

Claiming History, Claiming Rights:  
Queer Discourses of History and Politics

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Evangelia Mazaris was born in Wilmington, Delaware on September 21, 1976. She received her B.A. in English from Vassar College in 1998. Mazaris completed her A.M. in Museum Studies/American Civilization at Brown University in 2005. Mazaris was a Jacob Javits Fellow through the United States Department of Education (2004 – 2009).

Mazaris is the author of “Public Transgressions: the Reverend Phebe Hanaford and the ‘Minister’s Wife’,” published in the anthology *Tribades, Tommies and Transgressives: Lesbian Histories, Volume I* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008). She also published the article “Evidence of Things Not Seen: Greater Light as Faith Manifested,” in *Historic Nantucket* (Winter 2001). She has presented her work at numerous professional conferences, including the American Studies Association (2008), the New England American Studies Association (2007), the National Council on Public History (2009), and the University College Dublin’s Historicizing the Lesbian Conference (2006).

Mazaris has taught courses in American Studies and Queer Public Histories for the Department of American Civilization at Brown University, and in English for Delaware Technical and Community College. She has served as Graduate Proctor for Brown’s Sarah Doyle Women’s Center (2009 – 2010), and as Coordinator of Brown’s LGBTQ Resource Center (2004). Mazaris sat on the Diversity Advisory Board at Brown University (2005 – 2007), and represented the Department of American Civilization to the Graduate Student Council (2004 – 2005). In addition to other public service, she has been honored to sit on the Advisory Council for Rhode Island’s Equity Action Fund since 2007.

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gave my students a tour of the Archives. Terence Kissack, Gerard Koscovich, and Jacob Richards at the GLBT Historical Society accepted me as a daily presence during the summer of 2006, and took the time to point me toward items of particular interest. My work at the GLBT Historical Society was made far more pleasurable by the companionship of various other researchers. I spent one particularly happy week working side by side with Daniel Rivers and Regina Kunzel, both of whom offered welcome companionship and intellectual support. At the Lesbian Herstory Archives, I was welcomed by Deb Edel, Maxine Wolfe, Desiree Yael Vester, Shawnta Smith, Devin Lindow, Joan Nestle, and many other coordinators and volunteers. Joan graciously met with me several times on trips to New York, allowing me to interview her, and giving my students a tour of the Lesbian Herstory Archives that they talked about for months afterward. Desiree made sure that I felt at home in the Archives, particularly on my last research trip when I was seven months pregnant and could frequently be found falling asleep in the special collections room.

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recently, she spent a year in Providence helping to care for my child so that I had time for my research and writing. My father, Demetre Mazaris, managed to stifle his disappointment that I didn't write a dissertation about the Greeks, and be a supportive figure in my life anyway. My sister, Sofia Mazaris, constantly reminded me that if I quit before finishing, she'd never be able to claim a doctor as a sibling. I am happy to have finally obliged her. Linda, Paul, Kerrie, and Sasha Welsh provided the family dinners that grounded me throughout the grueling writing process. I appreciate all of their love and support more than I can say.

Writing a dissertation while parenting a small child is the hardest thing I have ever done. In addition to the support of my family and friends, I benefited significantly from the time afforded me by several different daycare providers, who did the incredibly valuable work of caring for my child so that I could write. I owe a large debt of gratitude to my good friend Ariana Steele, as well as to Kerri, Josselene, and Joanne at the Cozy Corner Daycare. Knowing that my child was in such good hands meant the world to me.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page	iii
Curriculum Vitae	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	12
Identity, Discourse, and Sex in the Archives	
Chapter 1	36
Dangerous Pleasures and Radical Redefinitions: The Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Debates over Lesbian Identity	
Chapter 2	76
Remembering for Our Lives: Queer Public History in the 1980s	
Chapter 3	114
“Do Not Feel Shame for How I Live”: Invisibility and Archiving in Queer Black Life	
Chapter 4	143
Queer Discourses in the Political Sphere	
Conclusion	186
The Possibilities of Pleasure	
Works Cited	196

## Introduction: Identity, Discourse, and Sex in the Archives

*I really believe that so little is known about us that,  
whatever we say, however we say it, it is worth printing.*

-letter to the Lesbian Herstory Archives, 1976<sup>1</sup>

*The central issue, then, is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex ... but to  
account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the  
positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to  
speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said.*

-Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*<sup>2</sup>

In the spring of 2008, I spent several weeks in New York doing research at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). Though I had visited the Archives before, I had never been able to spend more than a day or two at a time with the collections. This visit was different. Seven months pregnant, I was determined to finish my dissertation research before having a baby. So, I camped out on my cousin's couch in Park Slope, and spent every waking hour of my day immersed in lesbian history.

The women at the LHA were more than welcoming. They gave me a key, told me the alarm code, and urged me to make myself at home. After a few days, I was not just doing my own research, but greeting visitors and giving impromptu tours when no one else was around. I was given free access to all of the collections. Unlike a traditional archive, no one brought me the boxes of materials I requested. Instead, I dug around in

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<sup>1</sup> Letter, Peg Cruikshank to Joan Nestle, *Lesbian Herstory Archives*, correspondence folders.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978), 11.

closets, pulled things off shelves, and rooted around in anachronistic filing systems to find what I needed for myself.

I loved it. I loved sitting in that old brownstone with its papery smell and old fashioned wallpaper. I loved the screen in the bathroom covered with buttons from lesbian groups and gay liberation protests. I loved the intimacy of reading so many women's thoughts, emotions, and lives. Sometimes, when I was the only one in the building, I was almost overcome by the trust that had been placed in me. There I was, alone with all of these words, all of this history. I felt close to these women I had never met, and I felt a huge sense of responsibility to write something that did not distort the realities of their lives.

One day in the course of my rummaging and reading, I found this note written by Judith Schwartz, one of the early coordinators of the Archives, to founders Joan Nestle and Deb Edel:

Sometimes I have a fantasy of a future yet-unborn lesbian, sifting through our letters and diaries, shaking her head (much as I have done myself when I have been deeply moved by a 100-year old diary of Katharine Bates) in wonderment, delight, and a certain personal sorrow that she could not have been here herself to share these years with us.<sup>3</sup>

The letter, written 30 years earlier, touched me deeply. At each of the archives I studied, I found traces of these voices from the past, speaking to the future. In this dissertation, I have attempted to map out some of the ways in which identities are claimed and articulated through historical and political processes. Through archival research and discourse analysis I have uncovered sites of identity formation, as well as sites of political empowerment. Beneath all of the theoretical frameworks and institutional

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from Judith Schwartz to Joan Nestle and Deb Edel, 1978, *Lesbian Herstory Archives*, Joan and Deb Collection

histories in this document, however, lie the voices of real people. People who wrote letters, kept diaries, drew sketches, attended rallies and parties and exhibits, and somewhere along the way, left even the smallest of marks on queer history. This project would not exist without these voices, and I hope that my respect for and gratitude to them is evident in this work.

### **Project Overview**

This dissertation is a history of discourse relations around queer sexualities. It is concerned with how both historical narratives and political strategies call upon discourses of sexuality and sexual identity. These two distinct but interrelated strains of public dialogue – history and politics – are used to make claims about sexuality and identity that have material consequences for various queer communities. My project examines queer archives and queer political rights groups to understand how individuals, groups, and organizations craft and deploy narratives, both historical and political, to make particular claims about the queer subject, and how, in doing so, they are constantly renegotiating the boundaries of various sexual identities (i.e. “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” etc.). I am interested, in other words, in how the act of building an archives, narrating a history, or describing the needs of a group of people in order to claim rights on their behalf, is not a passive act of description, but rather, a generative act that constitutes the very groups and identities it seeks to describe. My methodology combines the study of institutional histories with an analysis of the discourse produced by these institutions.

Several themes run through this project. First is what I term a “politics of the body” at play within the organizations I study. This politics is characterized by an

approach to sexuality and the body that celebrates erotic difference and expression, and makes explicit claims for the importance of protecting sexual freedoms. In archives, this manifests as a sex-positive approach to collecting, in which space is made (and claimed as legitimately historical) for the preservation of materials that relate to sexualities deemed deviant, kinky, or “wrong.” In political organizations, this sex positivity emerges through rights discourse that recognizes non-normative, non-respectable queer subjects as legitimate political actors, and claims rights on their behalf.

Another important theme of this dissertation is the movement within queer archives from private to public, and the attendant changes this brought. All of the archives I study began as private collections, housed in the pantries and closets of grassroots historians who recognized a gap in the historical record and set about to correct it. This dissertation is the story of the movement from private apartment to public historical society, and of the ways in which this shaped the historical narrative. It is a story that parallels the larger trajectory of gay liberation itself, in which individuals moved from lives in which their sexualities were not publicly acknowledged to openly politicized existences in which they claimed rights based on these sexualities. In other words, just as gays moved out of the closets and into the streets, so too did their artifacts. This movement from private to public also reflects concurrent shifts in the world of non-profit development, in which organizations of all kinds shifted from a strictly grassroots model to a more professionalized one.

Finally, this project is concerned with the ways in which sexual identities are constituted in terms that are inherently raced and classed. My dissertation traces the

negotiations over racial identity and sexual identity in both archives and political rights organizations.

### **Scope of Project**

The case studies for this project fall into two separate groups. The first three chapters of my dissertation look at public history projects, and examine the ways in which individuals and organizations have crafted self-conscious narratives of LGBTQ history. I also examine the notions of queer identity and subjectivity that emerge from these narratives. These chapters focus on three organizations, founded between 1973 and 2000: Brooklyn's Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), San Francisco's GLBT Historical Society (GLBTHS), and the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives (BGLA), housed in the Schomburg Center at the New York Public Library. The final chapter of my project examines the ways in which narratives of the queer subject are called upon in political discourse. This chapter focuses on LGBTQ rights groups and the ways in which they articulate particular narratives of history and identity in support of various political objectives. I analyze the literature and discourse of the following organizations: the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP).

### **Methodology**

This project asks several fundamental questions. First, it asks how queer subjects are constructed through discourse. I examine two broadly defined types of discourse: the collections and publications of queer archives, and the information publicly disseminated



by LGBTQ rights groups. With regard to the archives, my dissertation asks, how is the process of identity formation mediated through historical institutions such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives or the GLBT Historical Society? In other words, how do historical narratives articulate particular queer identities – “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “trans,” “queer,” etc. – and how do the meanings of these identities change over time? How does the act of creating a historical narrative also work to bring into being a contemporary community? In what ways is the historical both personal and political? In terms of the political projects studied, my dissertation asks, how do political groups use particular language and modes of political discourse to create a notion of a unified queer subject? How are celebratory narratives of identity and liberation reproduced and contested? I look specifically at the language used by organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign in their public outreach, education, advocacy.

Many people have written about the tensions between histories that provide a sanitized, “respectable” view of the past and histories that embrace the nuances of complex, not-always-stable sexualities and identities. Additionally, scholars such as Michael Warner have written excellent critiques of the ways in which academics and public intellectuals have grappled with the issue of gay marriage.<sup>4</sup> My project intervenes in these discussions to ask first, how do public history projects specifically negotiate this tension between building respectability, community, and identity on the one hand and providing an intellectually valid rendering of the multiplicities of identities, sexualities, and behaviors in history on the other hand? Second, how do the discourses of the rights

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Warner, “Normal and Normaller: Beyond Gay Marriage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1999): 119-71.

groups themselves construct notions of queer subjects and subjectivities? Third, what are the political implications of these subject constructions?

My methodology involves engaging in discourse analysis to understand the ways in which institutions create and redefine queer identities. I pay particular attention to the language used by both historical and political organizations in their mission statements, public materials, and published or exhibited literature. Ultimately, this is an American studies project that draws on historical methods as it seeks to track change over time in the ways in which organizations conceive both of themselves and the queer subject. Additionally, it seeks to connect particular notions of subject formation and identity construction with specific historical moments.

In evaluating the work of the public history projects, I look at several different types of sources. One important area of investigation focuses on the archives, collections and exhibits of the organizations themselves. Through an examination of the contents of each collection, I mark the change over time in what organizations thought it was important to save (or indeed, were able to find and save). This exploration of what each archive and historical society holds reveals *who* has been collecting *what*, *when* and *why*. Additionally, I look at the exhibitions mounted by these various groups, to see what, with limited resources, each organization chose to make public as an historical narrative. An analysis of this information is a key part of understanding how political and cultural influences shape the process of collection and interpretation, and gives insight into the cultural and political identities of each historical moment.

I also look at documents that trace the evolution of these organizations. Using sources such as newsletters, meeting minutes, business documents, oral histories, and

correspondence, I gain an understanding of the complex negotiations of organizational development. Uncovering these institutional histories is a key aspect of understanding how the changing goals of historical organizations are tied to cultural and political realities.

In studying the political organizations, I look at the materials these organizations produced for the public. I examine the pamphlets, brochures, web sites, publications, and other materials these various groups distributed to the public. In looking at these publications, I am interested both in how the organizations describe their respective missions and work and in how they constitute particular notions of the queer subject. I use these sources to understand how the terms of various political debates are set and what the implications are for public understandings of queer identities. For example, when Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD) is advocating for same-sex marriage, how do its written materials construct a particular notion of the gay or lesbian subject?

In addition to examining the existing documents of institutional history, I have created my own sources through interviews with some of people who have founded these organizations. Through these interviews I collect diverse points of view, memories, and understandings of how these organizations have functioned and for what purpose. These interviews reveal some of the subjectivities involved in the historical and political processes, laying bare differences in both how and why people collect and craft history, and how and why people make claims for political rights.

### **Literature Review**

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault notes that:

The central issue, then, is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex ... but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said.<sup>5</sup>

As institutions that *literally* stored a history of the discourses of particular iterations of sexuality, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the GLBT Historical Society, and the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives provide a lens for thinking about the ways in which these forms of knowledge both shape and are shaped by individuals and communities. My project draws on Foucault's analysis of discourses of sexuality to ask what made it possible to speak of, or collect, these histories. I am interested in the subject positions of the people who contributed pieces of their histories to these archives, and interested as well in the cultural contexts in which these institutions operated.

In her book *Sapphic Slashers*, Lisa Duggan discusses the ways in which institutions use narratives to construct the limits of acceptable public discourse, and indeed, the limits of citizenship itself. In focusing on the discourse surrounding the 1892 murder of Freda Ward by her female lover, Alice Mitchell, Duggan demonstrates how newspapers, court documents, literary works, and medical texts created a cultural narrative that cast female relationships as violent, dangerous, and pathological. Coming at a moment in which women were entering the workforce, educational institutions, and other manifestations of the public sphere in unprecedented numbers, this narrative of female pathology worked to contain women's agency. In linking the discourses of the Ward murder to concurrent narratives of lynching, Duggan demonstrates the ways in which, through the dissemination of carefully controlled information, institutions like the

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault, 11.

press and the courts managed to, as she says, “limit the scope of democracy,” and in so doing, constructed a vision of modernity predicated on particular racial and sexual identities and hierarchies.

Though Duggan’s work focuses on events that happened over a century ago, her theoretical approach remains valuable. In examining institutions and the discourses they produced, Duggan exposes the ways in which these institutions served as sites of identity-production, and examines the profound impact that had on the cultural and political landscape. My project, though concerned with the production of knowledge by more contemporary institutions – LGBTQ public history sites and political rights groups in the late-twentieth century – is also invested in a methodological approach that analyzes discourse and its implications. Duggan writes:

The given organization of knowledge in newspapers and classrooms is neither natural nor necessary... Each institution’s hierarchies and norms have emerged over the past two centuries of political contest and have embedded within them the unequal power and resources of conflicting constituencies. The quotidian practices of the institutions reiterate these inequalities but also sometimes transform them. Especially revealing questions occupy daily decision making and expose the contours of conflict at particular times and places. What counts as “politics” in a newspaper or a classroom? What languages are assumed, taught, forbidden? What parts of the world are privileged as topics and what parts marginalized? Which races, ethnicities, genders, and sexualities are assumed, and which denigrated?<sup>6</sup>

These questions lie at the heart of my dissertation, which sees institutions both as organic, constantly evolving entities, and as sites of identity-production. My work seeks to uncover the hierarchies and ideologies embedded within organizations, and to understand how the practices of organizations both reiterate and contest these notions. Ultimately, in

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<sup>6</sup> Lisa Duggan, *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 1-2.

looking at the narratives of queer history and politics articulated by a diverse group of institutions, I am interested in continuing the project of understanding how discourse creates the possibilities of democracy, and in this case, specifically shapes the possibilities for queer subjectivities.

My project draws upon a number of scholars in defining queerness itself. I label “queer” those identities that deviate from norms not just around sexual object choice (identities we might refer to as “gay” or “lesbian”), but that deviate also from normatively sanctioned relations with both state and social structures. For example, in the book *In a Queer Time and Place*, Judith Halberstam writes that “‘queer’ refers to nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time.”<sup>7</sup> These alternative logics and organizations, Halberstam claims, allow queer subjects to imagine their lives in ways that reject the typical markers of life experience – birth, marriage, reproduction, and death – and to instead forge new models of life, family, and community. This has particular implications for the work of the archives I study in this dissertation. In speaking of the AIDS crisis, Halberstam notes:

Some gay men have responded to the threat of AIDS, for example, by rethinking the convention emphasis on longevity and futurity, and by making community in relation to risk, disease, infection, and death. And yet, queer time, even as it emerges from the AIDS crisis, is not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing.<sup>8</sup>

Evidence of this queer approach to time and space is visible in the archives I study in this dissertation. The Lesbian Herstory Archives houses numerous examples of women attempting to forge community outside the bounds of patriarchy and capitalism. For

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Halberstam, 2.

example, the Archives holds letters, records, and correspondence relating to the efforts of several groups of women to establish women-only communes in rural areas of the country. Likewise, the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives contains an extensive collection of items relating to House Ball culture. These materials illustrate an alternative imagining of community, in which biological kinship (and indeed, even biological sex) is rendered irrelevant in determining “family” relationships.

Writing specifically about the work of queer rights groups, Cathy Cohen describes her vision of a radical queer politics in this way:

I’m talking about a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work. Thus, if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin.<sup>9</sup>

Cohen is calling for a politics that challenges oppression based on a multi-faceted understanding of the ways in which race, class, nationality, gender *and* sexuality are sites of marginalization. “For many of us,” Cohen writes, “the label ‘queer’ symbolizes an acknowledgement that through our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multisited resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor, and constrain our visibility.”<sup>10</sup> The fourth chapter of this dissertation takes up the question of how the discourses of various LGBT rights groups meet (or fail to meet) this definition of queerness in their political activism.

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<sup>9</sup> Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”, *GLQ*, Vol. 3, 1997, 438.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

In thinking about the role of pleasure in queer historical and political narratives, my work draws on that of Robert Reid-Pharr, who, in his book *Black Gay Man*, reframes cultural analysis to locate pleasure and sexuality at its center. He writes:

I believe that in our struggle to produce an American progressivism we are lost if we discount the ways in which desire operates in the production of putatively rational decisions about government and politics. We risk the charge of hypocrisy if we offer only more and more sophisticated expressions of the anthropological gaze. We will clearly fail if we give into the fear that our dreams, our obsessions, our grubby secrets can never be the vehicles for the articulation of the universal.<sup>11</sup>

Reid-Pharr's work accounts for the specificity of not just gender and sexuality, but of race and class in desire as well. His analysis of racial and sexual identity offers a lens on American culture that exposes the rich nuances of desire that are lost in both an unexamined Americanism and in unexamined identity politics. Indeed, he claims:

I echo the work of generations of feminists and black radicals who have insisted continuously that their visions of the American future are the most legitimately *American* visions now available to us. It is in this sense that my work is patently political. While it is full of equivocation and ambiguity, *Black Gay Man* is insistent in its defense of personal liberties, interracialism, internationalism, the security and dignity of our labor, and yes, our America.<sup>12</sup>

My dissertation engages the questions of pleasure and desire as central to an understanding of identity. Further, my project understands that race, class, nationality, and gender identity are crucial components of pleasure and desire, and that sexual identity cannot be studied absent a consideration of them.

Indeed, the work of scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz and Roderick Ferguson is central to my project of understanding how queer identities are shaped not just by sexual object choice, but by race, class, and gender identity as well. Muñoz and Ferguson

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<sup>11</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 11.

<sup>12</sup> Reid-Pharr, 8.



offer queer of color critiques that examine the places in which social practices diverge from normative, nationalistic practices and ideals. Their work locates and accounts for the emergence of figures who might otherwise remain unspoken and invisible. In discussing critical approaches to dominant historical narratives and representations, Ferguson writes:

My inspection is informed by a single assumption – that epistemology is an economy of information privileged and information excluded, and that subject formations arise out of this economy. I also know that canonical and national formations rarely disclose what they have rejected. Such disclosures require alternatives to those formations, alternatives expressed in those sites excluded from the rigors and official imperatives of canons and archives.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, José Esteban Muñoz claims, queer of color cultural performances transform familiar cultural and political tropes to give them meaning for the queer subject. This process of disidentifying with the dominant meaning of a particular stereotype or act is a way for the queer subject to claim power and assert a positive identity in the face of totalizing normative discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. “Disidentification,” Muñoz writes, “is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies that the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”<sup>14</sup> My project uses this lens to examine queer cultural production, and queer of color cultural production in particular, as a site of rupture from dominant narratives about identity.

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<sup>13</sup> Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004), ix.

<sup>14</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

Though it breaks with much LGBTQ history through a methodological approach that focuses explicitly on notions of discourse, rather than on social history, my dissertation is also situated at the intersection of LGBTQ history and studies of public history. My work draws on the groundbreaking studies of queer communities and identities by scholars such as John D’Emilio and George Chauncey, who have documented the ways in which notions of queer identity are not fixed, but rather, dependent on social, cultural, and political forces.<sup>15</sup> In *Gay New York*, Chauncey demonstrates that while male/male sexual activity was widespread in turn-of-the-century New York City, the hetero/homo sexual divide, which is often taken as a given in current historical, social, and political projects, is actually a startlingly recent development. It was not until the mid-twentieth century, Chauncey asserts, that the public at large conceptualized of sexuality and sexual identity in terms of “heterosexual” and “homosexual.” This theoretical contribution – an understanding of the ways in which sexual identities are constructed in relation to social, cultural and political forces – underlies my project. My work engages Chauncey’s question – how is identity constructed? – and explores it in relation to particular sites of historical production and political discourse.

My work engages with the limited literature that deals specifically with LGBTQ public history sites and projects. Gail Dubrow’s article, “Blazing Trails with Pink Triangles and Rainbow Flags: Improving the Preservation and Interpretation of Gay and Lesbian History,” provides case studies and suggestions for incorporating interpretation of queer history into existing neighborhoods and historical sites. Lisa Duggan’s

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<sup>15</sup> See John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), and George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

“History’s Gay Ghetto: The Contradictions of Growth in Lesbian and Gay History,” details the history of grassroots queer history organizations such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives.<sup>16</sup> Ann Cvetkovich’s *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* examines particular cultural sites as locations of lesbian memory and response to trauma. In looking at institutions such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, as well as the oral histories she conducts with female members of ACT-UP New York, Cvetkovich highlights the ways in which “dykes writing about sexuality and vulnerability have forged an emotional knowledge out of the need to situate intimate lives in relation to classism, racism, and other forms of oppression.”<sup>17</sup> My examination of archives continues this work of situating sexual identities with regard to race and class. I also look at the specific policies and collections of archives to examine how this has been carried out. In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*, Marita Sturken examines the AIDS quilt as a site of cultural memory. Sturken argues that the AIDS quilt serves as a site of contested national meaning. She writes:

Cultural memory is a means through which definitions of the nation and “Americanness” are simultaneously established, questioned, and refigured. For instance, when the AIDS Quilt is displayed on the mall in Washington, D.C., it both resists and demands inclusion in the nation. Laid out in the most symbolic national place of the United States, the quilt form evokes a sense of Americana, and yet it also represents those who

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<sup>16</sup> Gail Dubrow, “Blazing Trails with Pink Triangles and Rainbow Flags: Improving the Preservation and Interpretation of Gay and Lesbian History,” in Gail Dubrow and Jennifer B. Goodman, eds., *Restoring Women’s History through Historic Preservation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), and Lisa Duggan, “History’s Gay Ghetto: The Contradictions of Growth in Lesbian and Gay History,” in Susan Porter Benson, Steven Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds. *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 4.

have been symbolically excluded from America – drug users, blacks, Latinos, gay men.<sup>18</sup>

My dissertation draws on Sturken's analysis of cultural memory vis-à-vis sites of queer history, and asks how these memories work their way into larger discourses.

Additionally, my work is in conversation with a rich literature on history, memory, and identity that deals with the ways in which public history projects – and memory itself – mediate identity in racial, ethnic, and national groups. For example, Mary Lawlor's work on tribal self-representation in museums and powwows explores the ways in which Native American communities use public history sites to negotiate both an articulation of history and identity along with participation in a broader political and economic sphere.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, John Gillis's work on commemoration and national identity emphasizes the ways in which memory and identity are actively produced in a process strongly inflected by race, class, ethnicity, and gender. He writes,

At this particular historical moment, it is all the more apparent that both identity and memory are political and social constructs, and should be treated as such. We can no longer afford to assign either the status of a natural object, treating it as a 'fact' with an existence outside language. Identities and memories are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*. As such they have no existence beyond our politics, our social relations, and our histories.<sup>20</sup>

My dissertation applies this work to studies of sexual identity and LGBTQ history.

Drawing on a literature of memory, representation, and identity, I analyze how public history and political rights work have become sites for the negotiation of queer identities.

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<sup>18</sup> Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Lawlor, *Public Native America: Tribal Self-representation in Museums, Powwows, and Casinos* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> John R. Gillis, *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

In her book *The Ellis Island Snow Globe*, Erica Rand takes up questions of how gender, race, and sexuality are embedded in public history sites.<sup>21</sup> While Rand focuses on the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island (not monuments usually claimed as “queer” destinations), her work provides a useful model for my own analysis of LGBTQ public history projects. In asking questions about what is and what is not on display, who is included and who is rendered invisible, which stories are told, and which are not, Rand highlights just the sort of institutional hierarchies and ideologies that Duggan refers to in *Sapphic Slashers*, with an explicit focus on the institutions of public history. Rand examines not just the exhibits of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, but their gift shops, souvenirs, publications, and marketing devices as well. Through her analysis of these various forms of narrative technologies, Rand uncovers contested and conflicted notions of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

This work is relevant to my own project of uncovering how explicitly LGBTQ-focused public history projects present the past. Far from imagining that their status as queer-founded, queer-focused groups somehow exempts them from operating within hierarchical ideologies of race, gender, class, and sexuality, my work is concerned with understanding how the notions of sexual identity that these organizations present are implicitly or explicitly raced, classed, gendered, and nationalized. Because these institutions operate within particular parameters of cultural discourse, and are simultaneously participating in the project of creating that discourse, the visions of queer subjectivity they produce play a role in shaping the possibilities of identity that can be imagined. For this reason, studying the narratives produced by these public history institutions – from exhibits to archives to publications in their many forms – is not just an

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<sup>21</sup> Erica Rand, *The Ellis Island Snow Globe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

exercise in historical fact-checking, but rather, an investigation into the limits of subjectivity and identity. As I discuss with regard to LGBTQ rights groups, this work of identity-construction has tangible social and political repercussions.

The final chapter of my dissertation, which addresses the work of LGBTQ rights organizations, draws on scholarship by Ian Lekus, Michael Warner, Cathy Cohen, and others who interrogate the relationship between politics, identity, and institutions. Lekus's research on the North Carolina Lesbian and Gay Health Project provides a model for understanding how LGBTQ-related organizations play a role both in building queer communities and in setting the limits of inclusion and exclusion that bound these communities. While Lekus focuses on an organization that provides direct services (as opposed to the more explicitly political advocacy groups that I am studying), his methodology is useful for thinking about how organizations function, and how the interplay of mission, ideology, personalities, funding, publicity, and services works to *bring into being* the very communities that these institutions are founded to serve. As Lekus discovered, while the Health Project was created to address the needs of all gay men and lesbians, the pressures brought to bear on the project by the AIDS crisis "exposed limits in popular notions of who belongs to a community (in this case, a community defined primarily by sexual identity), who the community excludes, how a community operates, and how those processes are intrinsically connected."<sup>22</sup> As Lekus found, the process of determining who was included in the notion of "community" also came to determine who was included in uses of the terms "gay" and "lesbian." This work is a valuable model for my thinking about how organizations like the Human Rights

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<sup>22</sup> Ian Lekus, "Health Care, the AIDS Crisis, and the Politics of Community," in Alida M. Black, ed., *Modern American Queer History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 228.

Campaign function not just to *serve* LGBTQ populations, but to determine the very ways in which those populations are defined.

## **Chapter Outline**

### **Chapter One: Dangerous Pleasures and Radical Redefinitions: The Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Debates over Lesbian Identity**

This chapter explores the ways in which the Lesbian Herstory Archives navigated the complex interplay of the personal, the political, and the historical in constructing new narratives of queer pasts and presents. As in the chapters that follow, I examine the archive as a site not just of historical preservation, but of political activism as well. Additionally, I examine the ways in which the LHA engaged in what might be referred to as a politics of the body, using its position as an historical authority to advocate for a more expansive vision of sexuality and erotics. This involved collecting the stories and artifacts of women who engaged in butch-femme relationships, as well as those who participated in kinky sex, lesbian S/M, leather scenes, and other taboo erotic behaviors. In a cultural moment in which lesbian feminism frowned upon so-called butch-femme “role playing” and kinky or deviant sexualities, this was a radical move on the part of the Archives, and broke with the prevailing attitudes of the day. I also examine the ways in which the LHA both succeeded and failed at realizing its vision of a truly racially inclusive archive.

### **Chapter Two – Remembering for Our Lives: Queer Public History in the 1980s**

This chapter tells the story of San Francisco’s GLBT Historical Society. As one of the first groups to grapple with the implications of the AIDS crisis and public memory,

this narrative is an important piece of the development of grassroots queer history groups in the U.S. It is also a story about a group of people grappling to figure out just what queer history was. By 1985, when the Historical Society officially formed, queer history still barely existed outside of the grassroots. Over the years that followed, the Historical Society supported a number of scholars in this emerging field, including Allan Berube, Nan Boyd, Martin Meeker, and Terrance Kissack. The Historical Society wasn't just piecing together a narrative of the past, however. It was also engaged in determining what it meant to *be* gay or lesbian, in both the past and the present. In telling stories, histories, of those who had gone before, the members of the Historical Society were helping to define what constituted gay and lesbian history, and thus, what constituted the very terms "gay" and "lesbian." This chapter is a history of these negotiations of meaning, and indeed, the definitions that emerged were often surprisingly queer.

AIDS is central to this story of negotiated meanings, and it represents one of the crucial differences between what happened at the Historical Society in the 1980s and what happened a decade earlier at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. The LHA's focus on women and lesbianism meant that the politics and struggles that shaped its historical efforts were centered around lesbian feminism, separatism, and the sex wars. The Historical Society, on the other hand, grew out of a group of primarily white men, along with a minority of mostly white women, working in the heart of the AIDS crisis. It is thus not surprising that AIDS came to affect greatly the stories that the Historical Society told, and the ways in which they collected, interpreted, and shared history. Indeed, the story of the Historical Society is in some ways inseparable from the story of AIDS.



This chapter will thus explore the ways in which the Historical Society, through the collecting, archiving, and telling of history, renegotiated the terms of various sexual identities and gender identities. It will examine the impact of the AIDS crisis on queer public history, and will look at how AIDS affected what was collected, what was saved, and how stories were told. Finally, it will analyze the role of the Historical Society in the changing terrain of non-profit development and professionalization, and will examine the impacts of these forces on how history was told.

### **Chapter Three – “Do Not Feel Shame for How I Live”: Invisibility and Archiving in Queer Black Life**

This chapter tells the story of the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives. As detailed in the previous chapter, the AIDS crisis in San Francisco in the 1980s gave rise to the GLBT Historical Society, a group founded primarily by gay white men. However, AIDS was not just a gay white man’s disease. The rise of HIV in the black community throughout the 1980s and 1990s led to higher stakes for black queer visibility.

Within the context of increasing infection rates, racism, and invisibility, the need to preserve queer black history became critical. In 1999, Steven Fullwood, an archivist at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, founded the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives, and housed the collection within the Schomburg’s division of Archives and Manuscripts. Much like the founders of the GLBT Historical Society, Fullwood already had a significant personal collection of black queer materials that reflected his involvement in the community as a writer and activist, including books, magazines, flyers, posters, and photographs.

Just as the founders of the GLBT Historical Society understood their work as a response to the tide of historical erasure brought on by the AIDS crisis, so too did Steven Fullwood. The political momentum of social movements in the 1970s was severely dampened in the 1980s by the AIDS crisis. By the 1990s, the queer black community was left without a clear organizing force. Fullwood founded the BGLA as an explicit attempt to make visible queer communities of color. Like all the archival work I have discussed in these chapters, this practice of cobbling together histories is not a politically neutral act, but rather, an assertion of the existence and visibility of communities often rendered powerless and invisible. The BGLA, I claim, uses the tools of the archive to disrupt totalizing narratives of gay history that erase people of color, as well as to disrupt narratives of black history that leave no room for queer sexualities and identities.

#### **Chapter Four – Queer Discourses in the Political Sphere**

This final chapter shifts the focus from archives to a different type of institution: political rights organizations. The discourses arising from queer archives and their collections call upon particular notions of the queer subject that have the power to change how we understand identity and community as a whole. Using the language of history, archives paint a picture of various identities, and create a discursive and imaginative (and indeed, sometimes physical) space for these particular identities to exist: butch/femme lesbians, kinky HIV-positive fags, queer black men, and many others. As my chapter on the Lesbian Herstory Archives demonstrates, for example, the LHA's intervention in the debates over butch/femme and lesbian feminist cultures created a space in which women across this spectrum of identities could feel validated and could safely express their identities.

This chapter focuses on LGBTQ political organizations because they are fighting explicitly for the rights of the communities represented by the archives I have studied. My study of archives has demonstrated the diversity and complexity of identities within the LGBTQ community, as well as some of the dangers of a politics of respectability. An examination of political organizations provides us an opportunity to see how these identities are – or are not – being represented and accounted for in the public sphere.

Dangerous Pleasures and Radical Redefinitions:

The Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Debates over Lesbian Identity

*We create history as much as we discover it. What we call history becomes history and since this is a naming issue, we must be on guard against our own class prejudices and discomforts. If close friends and devoted companions are to be part of lesbian history, so must be also the lesbians of the fifties who left no doubt about their sexuality or their courage.*

-Newsletter of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, 1981

When the women who founded the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) wrote these words in 1981, they displayed a consciousness of the politics of history and memory, and an understanding of the ways in which the act of remembering is never neutral, but rather, happens within a complex web of power relations. In reflecting self-consciously on the process of creating history, these women attempted to avoid the methodological violence that has suppressed, erased, and distorted lesbian histories for years. Along the way they encountered obstacles of their own: lesbian-feminists who didn't want to collect butch/femme histories; women of color who didn't feel represented by a group of primarily white women; other gays and lesbians who feared that the LHA's grassroots approach was "ghettoizing" lesbian history. As they collected books, manuscripts, objects, and memorabilia, the women of the Lesbian Herstory Archives negotiated these and other tensions in crafting narratives of lesbian history, and also revealed contested notions of what a "lesbian" actually was.

This chapter explores the ways in which the LHA navigated the complex interplay of the personal, the political, and the historical in constructing new narratives of queer pasts and presents. As in the chapters that follow, I examine the archive as a site not just of historical preservation, but of political activism as well. Additionally, I examine the ways in which the LHA engaged in what might be referred to as a politics of the body, using its position as an historical authority to advocate for a more expansive vision of sexuality and erotics. This involved collecting the stories and artifacts of women who engaged in butch-femme relationships, as well as those who participated in kinky sex, lesbian S/M, leather scenes, and other taboo erotic behaviors. In a cultural moment in which lesbian feminism frowned upon so-called butch-femme “role playing” and kinky or deviant sexualities, this was a radical move on the part of the Archives, and broke with the prevailing attitudes of the day. I will explore this further in my next chapter as I analyze how the GLBT Historical Society engaged in a politics of the body by affirming the value of sex and the erotic body in the midst of the AIDS crisis, a cultural moment in which gay male sex was publicly denigrated as perverse and dangerous. Both of these organizations participated in this political discourse through their archival and collecting practices as well as through their outreach and public engagement. In this chapter I argue that through its collecting, exhibiting, and the creation of an inclusive archive, the LHA helped to expand the very definition of lesbianism itself.

### **History of the LHA**

In 1974, The Lesbian Herstory Archives began as a single file cabinet containing a full run of the early lesbian newsletter, *The Ladder*.<sup>23</sup> Initially housed in the pantry of Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel's Manhattan apartment, the Archives quickly outgrew its space, eventually taking over their entire home. The Archives was founded by five women, including Nestle and Edel, who had met at the first conference of the Gay Academic Union the year before (1973). After discussing in a consciousness raising group the need to have a specifically lesbian history, separate from both gay men's history and women's history in general, the founders made a commitment to preserving the voices and artifacts of a lesbian community, and set about collecting all that they could find.<sup>24</sup>

The beginnings of the LHA were marked by milk crates and shopping bags full of books, letters, posters, and the ephemera of daily lesbian life. To start the collection, the five founders- Nestle, Edel, Julia Penelope (Stanley), Sahli Cavallo and Pamela Oline – or Coordinators, as they eventually designated themselves, donated their own books and writings, and then began to ask all of their friends and acquaintances to do the same. The Coordinators wrote to all of the lesbian publications of which they knew, and requested copies for the Archives. They traveled to the homes of interested women, in New York and elsewhere, and gave presentations. During these gatherings, they would not only

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<sup>23</sup> *The Ladder* was the first nationally distributed lesbian magazine in the U.S. Published by the early lesbian-rights group the Daughters of Bilitis, *The Ladder* was first published in 1956 and remained in print until 1972, reaching countless numbers of readers – many of whom had no access to other information about lesbianism – during that time. For a history of the Daughters of Bilitis and more information about *The Ladder* see Marcia M. Gallo, *Different Daughters: A History of the Daughters of Bilitis and the Rise of the Lesbian Rights Movement* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> For a more extensive history of the LHA, see Polly J. Thistlethwaite, "Building 'A Home of Our Own': The Construction of the Lesbian Herstory Archives," in James Carmichael, ed., *Daring to Find Our Names: The Search for Lesbian Library History* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Press, 1998); Lisa Duggan, "History's Gay Ghetto: The Contradictions of Growth in Lesbian and Gay History," in Susan Porter Benson, Steven Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); and Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

display items from the Archives, but would request new donations of materials as well. Known as the “shopping bag ladies,” because they were always carting pieces of the collection around in plain grocery bags, the women of the Archives reached out to a great number of women in their first years of operation.

From its beginnings, the LHA understood that it was engaged in a unique endeavor that had the potential to change how women, and lesbian women in particular, understood the world. As Joan Nestle has noted, “we were very aware that at the same time we were *collecting* history, we were *creating* history... So, everything we did, we were aware that we could create new limitations, we could create new exclusions, or we could create openness.”<sup>25</sup> This commitment to openness was manifested in the diversity of the Archives’ collections, in its engagement with one of the central debates of 1970s feminism: the rift between lesbian feminism and butch-femme culture, and to some degree, in its inclusion of women of color in the Archives.

### **A Dangerous Moment: Lesbian Feminism and Butch-Femme Culture**

*In our own time, the debate over sexuality has opened herstorical wounds made even deeper by the fact that it is other Lesbians who are judging the correctness of our sexuality. This is what my herstory has taught me: If we choose to involve ourselves in the women against pornography movement, it would be helpful to keep in mind that many of us were the early victims of vice squad raids, that some of us are Lesbian prostitutes and sexworkers, that we have a long herstory of surviving and finding each other in those places other women were too frightened to walk through, that sexuality has always been our frontier.*

-Joan Nestle, 1981

To understand the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and what made it so radical, one must understand the cultural debates of the 1970s, particularly as they pertained to

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Joan Nestle, April 6, 2007, New York.

feminism and sexuality. The LHA was founded in the midst of a movement known as lesbian feminism. Indeed, it was the conditions of lesbian feminism, which arose from the women's liberation movement, that made the very founding of the Archives possible. And yet, the Archives found itself at the center of a battle between lesbian feminists and those who embraced other forms of lesbian identity, including but not limited to butch-femme culture, sex radicals, and those who engaged in lesbian S/M, pornography, and other forms of kink. Ultimately, it was the Archives' ability to create a space that welcomed all of these identities that allowed it to articulate an expansive and diverse vision of lesbianism.

Lesbian feminism, a branch of feminism that was popular in the 1970s, was rooted in the concept that women's liberation could only be enacted through a wholesale rejection of men and masculinity. Lesbian feminists believed that lesbianism was the logical means through which to live out feminist principles. As a popular saying of the time declared, "feminism is the theory, and lesbianism is the practice." Many women, sometimes referred to as "political lesbians," who might not have otherwise identified as lesbians, were attracted to the politics and culture of lesbian feminism, and aligned themselves with it. Others, who had always been sexually attracted to women, felt that their desires were finally legitimized and framed within a movement for feminist liberation. Lesbian feminists created "women's only" spaces everywhere from universities to conferences to communes. They reclaimed the language of gender, removing the word "men" from "women," and labeling themselves "wimmin" and "womyn" instead. They posited a world in which women existed, flourished, and were



celebrated separate from men and the corrosive influences of patriarchy and masculinity.

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For many women, lesbian feminism represented a safe and liberating space in which to live out both their feminist principles and their sexual desires. Other women, however, found lesbian feminism to be a far less welcoming milieu. Because one of its central tenets was the dismantling of oppressive gender roles, many lesbian feminists felt that butch-femme culture, a staple of working-class lesbian life in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, was retrograde, and constituted a tacit support of the patriarchy. Butch-femme culture relied on a construction of masculine and feminine gender attributes; many women who participated in it found it exciting, subversive, and liberating. However, many lesbian feminists referred to butch-femme as “role playing,” and felt that the women who engaged in it were supporting oppressive and patriarchal power structures.<sup>27</sup>

While both lesbian feminism and butch-femme culture had many nuances and overlaps, it is hard to overstate the tension that existed between the two. Lesbian feminists, including members of groups such as Women Against Pornography, were vocal in their criticism of women who identified as butch or femme, or who participated in lesbian S/M, porn, and leather scenes. This debate came to a head in April of 1982, at the Barnard College conference entitled “The Feminist and the Scholar IX.” The conference assembled academics and activists to consider the dangers and possibilities presented by women’s engagements with sexuality and pleasure.<sup>28</sup> A diverse group of

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<sup>26</sup> For a more nuanced and detailed explanation of lesbian feminism and its various factions, see Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad* (University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

<sup>27</sup> For a richly detailed exploration and analysis of butch-femme culture, see Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion of the politics behind the conference as well as the text of many of the papers, see Carol Vance, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Pandora, 1984). Writing in

women including Alice Echols, Gayle Rubin, Esther Newton, Shirley Walton, Kate Millet, Amber Hollibaugh, and LHA founder Joan Nestle, spoke on topics including women's sexual pleasure, butch-femme "roles," the class politics of sexuality, lesbian S/M, and the possibilities for a radical politics of sex. Even before the conference began, "anti-sex" lesbian feminists were protesting it, claiming that the topics discussed promoted anti-feminist values. Though they were unable to stop the conference from taking place, the protesters did manage to suppress the publication of the conference program and picketed outside the event.

The Barnard Conference brought to the fore the tensions over sex, feminism, and identity that had been brewing for a decade. The conference marked the launching of these "sex wars" into the public sphere, and raised the stakes in the ongoing debates between the lesbian feminists and those who advocated a more sex-positive understanding of the world.<sup>29</sup> I argue that the LHA intervened in these debates by providing a home for *all* lesbian history. By embracing both sides of the rift that was embodied by the butch-femme/lesbian feminism debate, the LHA affirmed the legitimacy of a diverse range of identities. In a fraught cultural moment, this was a radical political act, and had profound implications for the vision of history the LHA put forth.

### **Barely Visible: Women of Color Within the Movement and Without**

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this volume, Gayle Rubin notes that feminism, and lesbian feminism in particular, has at times been overtly hostile to theories of sexuality that don't line up with its politics (28).

<sup>29</sup> Readers interested in further exploring the "sex wars" and their attendant politics may wish to consult Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Ann Barr Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, *Powers of desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); Joan Nestle, *The Persistent Desire: A Butch-Femme Reader* (New York: Alyson Books, 1992); and Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (Michigan: Firebrand Books, 1993).

The sex wars were not the only tensions at work within the movement, however. Simultaneously, feminism and the women's movement struggled under the weight of their own racism and class privilege. The 1970s and early 1980s saw the beginnings of women of color feminism. Arising alongside Black Women's studies, women of color feminism challenged the assumptions of race and class privilege that underlay much of contemporary feminist theory.<sup>30</sup> Women of color feminism was concerned with the double oppression that women of color faced in society at large due to racism and sexism, as well as the racism and invisibility they faced within the women's movement itself. The Combahee River Collective, a group of black feminists who met from 1974 to 1980, articulated many of the concerns of women of color feminism in their now famous collective statement:

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.<sup>31</sup>

The women of the Combahee River Collective, and other black feminists and lesbians writing at the same time, recognized the importance of building a political movement that took into account the particular subject positions of women of color, gay and straight.<sup>32</sup>

The oppression that black women faced because of their gender could not be prioritized

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<sup>30</sup> For an introduction to Black Women's studies, see Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982).

<sup>31</sup> The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*.

<sup>32</sup> For a history and analysis of the work of the Combahee River Collective, as well as several other black women's organizations operating during the same time period, see Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

over the discrimination that they faced because of their race. This led the women of the Combahee River Collective to reject lesbian separatism. As they wrote:

Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism. [...] [W]e reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society; what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se – i.e., their biological maleness – that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.<sup>33</sup>

In critiquing lesbian separatism, the collective members did not claim that black lesbians did not face discrimination because of their sexuality (which indeed they did, from whites and blacks alike). Rather, they exposed the limitations of a political strategy that did not account for race and class in meaningful ways. A full reckoning of these dynamics, they claimed, could not allow for an identity that privileged sexual separatism over all other forms of coalition-building. Likewise, Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa's groundbreaking volume *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, articulated a critique of feminist "sisterhood" that didn't take into account the subjectivities of race and ethnicity.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Combahee River Collective, 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Watertown, Mass: Persephone Press, 1981).

### **The Founders of the LHA: Expanding Notions of Lesbianism**

The experiences of the founders with both lesbian feminism and butch/femme culture allowed them to create a space in which multiple and diverse understandings of lesbianism could co-exist. These were, however, primarily white cultures. The women of the LHA were similarly committed to creating a space in which women of various races and ethnicities were visible and represented. Though their work in this area was imperfect, they fostered this inclusivity through an anti-racist ideology, a campaign of outreach and collecting, and the inclusion of women of color as valued members of the Archives community.

Perhaps the single-most important factor in ensuring that the LHA became a repository for a diverse understanding of white lesbianism and lesbian identity was the fact that its founders themselves were engaged in a constant negotiation of the butch/femme-lesbian feminist divide. Several of the founders, including Deb Edel and Julia Penelope (Stanley), had deep roots in the lesbian feminist movement. Their commitment to creating separate spaces for women's culture was a primary impetus behind the founding of the archives. However, Joan Nestle, and her experience in *both* the lesbian feminist and butch-femme cultures, helped to ensure that the Archives would become a welcoming space for many different types of women.

Having grown up a working class femme in the 1950s, and then come into lesbian feminism in the 1960s and 70s, Nestle was intimately acquainted with both butch-femme and lesbian separatist cultures. In her various writings and speaking engagements, she consistently advocated for a vision of lesbian history and community that included both

lesbian feminists and bar dykes, both political lesbians and leather queers.<sup>35</sup> This frequently ran her afoul of the predominant voices of lesbian feminism, many of whom bitterly attacked her for her perceived betrayal of lesbian ideals. Nevertheless, Nestle continued to speak out publicly against a narrowly defined view of sexuality and identity. She also argued against a politics of respectability, urging lesbians and feminists to embrace the diversity of the queer community, even when the identities, behaviors, and practices of certain factions diverged sharply from the lesbian feminist ideal. In a conference address in 1982 Nestle said, “The real challenge to all of us, lesbians and feminists, is whether we can eliminate violence against women without sacrificing women’s erotic complexities. I do not want to become a dictator of desire, not to other lesbians and not to gay men who have had the courage to listen to their own erotic voices.”<sup>36</sup> She thus urged practitioners of lesbian history, and indeed, members of lesbian communities in general, to respect women’s erotic differences, and to avoid censoring those whose lives did not fit neatly into the rubric of lesbian feminism.

Nestle’s public speaking, and the Archives’ policies in general, influenced many women across the country. The Archives received letters from women all over who wrote to tell Nestle that her words resonated with their own experiences of feeling left out of, or alienated from, the lesbian feminist movement.<sup>37</sup> Her writings and speeches clearly addressed a need for recognition felt by many women, and the Archives provided a home

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<sup>35</sup> I do not mean to imply a false dichotomy between these various categories. Indeed, many of the women who participated in butch-femme culture also had political commitments to lesbian feminism (as did Nestle herself). There were, however, a number of tensions and fault lines that ran through this particular set of identity politics. Work such as Nestle’s writing and the collecting activities of the LHA attempted to address these sometimes conflicting identities and put them into conversation with one another.

<sup>36</sup> Joan Nestle, “Living with Herstory: Keynote Address for Amazon Autumn’s Six Annual Lesbian Fall Festival,” 1982. On file in the Unpublished Papers collection of the *Lesbian Herstory Archives*.

<sup>37</sup> Examples of these letters can be found in the “Correspondence” files in the *Archives of the Archives* collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

for their stories.<sup>38</sup> In this way, the Archives came to be not just a repository for materials of the past, but indeed, a center in the struggles over lesbian identity.

The LHA was also concerned with creating a history that felt representative of and accessible to women of all races. One of the most important figures in the development of the LHA and its collections was Mabel Hampton. Hampton, an African-American woman born in 1902, had taken care of Joan Nestle as a child, and remained friends with the Nestle family. Hampton played a pivotal role in Joan's life – she was the first lesbian Joan knew – and years later, as Joan worked to found the Archives, Hampton still provided guidance and inspiration. In the early years of the Archives, Hampton donated her collection of lesbian pulp paperbacks, forming the core of what would become a significant archival collection. In spite of her small income, she also regularly donated money to keep the Archives afloat.<sup>39</sup> Joan and other LHA volunteers conducted several oral histories with Hampton, and she donated many of her photographs as well.

The inclusion of Mabel Hampton's story in the Archives is evidence of the Archives' commitment to telling the stories of women from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Equally significant is the fact that the women of the Archives recognized that Hampton's story was one that might easily be lost, and found creative ways to preserve it. Though she was a self-taught and avid reader, and left many of her books to the Archives, Hampton did not leave behind a written trail of letters and journals that might easily narrate her personal history. Thus, the women of the Archives organized a series of oral histories with Hampton, and recorded her life story. These oral histories,

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<sup>38</sup> For examples of Nestle's writings on butch-femme, see Joan Nestle, *A Restricted Country* (New York: Firebrand Books, 1987), and Joan Nestle, *A Fragile Union* (Cleis Press, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> Beth Hodges, "An Interview with Joan and Deborah of the Lesbian Herstory Archives," *Sinister Wisdom*, #11, fall 1979.

recorded in the early 1980s, provide insight into the life of a woman who was born and orphaned in the segregated south, lived on her own in New York for years, participated in the balls and society of the Harlem Renaissance, and referred to herself as a “bulldyer and ladylover, stud and butch.”<sup>40</sup>

Hampton was an integral part of the Archives community as well. In 1979, Joan noted that Hampton used the Archives more than any other visitor, coming regularly to read new materials, even though her cataracts made it difficult to see.<sup>41</sup> As importantly, Hampton provided a model for the theory of archiving that the LHA followed. As Joan described it,

Years ago she was doing the things that we as a community are doing now. In her own way she was an archivist. Her whole life she was always looking for lesbian images. She taught herself to read; and she'd save the Wonder Woman comics because they were images of strong women... She was political in her own way. She was cherishing of her own history, and knew there were other women like her.<sup>42</sup>

Mabel Hampton's story contributed to the ability of the Archives to tell a more complete lesbian history. Likewise, her life served as both model and inspiration for the Archives, reminding the coordinators of the need to collect histories in a variety of ways, and to recognize the histories of a diverse group of women.

The LHA, unlike many other women's organizations of the time-period, attempted from its inception to ensure that the histories it collected represented the experiences of women from all races and class backgrounds. This was not, however, an easy task, and the LHA did not always succeed. As the women of the Combahee River Collective noted, black women engaging in political organizing faced almost

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<sup>40</sup> Joan Nestle, “Excerpts from the Oral History of Mabel Hampton,” *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Theorizing Lesbian Experience (Summer, 1993), 925-935

<sup>41</sup> *Sinister Wisdom*, 6

<sup>42</sup> *Sinister Wisdom*, 5



insurmountable obstacles. Trying to organize not just around race, or gender, or class, these women understood that change could happen only at a systemic level by addressing a full range of oppressions. Further, the Collective wrote, “We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have. The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated.”<sup>43</sup> These obstacles were not unique to political work. Women of color wishing to document their histories faced similar exclusions, erasures, and struggles from white archives and historical institutions. As Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith remark in the introduction to *But Some of Us Are Brave*, “Black women scholars must maintain a constantly militant and critical stance toward the places where we must do our work.”<sup>44</sup> An organization founded by white women was, by necessity, a site that must be approached critically and cautiously. Further, women of color had to make careful decisions about where to expend their time and energy. Many operated with significantly less class and economic privilege than their white counterparts. Choosing to invest that energy in an organization founded by white women may have seemed to some like a risky investment.

Finally, there was the problem of (in)visibility. While the debates in the 1970s between lesbian feminism and butch-femme culture gained some prominence (at least within feminist circles), as did the “sex wars” of the 1980s, the concerns of women of

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<sup>43</sup> Combahee River Collective, 18.

<sup>44</sup> Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), xxiv.

color were largely absent from popular discourse, feminist or otherwise.<sup>45</sup> As the white women of the LHA struggled to formulate a methodology to guide their collecting activities, they were to some degree bounded by the limits of their own experiences and imaginations. This had serious implications for what was collected and what was not.

### **Collecting a Diverse History of Desire**

Given the raging debates over butch-femme culture and lesbian feminism, one can imagine that it might have been very easy to exclude the stories of butch-femme women from the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Likewise, given the near invisibility of women of color within the burgeoning field of women's studies, the founders of the LHA might have excluded them from the Archives, as did other organizations led by white women, consciously or unconsciously. However, the women who founded the LHA made a conscious decision toward inclusivity. Asserting that *all* lesbian stories were worth telling, the founders welcomed from the beginning stories of butch-femme women, as well as materials relating to S/M, lesbian erotica, and sex work, other topics considered perverse and oppressive by lesbian feminism. They also made a concerted effort to collect the materials of women of color. Through these collecting policies, the LHA attempted to ensure that the vision of lesbianism and lesbian identity they espoused was expansive and diverse, and that women whose identities and practices diverged from lesbian feminism were still welcome. They also created a space in which women of color were visible, though not always as thoroughly documented and complexly represented as white women.

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<sup>45</sup> For an excellent critique of the ways in which white feminist criticism has rendered invisible women of color, see Barbara Smith, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," in *But Some of Us Are Brave*.

Examples of an expansive notion of sexual identity within butch-femme and lesbian feminist cultures abound in the archives. One collection documents the history of the “Moody Garden Gang,” a group of butch-femme, working class lesbians in 1950s Lowell, Massachusetts. The Paula Vode collection, papers of a self-identified “stone butch,” contains letters that Vode wrote to her lovers, as well as erotic stories she wrote about women in love. Vode’s writings are both sex-positive and butch-femme positive, and certainly would not have fit neatly into a lesbian feminist vision of woman’s identity. A collection from an unnamed lesbian prostitute consists merely of her notebooks and call logs, with information about her various johns. Though no other materials or information about this woman were available, her identification as a lesbian was enough to secure her a place in the Archives, and to write her story into the narrative of lesbian herstory. The LHA also maintained a photograph collection of lesbians, seeking to document the visual diversity of the community. In responding to a call for photographs, San Francisco resident Michele Lloyd sent four pictures of herself, including some of herself in leather gear. She wrote, “I am into leather and SM and it is important to me that records of lesbians into all kinds of activities, including SM, be kept.” Indeed, the archivists agreed, and S/M dykes took their place in herstory along side the lesbian feminists.

The lesbian feminists were also well represented. The 1979 Luna W. collection contained “high school papers, slides, mask, skirt, overalls, materials from participation in anti-nuclear struggle: collection documents the growing consciousness of a Lesbian feminist.”<sup>46</sup> In addition to personal papers and journals, the collection contained information on the politics of various women’s communities, providing insight into the

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<sup>46</sup> *Newsletter of the Lesbian Herstory Archives*, #6, July 1980, page 14.

culture of lesbian feminism and separatism. Likewise, the 1975 Women on Land collection included papers and correspondence documenting the efforts of a group of lesbians in New York who were searching for land in order to start an intentional lesbian feminist community.<sup>47</sup> These documents illustrate an important moment in both lesbian and feminist consciousness, and signify the LHA's understanding of the importance of fully documenting the many facets of lesbian identity.

Of course, not all of the collections in the LHA were specifically related to or concerned with the lesbian feminist/butch femme debate. The materials collected by the Archives served various purposes. Some provided information on the resources available to lesbian women. Some illustrated the ways in which lesbians had been depicted historically, in literature, history, and the sciences. Others preserved and showcased women's cultural production, through collections of women's writing and art. Finally, many materials provided a social history of lesbianism through their documentary and biographical nature.

### *Resources*

From its beginnings, the women of the LHA understood that collecting materials of historical value to lesbians meant also collecting information on contemporary lesbian resources. The Archives maintained subject files on a broad range of topics, including drag, erotica, male children, prostitution, S/M, and identity. They also kept resource files on various organizations that served lesbian women. These files, as well as the many letters the Archives received from women seeking information on a wide range of topics, speaks to the many ways in which the Archives served both as a historical repository, and as the center of a diverse contemporary lesbian culture.

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<sup>47</sup> *Lesbian Herstory Archives*, Special Collections, Women on Land Collection (79-33).

Some of the most poignant demonstrations of the ways in which the LHA served as a resource for the lesbian community are the many letters the Archives received asking for help or advice. For example, the Archives held the papers of the Lesbian Mothers Defense Fund, a group that advocated for the rights of lesbian mothers, particularly around custody issues. This special collection was not, however, merely a historic artifact. The Archives received letters and visits from women and their lawyers who used the collection as a resource for understanding their rights, learning legal precedent, and preparing for hearings. In 1976, a lawyer from Mineola, New York wrote the following note to the Archives:

Dear Madam:

I am an attorney representing a woman in a child custody dispute against her husband. The issue involves lesbianism.

Do you have any material which might be useful to me in this legal battle?<sup>48</sup>

This request for information illustrates the ways in which the Archives served both as a repository for the past, and also as a resource for contemporary legal and political issues and situations.

Women reached out to the Archives when it seemed they had no place else to go for information, community, or support. By March of 1976, just a year after they officially announced their presence to the world, the Archives received thirty to forty letters a month from women all over the world.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in an age in which lesbianism was not mentioned in mainstream news media or culture, the LHA represented for many women the only known point of contact for finding others with whom to talk about their sexuality and its attendant issues. In October of 1982, the Archives received a letter from

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<sup>48</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, *Archives of the Archives*, Correspondence Folders, January – June 1976

<sup>49</sup> *Lesbian Herstory Archives Newsletter*, #2, March 1976, page 1.

a 17 year old in Tennessee, asking for advice on behalf of herself and her 15-year-old lover. Facing unsupportive families who accepted neither their lesbianism nor their relationship with one another, the writer asked for resources on legally separating from one's parents, and learning how to emigrate overseas (presumably beyond the reach of the American child welfare system). Though this was not, strictly speaking, a question of an "historical" nature, Deb Edel wrote back, offering support and the names of lawyers and youth advocacy groups.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, still other women viewed the Archives as a resource for connecting with other women and building a sense of community. Many women wrote letters describing their appearance and interests, sometimes enclosing photographs, and asking to be connected to other "likeminded" women. There exists, unfortunately, no record of whether the LHA engaged in such matchmaking. Regardless, the letters demonstrate the ways in which the Archives tapped into a deep desire for community and connection. Though its purpose was to preserve history, as one of the only nationally visible lesbian-specific organizations, it naturally served as a locus for many women seeking other lesbian friends, lovers, and community members.

### *Women's Writing*

The LHA was committed to creating a space in which women's cultural and artistic production was valued, celebrated, and preserved. Indeed, the women of the Archives believed that protecting lesbian women's culture and the right to cultural production was an integral part of defending the rights of lesbians to exist in the larger world. Thus, the Archives made a great effort to collect the writings, fiction, poetry, and non-fiction of lesbian writers.

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<sup>50</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, *Archives of the Archives*, Correspondence Folders, October 1982

Recognizing that much of this work was unpublished and not well-distributed, the LHA made a specific point of asking women to send in writing that might otherwise remain unread and inaccessible to the larger lesbian community. In 1978, the Archives published in its newsletter a list of its poetry collection to date. The list of 87 authors (listed by first name, so as to “deemphasize the patriarchal lineage”) contained both the well-known (Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Audre Lorde) and the unknown – many of the authors were women who had sent to the Archives the only copies of their poems. Likewise, in the next edition of the newsletter, the LHA published a list of its short story collections.

In collecting these examples of lesbian women’s artistic and cultural production, the women of the Archives actively worked to expand the definition of what was valued, and what was worth making public. Indeed, as Joan Nestle wrote in the introduction to the poetry bibliography, “We would especially like to receive unpublished work, poems that have been hidden away, poems written on scraps of paper, poems ‘not considered good enough’.”<sup>51</sup> The collection reflected this desire, containing some items published by mainstream presses, many poems and stories that appeared in small publications put out by women’s and lesbian presses, and some writings sent only to the Archives.

The LHA recognized the importance of this work on a number of levels. In addition to uncovering the heretofore hidden thoughts, writings, and creative expressions of lesbian women from across the world (the Archives made a specific plea for work in languages besides English), the existence of the collection posed a challenge to the status quo within the academic canon. In her introduction to the short story collection bibliography, Joan Nestle wrote, “Another purpose of this list is to enrich women’s

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<sup>51</sup> *Newsletter of the LHA*, #4, January 1978.

studies classes. No longer can a teacher say ‘but there is not enough material to do a study on the Lesbian short story.’”<sup>52</sup> She went on to add, “If we have not included someone, please let us know where we can get copies of her work.”

The Archives took seriously its role as collector of lesbian culture, and understood that the existence of the collection had implications for the larger world. Likewise, many of the women who sent their writings to the Archives did so with a sense that they were contributing to a project of great importance to lesbian women. In 1977, a woman from Mississippi wrote to the LHA, inquiring about how she and her lover might donate a small collection of writing and photographs whilst remaining anonymous for the time being, as one of them served in the military. She wrote, “We are poor but rich together. We have some poetry, pictures, etc. How can we help the future generations of our sister lesbians?”<sup>53</sup> Here, the building of a collection of lesbian materials was explicitly linked to the improvement of lesbian lives overall. As this example demonstrates, the LHA and the women who contributed to it worked together to carve out a space for lesbian women’s cultural production, and recognized the importance of that project in ensuring a better future for lesbians.

### *Special Collections*

Many of the special collections acquired by the Archives documented the daily lives of “ordinary” lesbian women. In 1980, the Archives published a list of its special collections to date (excluding those given by women who chose to remain anonymous). While there were some famous names on the list (Adrienne Rich, for example, had already donated five boxes of personal materials), most of the women were unknown.

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<sup>52</sup> *Newsletter of the LHA*, #5, Spring 1979.

<sup>53</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, *Archives of the Archives*, Correspondence Folders, May – September 1977



The contents of these collections speak to the rich diversity of experiences claimed by women who identified as lesbians. The importance that the Archives placed upon these collections demonstrates that the LHA believed that seemingly insignificant acts of daily life were in fact what constituted “history.”

In its early advertising, the LHA would urge women to donate their old love letters to the Archives, instead of burning them.<sup>54</sup> The Doris Greenfield collection, one box of papers from 1979, was an example of one such acquisition, the collection description simply reading, “Letters, documenting the break-up of a relationship.”<sup>55</sup> Another such collection, received in 1982, was accompanied by the following letter:

sisters –  
 i heard you wanted old love letters, so i send these to you instead  
 of burning them.  
 contents: correspondence between a 21yr old white middle class  
 jewish woman and a french canadian irish catholic white working class  
 woman, age 39. boston, 1980 – 1982.  
 if i find any more i'll send them along. also i am sending seperately  
 (sic) a necklace which goes along with the blue birthday letter.  
 thank you for providing a place to save our herstory when it gets to  
 be too much to keep it at home.<sup>56</sup>

These women trusted the Archives to be a repository for items of deep emotional significance.

Likewise, the Archives recognized the importance of women’s relationships as a force in defining lesbian culture and identity. Perhaps the most self-reflexive example of this is the Deb and Joan Collection, a box of materials marking LHA founders Deb Edel and Joan Nestle’s relationship with one another. The collection description simply reads,

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<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the protagonist of Leslie Feinberg’s novel *Stone Butch Blues* frames her narrative as a letter to an ex-lover that she is sending to an unnamed archive (clearly modeled on the LHA) for safe keeping.

<sup>55</sup> *Newsletter of the LHA*, #6, January 1980, page 13.

<sup>56</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, *Special Collections: KJS Collection*

“Letters, cards, materials growing out of a relationship.”<sup>57</sup> These materials demonstrate the ways in which the lives of the founders affected the contents of the Archives, and indeed, through that, the ultimate narrative of lesbian history that emerges from the LHA. In addition to notes and cards written by Deb and Joan to one another, the collection contains scores of letters and correspondence from women all over the world who clearly adored them both. They were, for many, the quintessential lesbian couple, as well as the public face of the Archives. As Joan in particular was quite outspoken in her support of butch-femme culture, and queer women’s rights to sexual and erotic freedom, this was not insignificant. One undated letter in the collection asks Joan and Deb for advice on how to start a local lesbian leather scene. Another, addressed specifically to Joan, thanks her for her writings on lesbian desire, and notes that these writings have helped her come to terms with her own S/M desires. As important as her writings, however, was her publicly recognized relationship with Deb, a living example of the history the Archives was attempting to document.

When Joan and Deb’s relationship began to change, Joan took pains to assure people that the Archives would remain unaffected. In a 1981 letter to Madeleine Davis (herself working on what would become a groundbreaking study of Buffalo’s lesbian community), Joan discussed how she and Deb had opened up their relationship. Though unsure if they would continue to live together in the apartment that housed the Archives, Joan offered many assurances that their personal challenges would not affect the Archives or the future of the collections.<sup>58</sup>

### *Sexuality Collections*

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<sup>57</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, *Special Collections: Deb and Joan Collection*

<sup>58</sup> Letter, Joan Nestle to Madeline Davis, Joan and Deb Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives

The Archives collected materials demonstrating the many ways in which lesbians and lesbian sexuality had been understood and documented in history. These ranged from novels written by lesbians to medical texts about lesbians to what the Archives termed “survival literature” – the pulp fiction from the 1930s to the 1960s that portrayed lesbianism as deviance. While the protagonists of these novels never found both Sapphic bliss and a happy ending, the Archives recognized that, for many women, they had served as the only written confirmation that lesbianism did indeed exist. A large source of these, the Maida Tilchen Lesbian Trash Paperback Collection, contained over 400 titles, which taken as a whole, “creates a cultural history of how others saw us.”<sup>59</sup> The Archives recognized that an important component of documenting lesbian history was collecting materials that had often been hostile to lesbianism.

In the December 1981 edition of the Archives’ newsletter, the LHA announced the beginnings of an attempt to catalogue its archival holdings related to sexuality. As the introduction to the bibliography indicates, the Archives understood that a broad and inclusive approach to collecting materials related to sexuality was necessary in order for the collection to have historical validity. The newsletter stated:

This is a beginning bibliography, based on the Archives’ holdings, on the subject of sexuality. It started as a much shorter listing on the topics of pornography, s/m and censorship. I have undertaken it as an ongoing project because of my concern with the debates now raging in our communities over sexuality in general and these topics specifically. As an archivist, it is crucial to me that all information be made available and be preserved; that personal judgments not be transformed into history because some have a greater access to our presses or to our organizations or to our fears. I have also added works about the history of sexuality to this list and hopefully each decade or historical period will be included as the forces and theories around us change. The things we are beginning to say about our sexuality now are very different from what we said in the early seventies and all of this is different from what was written about us

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<sup>59</sup> *Newsletter of the LHA*, #6, January 1980, page 14.

in the thirties and forties. We hope the archivists will have as full a collection of sexual documents as possible – both by Lesbians and the statements, images made about us. To help us, we need you to take courageous steps in sharing your sexual lives with the archives in the form of statements, photographs, letters or tapes.<sup>60</sup>

I have quoted extensively from this introduction to the collection because it demonstrates how clearly the women of the Archives understood what was at stake: in compiling a collection of materials that was designated to represent “lesbian sexuality,” they were making claims about the nature of lesbian desire, and through that, lesbian identity itself.

The nature of the materials represented in the sexuality collection ranged from academic and medical texts to photographs to fiction. Likewise, the collected items covered a broad range of topics, including psychological analysis, the anti-pornography campaign, S/M and lesbian erotica, transexuality, grassroots history, and political advocacy.

Though they may have found certain materials unpleasant or offensive, the women of the Archives included them in the sexuality collection. Recognizing the importance of collecting not just materials by lesbians, but also materials about them, the LHA included materials such as Alfred Kinsey’s *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953) and Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*. These books, written by men about lesbians, were countered by the many works by lesbians about lesbians.

For example, the Archives also included in the collection materials from both sides of the feminist pornography debates. Collected articles included “Marketing Misogyny: The Economics of Pornography,”<sup>61</sup> as well as several pieces by feminist anti-porn crusader Andrea Dworkin. Also included, however, were articles such as Paula

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<sup>60</sup> *Newsletter of the LHA*, #7, December 1981, page 11.

<sup>61</sup> *Aegis: Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women*, Autumn, 1981.

Webster's "Pornography and Pleasure," from *Heresies: Sex Issue*.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, the sexuality collection included numerous articles on lesbian erotica and S/M, including *What Color is Your Handkerchief: A Lesbian S/M Sexuality Reader*,<sup>63</sup> and an unpublished work by writer Dorothy Allison entitled, "Introduction to a Deviant Ethnography: the Female Dominant S/M Community."<sup>64</sup> These articles engaged one of the central feminist debates of the era and represented both sides with nuance and respect. In this way, the LHA affirmed the right of women with a variety of sexual and gender identities to claim the label "lesbian" for themselves. The sexuality collection also included several items dealing with transexuality. In the fraught atmosphere of the late 70s and early 80s, in which a separatist politics often reigned over gender relations, the affirmation of non-normative gender expressions, particularly those of "passing women" (women who passed as men), was a radical act on the part of the Archives.

Recognizing the importance of historical projects in articulating sexual identities, the LHA included in the sexuality collection works from several other grassroots history efforts. Allen Berube's talk on "Lesbians and Gay Men in Early San Francisco" was included, as were papers from the Buffalo Lesbian Oral History Project. Berube, an influential member of several gay and lesbian history projects in San Francisco, also prepared a slide show in the late 70s on the history of passing women. The Buffalo project, which eventually resulted in the well-known book, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, documented the history of working class, butch-femme communities in Buffalo. Both of these projects used history and historical methods to challenge notions of gender and sexual identity. In including them in the sexuality collection, the LHA acknowledged

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<sup>62</sup> *Heresies* Sex Issue #12, 1981, pp. 30-34.

<sup>63</sup> Samois, 1979.

<sup>64</sup> unpublished paper, *Lesbian Herstory Archives*, sexuality collection.

the important role that the historical process plays in articulating and legitimizing notions of identity.

*Women of Color in the Archives*

The founders of the LHA were committed to collecting the histories of women from a diverse spectrum of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Though the initial five founders themselves were all white women, they were keenly aware of the ways in which the experiences of women of color were often erased from the historical record, and made a conscious effort to avoid repeating these mistakes. Indeed, they understood that an authentic lesbian history must include voices from many different backgrounds, and considered it part of their responsibility to ensure that the Archives did just that. An important part of the early work of the LHA was reaching out to women of color, such as Mabel Hampton, to bring them on board as members of the collective, contributors to the collections, and voices within the Archives' community. As LHA Coordinator Maxine Wolfe stated in a speech commemorating the history of the LHA:

Striving to put our principles into practice has created a collection representing an incredible range of lesbian communities and perspectives. We want every lesbian to be able to find an image of herself at the LHA. The collection has always reflected diverse ethnic and cultural communities because the LHA had an inclusionary and anti-racist basis from its inception.<sup>65</sup>

Through their collecting, outreach, and commitment to diversity, the LHA revealed a lesbian history that was multi-racial and multi-ethnic.

Women responded to the Archives' commitment to diversity, and a number of women of color volunteered their time, resources, and collections. In the mid-1970s, Audre Lorde invited Joan and Deb to look through her writing and photographs and "take

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<sup>65</sup> Maxine Wolfe, "The Lesbian Herstory Archives: A Passionate and Political Act," talk presented at *International Seminar on Archiving*, Wits University, Johannesburg, South Africa, September 29, 1998.

what you need for the Archives.”<sup>66</sup> Many less well-known women did the same. In 1979, for example, a woman named Pauline Guillermo donated some of her drawings. In the accompanying letter, she wrote:

I am a so-called “Third World Woman” and this is the first project done by lesbians that I can identify with. I personally am not involved in any lesbian groups or gatherings, because of the lack of non-anglo women. So I am happy you showed an interest in us and our work and play.<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, the Marilyn Jane Isabell collection documented Isabell’s “struggle for an education while incarcerated in a Chicago prison[:] poetry, essays, experiences of Black Lesbian feminist in the Illinois women’s movement.”<sup>68</sup> These women trusted the Archives enough to donate items that they felt represented their lives, told their stories. In turn, the Archives honored that trust by continuing to reach out to women of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, and building collections and developing programming that demonstrated the many ways in which lesbian herstory was anything but white and middle class. Indeed, the Archives’ first public exhibit, entitled “Keeping On: Images of African-American Lesbians,” was created by black women who volunteered at the Archives, and drew on many of these collections.<sup>69</sup>

### **Visitors’ Experiences**

The experience of visiting the Archives was powerful and, for many women, charged with emotion. While the Archives accommodated the occasional academic researcher (a trend that increased in later years, as the acceptance of gay and lesbian studies grew), most of its early visitors were women who had no formal historical

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<sup>66</sup> *Newsletter of the LHA*, #13, June 1993

<sup>67</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, *Archives of the Archives, Correspondence Folders*, January – June 1979

<sup>68</sup> *Newsletter of the LHA*, #6, January 1980, pp. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Wolfe, 6.

training. They were, rather, women who wanted to connect with other lesbians, and to understand what life had been like for those who came before them. Many of these women were desperate to see some evidence that lesbians had existed in history, and to understand their own experiences in a larger context. They discovered in the Archives not just historical knowledge, but a sense of community as well. Many described the experience as a “homecoming” of sorts. One 1979 visitor from Virginia described her first encounter with the Archives in this way:

Only once before have I felt like I’ve come home. This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> – I never thought I would be that lucky again – and I realize it’s my right to come home to the world. Thanks to you and all the lives in this room for showing me that right!<sup>70</sup>

Several months later, a visitor from Hillsboro, North Carolina commented on the powerful feelings of being historically validated:

30 years of being told we don’t exist – especially as artists – and here is the documentation not only of our existence, but our excellence, our courage, our dreams that are reality. I’ve been overwhelmed. I’ve been filled with new courage. Thank you for being here.<sup>71</sup>

The Archives thus existed as a place of homecoming, as well as a source of inspiration. Women left feeling empowered by and proud of the lesbian tradition that the Archives exemplified. They also understood themselves as stewards of that history. As a self-described “Jewish-lesbian women’s bookstore worker” from Madison, Wisconsin wrote in 1982:

My resolution after visiting the archives today is to be ever vigilant in collecting our own local history (especially of Jewish lesbians) for the archives – for our sisters – for ourselves – and the preservation of our own lives.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, *Archives of the Archives*, visitor logs

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*



The notions of homecoming and empowerment were, however, racially and ethnically inflected. In 1983, a group of women working on an Asian Lesbian Herstory Project visited the Archives. They both noted the need for more information about Asian lesbians at the LHA, and acknowledged the importance of the LHA in helping them to plan and carry out a project of their own. One of the group members wrote:

We're here looking through your/our Asian Lesbian files. You need more pictures. We'll be happy to supply you with some as soon as we all gather and get a camera.<sup>73</sup>

What is striking in this brief comment is the way in which the author simultaneously recognizes the Archives and its collections as both hers and not hers. While many of the other visitors unequivocally claimed the collection as their own, this woman's response is more tempered, and reflects both the highly charged identity politics of the 1970s and early 80s and the fact that, in spite of its commitment to anti-racism and inclusivity, the LHA was still an organization run primarily by white women. While the LHA made a concerted effort to collect the histories of a diverse group of women, not everyone felt comfortable embracing it as her own. And yet, even as this visitor's ambivalence is evident in her use of the dual possessive, "your/our," she clearly feels an investment in helping the collection grow. Much as the Jewish-lesbian bookstore worker pledged to collect more Jewish-lesbian histories, this writer felt a responsibility to help fill the gap she identified, with a promise of more photos of Asian lesbians. Likewise, another member of the group left this note:

You have given us the much needed inspiration as well as direction to pursue the development of an Asian Lesbian Herstory Project.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*

For these women, the Archives served as a model and an inspiration. They felt a certain amount of buy-in, and a responsibility to contribute to a full and accurate history. But, they also recognized the importance of having a space and an archive of their own, and saw the LHA as a stepping stone to help them get there.

### **The Grassroots Nature of the Archive**

The grassroots nature of the Archive created a level of investment and urgency amongst the women who used it that would not have existed in a more mainstream archive, and relied far more on women's networks of community and support than on traditional funding sources or organizational practices. The circumstances surrounding the acquisition of the Marge McDonald collection demonstrate both the urgency of the work at hand and the Archives' particular dependence on networks of women's support. McDonald, a lesbian who came of age in Columbus, Ohio in the 1950s, contacted the Archives in 1979 to set up a showing of the traveling Archives' slide show in Syracuse, New York, where she then resided. While the show was not particularly well attended, Joan and Deb made an important connection with McDonald herself, who was a consummate collector of books and records. McDonald's "lesbiana" collection included pulp novels from the 1950s and 60s, first editions of books by Gertrude Stein, Havelock Ellis, Radclyffe Hall, and others, as well as lamps and statuary, and recordings by many women musicians. In addition to these collections, McDonald kept her own writings. Her journals chronicled her coming out story, and her attempts to find a lesbian community in a pre-Stonewall, non-urban environment. During their 1979 meeting, McDonald

discussed with Joan and Deb her desire to leave her papers, writings, and lesbian-related collections to the Archives.

In 1986, McDonald died. Though she had never come out to her family, in her will she made provisions for the Archives to receive her writings and collections. However, her family, in shock about her posthumously revealed sexuality, was not prepared to deal with this request. The Archives received a panicked telephone call from a friend of McDonald who feared that her writings were being destroyed and her collections were about to be auctioned off. A letter from the family's lawyer informed the Archives that they must send their own representative to Ohio to sort through McDonald's possessions, because, as he wrote, "I am not capable of identifying the material nor are any of the people situated in this area."<sup>75</sup>

Faced with a rapidly approaching deadline and fearing the loss of the collection, the Archives scrambled to find a "representative" who could travel to the small town of Nelsonville, Ohio. Using their extensive contacts, the Archive coordinators located two graduate students from Ohio State University who were willing to go and rescue the collection. Sorting through the thousands of books, records, and papers, these women secured a significant amount of lesbian-related materials for the Archives. Most important, however, was their acquisition of the diaries that McDonald kept from 1955 to 1957. Totalling over 1,000 pages, the diaries detailed McDonald's sense of lesbian culture and community, and provided a valuable glimpse of queer life on a quotidian level.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *LHA Newsletter #10*, February 1988, 2.

<sup>76</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, Special Collections, *Marge McDonald Collection*

These resources would have been lost to the Archives (and indeed, to lesbian history as a whole) had it not been for the Archives exceptional networks of grassroots support. As the editors wrote in the Archives newsletter:

There is a world of obstacles stretched between any donation and the Archives. In Marge's case, we were lucky. Thanks to the women in Ohio we were able to recover much that Marge wanted us to have, despite the sloppy handling of the transfer.<sup>77</sup>

Though its methods were decidedly non-traditional (few well-established, mainstream archives would have entrusted two "strangers" to go and pick up an important new collection), its adaptability and grassroots ethos allowed the LHA to expand its collection in ways that might not otherwise have been possible.

The grassroots nature of the Archives inspired creative fundraising strategies as well. Early on, the Archives determined that it would not accept any governmental grants, funding, or support. Mistrustful of the government's intentions towards lesbians, the Archives' founders worried that accepting state or federal funds would mean giving up independence and autonomy over the collection. Thus, aside from a few very small private foundation grants, the Archives operated entirely on funds received from individual donations. This necessitated an operation that ran on volunteer labor, in volunteered space, with donated materials. Here again, the Archives involvement with communities of lesbian-feminist identified women gave them a broad base of support. The influence of lesbian feminism allowed the women of the archives to articulate a vision of women's culture, women's community, and indeed, women's history, or herstory, that existed independent of dominant patriarchal culture. The Archives' first statement of purpose read, in part, as follows:

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

The Lesbian Herstory Archives exists to gather and preserve the records of Lesbian lives and activities so that future generations of Lesbians will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives. The process of gathering this material will also serve to uncover and collect our herstory denied to us previously by patriarchal historians in the interests of the culture which they serve. The existence of these Archives will enable us to analyze and reevaluate the Lesbian experience.<sup>78</sup>

The notion that lesbians shared a unique culture that needed to be preserved and passed on was a direct legacy of lesbian feminism. And indeed, many of the early policies of the archives supported the creation of a separate lesbian culture. The archives, for example, were opened to “all lesbian women.” Any woman who identified as such was invited to visit the Archives, and to leave behind materials of her own. Men, on the other hand, were not allowed in the Archives, and could not access its holdings. This reliance on networks of women’s culture allowed the Archives to survive, and indeed, in some ways to thrive, while remaining outside of the world of mainstream historical organizations. Women donated generously to the LHA, giving their time, their money, and often, supplies that had been “liberated from the patriarchy,” or, stolen from the offices where they worked their day jobs. Women’s magazines and presses sent copies of their publications free of charge. And women from all over heard about the archives and sent the materials of their daily lives, creating the Archives’ special collections. These donors to the archives took seriously the LHA’s position as an institution of lesbian culture; collections were given with the understanding that only women would have access to them, and some donors went further and designated that access be given only lesbians only.

The commitment to building grassroots spaces for lesbian herstory gained new urgency and new momentum in 1986, when the LHA announced the beginning of an

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<sup>78</sup> *LHA Newsletter #1*, June 1975, page 2.

ambitious campaign to purchase a permanent home for the Archives. The Archives, which had been housed for thirteen years in the apartment that Joan Nestle shared first with Deb Edel then with Judith Schwartz, was literally bursting at the seams. What once filled a file cabinet in Nestle's pantry had spread throughout the apartment, filling room after room until parts of the collection had to be stored in remote locations. Further, Nestle's status as renter (rather than owner) meant that the collection remained vulnerable to the exigencies of the New York City rental market. The women of the Archives envisioned a space that could be secured and climate controlled, to best preserve the collection. They wanted enough space to allow the Archives to grow, with dedicated gallery space, study and research areas, and a performance space. In keeping with the tradition of the Archives' first home in Nestle's apartment, they felt it important that the new building include living space for a caretaker, who would literally live with the Archives.

On April 15, 1986, the Archives officially announced the start of the building fund at a fundraising event. In pursuing this ambitious goal, the coordinators reiterated their commitment to never charging a fee for the use of the Archives and to keeping all Archives events on a "pay as you can" basis. This grassroots ethos was mirrored in the fundraising strategy unveiled in the fall 1986 issue of the Newsletter:

The national and international Lesbian Community are our people, and we are making a people's appeal. Help us raise the funds our home needs. We said at the fundraiser that our dream will come into being not because of two or three women giving us thousands of dollars (although large contributions are always welcome!) but because thousands of Lesbians each give us one dollar. We have always been a grassroots creation, rooted in the belief that a people's history belongs to all the people who lived it and that the collective story will fuel hope, resistance and understanding in the times to come.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *LHA Newsletter #9*, September 1986, page 2.

The coordinators established a Friends of the Archives program to recognize women who made financial contributions to the building fund. However, it is clear even from the language announcing the initiative that they were very sensitive to maintaining a grassroots, pay-as-you-can ethos as they embarked upon the Archives' first major fundraising campaign. The newsletter assured readers, for example, that they would continue to receive mailings and have full access to the Archives regardless of whether or not they contributed.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, instead of appealing to a few large-ticket donors, the Archives campaigned extensively, asking supporters to hold house parties, dance benefits, softball game fundraisers, and other grassroots events to raise money.<sup>81</sup> They asked lesbian bars to put out jars for spare change. Indeed, the Archives tapped a diverse and extensive range of sources in their attempts to secure the funding necessary to acquire a new home.

The road to building ownership was certainly steep. Fearful that they would be unable to attain a mortgage, the Archives determined to raise \$2,000,000 in a very short period of time. In encouraging women to donate, the coordinators both stressed the fiscal responsibility of the Archives (which had never been in debt) and the many ways in which the LHA served the community:

We are asking every Lesbian to contribute individually, as well as help us in fundraising activities. The Archives doesn't just preserve papers and artifacts. It has honestly preserved Lesbian life and lives, in a hundred small and large ways. The very existence of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, as well as the knowledge contained in those countless files and images, have kept more women going than any of us will ever know. We have witnessed women on paltry retirement plans leave a hundred dollars in the goldfish bowl by the door after spending a few hours here, and a teenager gave everything in her pockets, wished it was more, and called

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<sup>80</sup> *LHA Newsletter #10*, February 1988, page 4.

<sup>81</sup> *LHA Newsletter #11*, January 1990, page 3.

the Archives her *lifeline*. The Archives is where we will be remembered, our writings and images cherished and preserved, our history connected to the future, and our people supported.<sup>82</sup>

On December 12, 1991, the Archives purchased a three-story brownstone in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood. It officially opened two years later, on June 20, 1993, after being retrofitted to provide a secure home for the collection, as well as wheelchair access to the first floor. While the Archives had needed to take out a mortgage to bridge the gap between the amount raised and the amount needed, through tireless fundraising they paid the bank back in record time, making their final payment in January of 1996.

### **The Importance of the Archive**

The collective nature of the archives and the many voices that constituted it allowed for a more nuanced and diverse understanding of lesbianism, and the multiple identities that constituted it. What was it about the archive, as opposed, for example, to a community center, a political rights organization, or a social services organization, that allowed for such a diversity of voices, opinions, ideas about what it meant to be a lesbian? First, and most obviously, it was the fact that an archive is by its nature constituted by a collection of materials from different sources. In asking the question, "What is lesbian herstory?", the LHA requested that women from all over the country and the world send in pieces of their lives as an answer. And indeed, an archive does not – or at least, should not – attempt to present an *answer* to the questions its collections might raise. That is to say, unlike a political organization that might attempt to answer a particular social need or address a particular crisis, an archive exists to collect

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<sup>82</sup> *LHA Newsletter #11*, January 1990, page 5.



information, materials, voices. The interpretation of these materials and information is usually left to others – researchers, scholars, visitors, users.

This is not to say, of course, that any archive exists outside of political and ideological influences. The LHA was a product of its time, culturally and historically, and the ways in which it structured itself, advertised itself, and operated profoundly affected whose voices came to be included. Nevertheless, an organization that existed solely for the purpose of collecting a variety of voices, stories, and experiences was by its very nature a more inclusive, multi-vocal institution than one that was formed without this sort of input.

## **Conclusion**

The Lesbian Herstory Archives clearly played an important role in lesbian culture, one that transcended the traditionally understood role of a historical society. Women turned to the Archives to locate themselves in the historical narrative, but also to understand their place in current society and culture. Thus, the Archives' commitment to representing a diverse range of lesbian identities had a direct impact on the many women who came into contact with the LHA's publications, exhibits, traveling slide shows, and collections. As one woman wrote in a 1981 letter to Joan Nestle,

What you've written about roles and being out before the Women's Movement means a lot to me... I spent years trying to deny the existence of roles, only to find out that I've always been butch (and have always been lovers with femmes.)

She concluded her letter by saying, "I want to let you know how glad I am for the existence of the Lesbian Herstory Archives."<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Lesbian Herstory Archives, *Archives of the Archives* collection, correspondence folders

The story of the Lesbian Herstory Archives fits into a larger narrative about the ways in which queer public history projects engaged in the study of what might be termed politically dangerous sexual practices. In the 1970s and early 80s, these practices included butch-femme relationships and lesbian sex radicalism. By the mid-80s, as I discuss in the next chapter, the “dangerous” practices being studied were those of gay male sexuality. This engagement by historical groups with a politics of sex, the body, and desire had important consequences for both the historical record and the lives of everyday people. Through its historical practices, the LHA challenged currently prevailing notions of sexuality and identity, and expanded the definition of lesbianism beyond that which was recognized by lesbian feminism. It did this through collecting policies based on diversity and inclusivity, and by building collections that demonstrated the complicated and varied past of the lesbian community.

The LHA also served as a site of legitimacy for marginalized members of the lesbian community. By revising the historical narrative to include those often labeled queers, freaks and sex radicals, the LHA expanded the possibilities for both personal identities and identity politics. This work clearly resonated with many people who had previously felt marginalized or ignored by history, as the many letters of thanks and recognition attest.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives thus stands as an example of the ways in which historical organizations can and do engage in the politics and debates of the present. Further, it demonstrates the ways in which archives, far from being dead and dusty collections, can potentially serve as sites of a radical redefining of sex and culture. From the redefinitions of lesbianism put forth by the LHA, new possibilities emerged for both

social and political engagement. For the many people who, for the first time, saw their own experiences reflected in a historical setting, the Archives provided the tools for a new sense of both personal and political engagement.

## Chapter Two: Remembering for Our Lives:

### Queer Public History in the 1980s

#### Introduction

In 1985, Bill Walker, co-chair of the fledgling San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society, addressed new members in the first issue of the group's newsletter. His introductory article made clear the imperative that he and the other founding members felt to preserve queer history. Walker wrote:

Interest in lesbian and gay history has seen phenomenal growth in recent times. This probably reflects a general maturation of the gay and lesbian communities, and is certainly accelerated by AIDS. Part of the dying and grieving processes involve remembering and reflecting on the past, and the crisis itself has heightened our awareness of the history of the present. But even before AIDS there was an increasing interest in how lesbian and gay lifestyles had evolved, the development of the homophile, women's and gay liberation movements, and what life had been like for those who went before us.<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, as Walker noted, there had been numerous queer historical groups operating in the Bay Area since the 1970s. The GLBT Historical Society, as the new organization eventually came to be called, grew out of the activities and membership of several of these earlier groups.<sup>85</sup> The interest in gay and lesbian history was not a new phenomenon.

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<sup>84</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 1:1, 1985.

<sup>85</sup> From its inception in 1985 through 2006, when I did the bulk of my research, the Society went through a series of name changes as it both refined and expanded its notion of itself and its constituency. It started out as the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society in 1985. In 1990, to better reflect a geographic interest that encompassed more than just San Francisco, it became the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California. By 1996, the Society was considering another change, seeking a name that reflected the many things they did and the diverse constituency they served. Finally, in 2000, after much discussion amongst the membership (including a lively debate on whether or not include the word "queer" in the naming), the society renamed itself the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society (GLBTHS). This new name was designed to be more inclusive of the sexualities and gender identities of those served, and also clearly signaled a move beyond regional history: the GLBTHS was prepared to encompass histories on a national scale. For the purposes of consistency throughout this project, I will refer to the organization simply as the Historical Society.

This chapter tells the story of the Historical Society. As one of the first groups to grapple with the implications of the AIDS crisis and public memory, this narrative is an important piece of the development of grassroots queer history groups in the U.S. It is also a story about a group of people grappling to figure out just what queer history was. In the 1970s, when the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian History Project, an important precursor to the Historical Society, began collecting materials and piecing together stories, there was little written or acknowledged gay and lesbian history. By 1985, when the Historical Society officially formed, queer history still barely existed outside of the grassroots.<sup>86</sup> Over the years that followed, the Historical Society supported a number of scholars in this emerging field, including Allan Berube, Nan Boyd, Martin Meeker, and Terrance Kissack. The Historical Society wasn't just piecing together a narrative of the past, however. It was also engaged in determining what it meant to *be* gay or lesbian, in both the past and the present. In telling stories, histories, of those who had gone before, the members of the Historical Society were helping to define what constituted gay and lesbian history, and thus, what constituted the very terms "gay" and "lesbian." This chapter is a history of these negotiations of meaning, and indeed, the definitions that emerged were often surprisingly queer.<sup>87</sup>

Of course, AIDS is central to this story of negotiated meanings, and it represents one of the crucial differences between what happened at the Historical Society in the

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<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Katz's 1976 *Gay American History* (T.Y. Crowell Press) heralded a new era of gay and lesbian history, compiling documentary evidence of homosexuality in the Americas from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward. Similarly, Lillian Faderman's 1981 work, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: William and Morrow), described centuries of same-sex intimacy. In 1983, John D'Emilio published *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*. These important works set the stage for the explosion of LGBTQ scholarship in the decades to follow. The academy remained frosty to gay and lesbian history, however, and much of the groundbreaking research continued to be done by grassroots scholars.

<sup>87</sup> For an extensive discussion of the definitions and politics of queerness, see this project's Introduction.

1980s and what happened a decade earlier at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), as detailed in my previous chapter. The LHA's focus on women and lesbianism meant that the politics and struggles that shaped its historical efforts were centered around lesbian feminism, separatism, and the sex wars. The Historical Society, on the other hand, grew out of a group of primarily white men, along with a minority of mostly white women, working in the heart of the AIDS crisis. It is thus not surprising that AIDS came to affect greatly the stories that the Historical Society told, and the ways in which they collected, interpreted, and shared history. Indeed, the story of the Historical Society is in some ways inseparable from the story of AIDS.

Finally, this chapter is a part of a story about organizational development, and the ways in which grassroots history groups, and indeed, non-profits in general, changed over the decades from the 1970s to the 1990s. If the Lesbian Herstory Archives represented a purely grassroots vision of organizational structure, volunteer labor, and consensus decision making, the Historical Society represented a middle ground. As a group that started off as an entirely grassroots, volunteer-run effort, the Historical Society shared a similar philosophy with the LHA. However, it made choices with regard to professionalization that moved it farther away from the strictly grassroots ethos of groups like the LHA, namely through the housing of many of its holdings in a state-run institution. The relationship between the grassroots and the mainstream, and the increasing professionalization of non-profit organizations, is also a part of the story of the Historical Society.

This chapter will thus explore the ways in which the Historical Society, through the collecting, archiving, and telling of history, renegotiated the terms of various sexual

identities and gender identities. It will examine the impact of the AIDS crisis on queer public history, and will look at how AIDS affected what was collected, what was saved, and how stories were told. Finally, it will analyze the role of the Historical Society in the changing terrain of non-profit development and professionalization, and will examine the impacts of these forces on how history was told.

### **The History of the Historical Society**

#### *Before the Historical Society: The SF Gay and Lesbian History Project*

Though the Historical Society was not officially chartered until 1985, its roots lay in a group of independent, grassroots historians who lived in San Francisco in the late 1970s. Drawn to each other by a shared interest in non-normative histories of gender and sexuality, this group of men and women called themselves the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project. The group included Allan Berube, Jeffrey Escoffier, Amber Hollibaugh, Eric Garber, and Gayle Rubin, and later, Bill Walker.<sup>88</sup> The History Project represented the genesis of a grassroots historical consciousness – these scholars met not in a classroom or lecture hall, but over the counters of bookstores and through political work around gay liberation and socialist organizing. Working with no methodological or theoretical guidance, the group gathered in each other's living rooms, talking through

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<sup>88</sup> This venerable group of scholars went on to produce some of the foundational texts of queer studies, including Allan Berube's *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in WWII* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990); Amber Hollibaugh's essays on butch/femme desire, including "What We're Rollin' Around in Bed With," co-authored with Cherrie Moraga, in Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson, eds., *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983); Eric Garber's 1989 article, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in Chauncey, Duberman, and Vicinus, eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989); and Gayle Rubin's 1984 "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Pandora, 1984). Jeffrey Escoffier co-founded *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*.

both their individual research interests and more general questions of what it meant to engage in queer historical scholarship.<sup>89</sup>

The History Project stands as important for several reasons. First, at the height of lesbian feminism and women's separatism, the History Project was a mixed-gender group, consisting of lesbians and gay men. In the tense and highly charged political atmosphere of the 1970s, this was extremely unusual. The group's mixed gender composition started somewhat organically, with Allan Berube's research interest in "passing women," (masculine women who passed, and sometimes lived entire lives, as male) and the willingness of Amber Hollibaugh and Gayle Rubin to accept his scholarship, even though he was a man working on "women's" history. However, this intellectual and political alliance of lesbians and gay men also pointed to underlying intellectual rifts within the lesbian community, and the inability of some lesbian scholars to be accepted within it. As Amber Hollibaugh pointed out, her desire to engage with butch-femme dynamics, both in her personal life and as an intellectual concept, had alienated her from much of the lesbian feminist community.<sup>90</sup> Likewise, Gayle Rubin's interest in leather communities and sado-masochism didn't fit into the agenda of feminism and separatism being widely articulated at the time. In part because of their own uneasy relationships with lesbian separatism, Hollibaugh and Rubin were skeptical of the notion that the practice of history must be a sex-segregated act. Thus, the History Project served as an early bridge between lesbians and gay men doing historical research.

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<sup>89</sup> My information on the history, background, and politics of the SFGL History Project is drawn from Interview with the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, 10 October 1995, *GLBT Historical Society Oral History Collections*.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project, 10 October 1995, *GLBT Historical Society Oral History Collections*, 6-7.



The members of the History Project didn't just meet in private. Berube's presentation of his work on passing women became a popular slideshow and talk, called "Lesbian Masquerade." This public presentation was important for several reasons. It brought the work of the History Project to the attention of many people, most of them women, who also became members. Also, in a moment of lesbian cultural consciousness in which butch-femme relationships were often scorned if not rendered invisible, "Lesbian Masquerade" provided an alternative telling of history, a narrative in which masculine women appeared as legitimate historical actors. For many of the women who came to this presentation, this was a deeply meaningful and transformative experience. It was also an experience in which history, and the presentation of an alternative narrative of the past, tapped in to a particularly powerful current political debate. In commenting on the presentation of "Lesbian Masquerade," Amber Hollibaugh said:

We were taking a lot of risks then because something really profound had happened. We didn't understand it, but we were sexual radicals in a deep way... So even if we really didn't know what to do with passing women in 1977 in the Women's Building, we knew they were valuable... We didn't have any sense of anything but that history could open up history. When we put that show forward – and these were not women who were in any way modern – it spoke to deep strains of need in a larger community. And we found lots of people who were willing to be connected to us as a safe place in a very transient political time around gender.<sup>91</sup>

Clearly the work of the History Project, much like the work of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York, tapped into a desire to articulate not just new historical identities, but new political possibilities as well. For the passing women who tentatively offered themselves up to the History Project as volunteers and supporters, for example, the discovery of a historical narrative that recognized and validated their existence was

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<sup>91</sup> "Interview", 11.

crucial in a moment in which the women's movement and lesbian feminism often denied their existence. Becoming a "safe place" in a moment of extreme gender unrest clearly demonstrated the ways in which history, and the production of historical narratives, was intimately connected to the political.

This important intellectual work formed the core of what eventually became the Historical Society. Acting as the unofficial group archivist for the History Project, Bill Walker saved articles, periodicals, files, and ephemera, filling his apartment with the documents that various group members were uncovering in their research. As the composition of the History Project changed over the years, its activities became less community history oriented, and more focused on studying new theory. There still existed, however, a desire within the queer community for public programs, slideshows, exhibits, and other activities. Combining the demand for queer historical programming with the clear need for a new home for the boxes of materials that were filling his apartment, Walker began having conversations with various people about forming a new organization to fill this gap.

### *The Historical Society is Born*

The founding meeting of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay and Lesbian Historical Society was held on March 16, 1985, after nine months of "pre-meetings" in which the chief organizers laid the groundwork for the new group. Over fifty people attended this meeting, and each attendee completed a membership form with contact information and a description of his or her interests. People could list themselves as individuals or include an organizational affiliation.

These first membership forms reveal a dynamic group of people, some of whom are

well known to us today. For example, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, best known for their roles as founders of the Daughters of Bilitis, one of the country's first lesbian organizations, were in attendance. Perhaps not surprisingly, they listed their interest as the "history of lesbian/gay organizations in San Francisco," and, touchingly, crossed out the word "individual" and wrote in the word "partnership" on the line that bore their names, demonstrating their commitment to publicly recognizing their own bond. Allan Berube, already then working on his now-famous project about gay and lesbian soldiers in World War II, attended and described his interests as "sordid and sleazy events." Lou Sullivan, who went on to become a key member of the society, was there, describing his research into the life of Jack Bee Garland, a turn-of-the-century San Francisco female-to-male crossdresser.<sup>92</sup>

The business of the meeting involved founding member Greg Pennington giving a brief history of the Historical Society planning efforts to date. A Structure Committee was formed, consisting of Bart Amarillas, Larry Burnett, Roberto Esteves, Jim Gordon, Terry Henderling, Tom Horan, David John Lamble, Mary Merryman, Greg Pennington, Richard Rector, Ed Sebesta, Sharon Ullman, and Bill Walker. Finally, all present voted unanimously to adopt the following statement of purpose: "The primary purpose of this Corporation is to uncover, preserve, promote and make available Gay and Lesbian history." Though this mission would manifest itself in many ways over the years, the Historical Society's initial focus was on archives and collections and preserving the material culture of gay and lesbian history. The first board of directors consisted of

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<sup>92</sup> See Louis Sullivan, *From Female to Male: The Life of Jack Bee Garland* (New York: Alyson Publications, 1990).

individuals with experience in grassroots history, as well as those with more formal historical training. They were described as follows:

- **Sharon Ullman:** History PhD student, Berkeley, 1900-1940 focus.
- **Ilene Brettholz** (co- chair): Media research, paralegal. Activist with NOW and Feminists for Direct Action.
- **Paula Lichtenberg:** Librarian, local history, oral history. Board member of SF NOW, Community United Against Violence. Former co-chair, Bay Area Committee Against the Briggs Initiative/No on 6. Currently researching women's suffrage in San Francisco.
- **Roberto Esteves:** Director of Special Media Services at San Francisco Public Library; Chair of Citizen's Telecommunications Policy Committee of the Board of Supervisors; Treasurer of Alice B. Toklas Democratic Club; Lesbian Gay Freedom Day Committee.
- **Jack Leister** (Treasurer): Head of the Institute of Governmental Studies Library at University of California at Berkeley. Chair, Gay Library Project, and liaison to CA Historical Society.
- **Eric Garber:** Founding member of the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project. Currently doing research on gays and lesbians in the Harlem Renaissance.
- **Greg Pennington** (Secretary): Co-founder, San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Periodical Archives; Archivist on the Steering Committee of Mobilization Against AIDS.
- **Bill Walker** (co-chair): Member of the San Francisco Lesbian and Gay History Project; Co-founder San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Periodical Archives. Helped establish a city/county archive in Montana.
- **Bart Amarillas:** Member of the Board of Gay American Indians; Economic development consultant for tribes.<sup>93</sup>

In addition to experience with libraries and archives, most of the founding Board members had significant ties to the gay and lesbian community through their political work and volunteer commitments.

One of the first large-scale projects of the new Historical Society was a survey of public and private collections of gay and lesbian themed materials in the Bay Area, undertaken in 1985-86. Concerned with avoiding a duplication of efforts, the Society

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<sup>93</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 1:1, 1985.

attempted to determine who was doing what sort of collecting already. Historical Society members met with public library officials, followed leads in the card catalog, and surveyed which institutions held what relevant materials. Additionally, the Society made plans to survey local lesbian and gay organizations, including political groups, service providers, and AIDS-related organizations. Aware that the records and histories of these groups were often neglected, the Society envisioned itself as a repository for organizational records, publications, and memorabilia. Indeed, this outreach worked, as, over the years, the Society acquired the records of organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the ARC-AIDS Vigil. The early members of the Historical Society recognized that telling the story of gay and lesbian life in San Francisco hinged on their ability to identify the groups of people who provided services, meeting places, and political strength to queer communities at different historical moments.

Equally importantly, the Historical Society developed a survey tool for identifying and evaluating private collections. The Society wanted, first of all, to raise awareness about the importance of preserving historically significant materials. Secondly, they wanted to collaborate with other private and grassroots collectors as much as possible in planning their archive project. As the flyer they distributed to publicize the survey announced:

The primary purpose of the survey is to obtain information, resources, and contacts to help us in planning the Archive project. We want to find out not only what historic documents and artifacts still exist, but what is currently being collected – and what isn't. We want to know if other groups or individuals are developing long term preservation plans so that we can work together. We also want to see if widespread interest and support can be developed among collectors, historians and the community in general.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Flyer, "Survey of Private Collections," *Records of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 1.

The Historical Society was also interested in potentially acquiring some of these private collections. They sought a broad range of materials, including letters, diaries, manuscripts, notes, calendars, scrapbooks, legal and financial records, periodicals, promotional materials, artwork, photographs, movies and videos, audio records, and bar guides and directories. To evaluate potential collections, Society members created a 13-page survey form that gathered information about each collection's size, content, storage conditions, ownership, and future plans. By 1986, the Society had completed seven private collection surveys, including that of gay rights activist and former Air Force Sergeant Leonard Matlovich, which later became one of the Society's most important acquisitions. Also surveyed were Greg Pennington's personal papers, which included approximately 1,000 pieces of correspondence between Pennington and men he met as he tried to set up sexual encounters. While Pennington stipulated that this collection must remain sealed for at least 20 years, the Historical Society's interest in it reflected its early commitment to collecting materials that documented sexual behavior and desire, a theme that was to be continued as its collecting efforts grew.

In 1986, the Historical Society received its first major collections acquisition, the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Periodical Archives. The Archives were formed in 1983 by Greg Pennington and Bill Walker (both of whom later became founding members of the Historical Society), along with Bill Camilo, who later dropped out of the project. Pennington and Camilo had been collecting materials since the late 1970s, and first joined efforts by founding an organization called the San Francisco Gay Archives and Information Service, which eventually morphed into the Periodical Archives. Bill Walker had also been collecting materials, mostly periodicals, since the 1970s. He moved to San

Francisco in 1981, and joined the History Project the following year. There he met Allan Berube and Eric Garber, and combined his collection with the materials that they had been gathering for years.

The Periodical Archives thus contained materials from a diverse number of sources, collected by several different individuals. To facilitate storage of the collection, Walker and Pennington initially decided to divide it between their two apartments: Walker's 17<sup>th</sup> street apartment became home to the periodicals, while Pennington housed the ephemera, posters, clippings, and other materials in his Post street flat. Walker also engaged in a proactive effort to expand the collection and fill gaps in what had already been collected. He wrote to publishers in hopes of getting complimentary subscriptions, corresponded with other archives to share duplicates and complete runs, and encouraged individual readers to turn over their subscriptions after reading them. The West Coast Women's Collection in Oakland (which later became the June Mazer Lesbian Archives) donated a large number of lesbian publications, ensuring that the collection was not solely male-focused.

The acquisition of the Periodical Archives gave the Historical Society a meaningful base from which to continue its collecting, and indeed, new items began to pour in. A diverse group of individuals and institutions donated volumes of books and magazines, personal letters and diaries, and organizational records, amongst other things. While these materials spanned a number of subject matters and time periods, their overall constitution was in many ways shaped by the very particular social, cultural and political factors of the mid-1980s. Indeed, AIDS, often considered as a medical crisis, also brought about a crisis of history within the queer community. In examining the early

collections practices of the Historical Society, it is useful to consider the ways in which the AIDS crisis affected what was collected, why, and how.

### **The Impact of AIDS on Queer Collecting**

AIDS is clearly central to the story of the 1980s; it shapes the contours of the discourses, actions, and memories that mark the decade. The discourses surrounding the responses of various groups and individuals to a rapidly spreading medical crisis generated new models of memory, history, political action, community, and indeed, queerness itself. The terms of what it meant to be gay or lesbian were renegotiated during the AIDS crisis. The process of death became politicized, as did the process of memory, as the biological families of those afflicted often refused to acknowledge the sexualities, communities, lovers, and lives of the recently dead. Obituaries obliterated the record of whom people loved, how they lived, and why they died. In an eerie inverse of the ACT-UP slogan, “Silence equals death,” the process of death itself was silenced.<sup>95</sup>

This silence was reflected in the historical record, and accounts for much of the urgency felt by members of the GLBT Historical Society as they founded their new organization. As Walker noted in his introductory newsletter article, AIDS both compelled people to try and “save” the past, and it confronted them with the temporality of the present. Fearful of “losing” history before it was written or preserved, the members of the Society were driven by the loss of individual memories, the obfuscation of the lives

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<sup>95</sup> See Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” in D. Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987). Crimp discusses the ways in which “cultural conventions rigidly dictate what can and will be said about AIDS” (245). Crimp notes that the discourses of television, newspapers, fiction, health care policy, political debate, art, and activism all shape our understanding of AIDS. See also Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990), for a discussion of the ways in which other institutional forces have shaped social understandings of AIDS.



of the dead by the straight world, and the rapid changes in gay life and culture, as a result of the AIDS crisis. As Judith Halberstam writes in relation to what she terms “queer time” and the AIDS crisis, “The constantly diminishing future creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and while the threat of no future hovers overhead like a storm cloud, the urgency of being also expands the potential of the moment.”<sup>96</sup> Indeed, this urgency was translated into action on the part of Historical Society members who took it upon themselves to “save” this moment of history. This urgency led to a collections practice characterized by three distinct components: first, a desire to collect the personal papers and memories of those who were ill; second, a desire to protect the historic collections of vulnerable community members; and finally, a desire to preserve the material culture of a gay sexual economy that was changing quickly and dramatically. Indeed, these three areas of collecting provided the basis for much of the early work of the Historical Society, and in many ways shaped the stories that the Society was equipping itself to tell.

### *Personal Collections*

As people fell ill and died at a staggering rate, one of the first, and most obvious, concerns of the GLBT Historical Society was recording and remembering the individual lives of those who were being lost. As Bill Walker wrote in the newsletter in 1987, “The continuing health crisis has brought an additional number of inquiries and donations to the Historical Society.”<sup>97</sup> These donations, often in the form of collections of personal papers, correspondence, and manuscripts, documented a broad spectrum of experience

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<sup>96</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2. For more on the politics of memory as specifically relates to AIDS, see Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>97</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 2:3, March 1987.

among gay, mostly white, men in San Francisco. In 1987, for example, the Society acquired the papers of Jerry Jacks, a gay activist and science fiction fan. Jacks was a member of the Urania Club, a local gay science fiction group. His papers included notes and correspondence from their meetings, and demonstrated the quirky diversity of both life in the Bay Area, and of the Society's new acquisitions.

The Historical Society was concerned with producing a history that included and gave voice to people of color. While many of the early personal collections received by the Society came from white gay men, collections such as the Randy Miller papers included information on the Gay Men of Color Commission, as well as other organizations in which Miller, a long-time activist, was involved. The collection also includes Miller's notes from several conferences he organized on AIDS in minority communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

In 1988, the Society received one of its most important personal collections to date. Gay rights activist and former Air Force Sergeant Leonard Matlovich donated his personal papers and memorabilia to the Historical Society.<sup>98</sup> Matlovich, a Vietnam veteran, was the first service-person to challenge the military's ban on gays and lesbians without first being accused of homosexuality. The subject of massive media attention and a television movie, Matlovich himself was a well-known figure, and the acquisition of his collection gave the new Historical Society a certain amount of publicity and respect amongst the general public.<sup>99</sup> The Matlovich collection was extensive, encompassing photos, correspondence, legal documents, old uniforms, dog tags, and fan mail. As Matlovich himself was fighting AIDS, the securing of his collection in an archive

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<sup>98</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 3:4, June 1988.

<sup>99</sup> See Mike Hippler, *Matlovich: The Good Soldier* (New York: Alyson, 1989).

dedicated to preserving the stories of gay and lesbian communities represented a small victory over the encroaching tide of historical erasure.

The Historical Society was not concerned only with preserving the stories of the famous, however. In 1989, Len Evans donated 20 hours of interviews with older lesbians and gay men. This was a harbinger of the numerous oral history projects that the Society would conduct in the years to come, and reflected its commitment to documenting not just the lives of well-known figures, but also the daily lives of the “ordinary” people living in San Francisco.<sup>100</sup> The same year, the Historical Society acquired the papers of Joseph Rose-Azevedo, which documented his long struggle to become San Francisco’s first openly gay police officer. Rose-Azevedo’s collection told the story of a working person struggling to overcome discrimination. Two years later, in 1991, historian Nan Boyd, then an intern at the Society, announced the beginning of the oral history project that would eventually form the substance of her book, *Wide Open Town*.<sup>101</sup> In describing her focus, Boyd wrote that she was particularly interested in gathering the stories of “working class dykes and fags, queer people of color, transsexuals, and transvestities – [who] are particularly valuable because these are the voices most often left out of a growing literature dedicated to lesbian and gay history.”<sup>102</sup>

Indeed, the concern for documenting the histories of those who fell outside the bounds of the mainstream was a priority for the Historical Society from its beginnings.

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<sup>100</sup> Indeed, oral history has been one of the most important methodologies in LGBTQ history in general. Same-sex relationships, historically unrecognized by most institutions of the state, have been rendered invisible by many of the official records of history (marriage licenses, for example), as well as in the mainstream media. Oral histories, such as Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis’s *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*, have provided a way for many scholars of LGBTQ history to capture the stories, memories, and life experiences of marginal populations.

<sup>101</sup> Nan Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A Queer History of San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>102</sup> *Our Stories: Newsletter of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California*, 6:3-4. Spring/Summer 1991.

This undoubtedly had to do with the diverse identities and political commitments of the Society's founders. In 1991, the Society received a collection that, while incredibly rich, must have been a particularly sad acquisition. That March, Lou Sullivan, a longstanding volunteer with the Society, independent scholar, and contributor to the newsletter, died and left his personal papers and collected research materials to the archives.<sup>103</sup> Sullivan was a female-to-male (FTM) transman who had, since childhood, identified as a gay man. His papers included his extensive research notes on other FTMs and early cross-dressers, including the 19<sup>th</sup> century figure Jack "Bee" Garland. He was particularly interested in documenting the experience of gay FTMs, and his collection included information about his own life and transition, including diaries spanning thirty years, writings about his S/M fantasies, medical correspondence, a letter from Kinsey researcher Wardell Pomeroy, who helped him find sympathetic doctors, and correspondence he received as he attempted, through personal ads and anonymous boxes, to find a community of other transmen. The collection also includes a record of Sullivan's participation in various medical studies and treatment trials, as he battled the AIDS virus that eventually killed him. Sullivan's life, and the collection that he left behind to document it, demonstrate the early diversity of the Historical Society. Rather than shying away from stories that didn't fit neatly into acceptable or respectable categories, the Society's members embraced the materials and experiences of a culture that was distinctly "queer." This, I contend, is one of the important ways in which queer historical societies and archives can serve as models for a queer politics. By embracing histories that fall outside of the dominant and normative narrative of gay and lesbian life, archives can expand the popular understanding of what it means to be queer. As the fourth chapter of this dissertation

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

discusses, this work has implications for the creation and articulation of a politics that embraces a queer subject position and uses it as a lens for radical social change.

### *Preserving Existing Collections*

The second area of collecting driven by the AIDS crisis was the preservation of existing collections. By “existing collections” I refer to collections of periodicals, gay pulp fiction, flyers, political and social brochures, and other ephemera that had been built over the years by collectors and grassroots historians throughout the community. The founders of the Historical Society were well aware of the need for a stable and secure repository for a number of such collections that had been housed in individual’s houses and apartments. As people became sick, and sometimes quickly died, their collections were often lost as their homes had to be cleaned and emptied in a hurry. Families arriving from out of town often did not recognize the value of the collections that they found. And of course, sometimes the destruction of such collections was enacted not just out of ignorance, but out of a desire to erase any trace of a life and sexuality that they found threatening or repugnant. Though not all of the Historical Society’s early “collections of collections” came from people who were sick or dying, the prevalence of death, and the community’s consequent loss of control of carefully crafted collections, made many grassroots historians all too aware of the need for a permanent archive.

Indeed, in 1986, the first collection acquired by the Historical Society came from the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian Periodical Archives, which turned over its holdings to the new organization.<sup>104</sup> Greg Pennington and Bill Walker had maintained the Periodical Archives, which included gay and lesbian newspapers, magazines, and newsletters from the 1950s onwards. Pennington and Walker were both also early founders of the new

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<sup>104</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 2:1, September 1986.

Historical Society. Watching their friends and fellow historians fall ill created a sense of urgency amongst them to find a home for the many collections that existed out there, as well as for the one that they themselves curated. Walker's work as a nurse on the AIDS Ward at San Francisco General Hospital meant that he was all too aware of the rapid loss of life within the gay community. Likewise, the fact that most of the Historical Society collections were housed in his apartment made him critically aware of the need to find a stable home for the material culture of queer history.

*Preserving the Culture of Gay Male Sexuality*

The final way in which the GLBT Historical Society responded to the AIDS crisis is perhaps the most radical. In addition to a concern for preserving the life stories of those being lost to the epidemic and desire to protect those collections that were suddenly made vulnerable, the Historical Society made an concerted effort to document the changing terrain of gay male sexual cultures.

In 1986, the newly-formed Society received one of its first donations. The owner of the former Bulldog Baths, a popular bathhouse that had operated in San Francisco's Tenderloin district in the 1970s and early 80s, offered the Historical Society all of the artifacts and artwork from the building, which was about to be stripped and renovated.<sup>105</sup> The Historical Society thus acquired a number of sheetrock panels depicting gay male sex, the murals that had formerly hung on the walls of the Baths.

The Bulldog Bath murals were the first in a long series of acquisitions that chronicled, in one way or another, the changing terrain of queer desire. Gayle Rubin, another early member of the Historical Society, was instrumental in helping the group collect materials that documented queer S/M sexual cultures. In addition to amassing her

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<sup>105</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 2:1, September 1986.

own extensive private collection, Rubin donated paraphernalia to the Historical Society, and arranged for others to do so as well. In 1989, for example, she orchestrated the donation of items from the estate of Geoff Mains, a scientist, writer, and leather activist. Mains's collection consisted of several paintings and pieces of art, as well as his personal papers, providing insight into the sexual subculture of the leather scene. That same year, Rubin also organized the transfer of artifacts and materials from the Catacombs, a private sex club that had operated in San Francisco during the 70s and 80s.<sup>106</sup>

These acquisitions were significant in several ways, particularly in light of the changes wrought to gay male sexual cultures by the AIDS crisis. Of course, there was certainly still sex after AIDS, including bathhouses, leather, and S&M. However, AIDS profoundly changed the ways in which gay male sexuality was allowed to operate in the world. The Historical Society's commitment to collecting materials relating to gay sexuality signaled several things. First, it affirmed the value of a sexuality that, in the panic following the AIDS crisis, was often demonized. As Douglas Crimp has noted, men having the "wrong" kinds of gay sex were attacked not just by the conservative right, but also by figures within the gay movement itself.<sup>107</sup> Second, it recognized the history of sexual practices and sexual pleasures as a legitimate site of historical inquiry. Finally, it

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<sup>106</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 5:2, Winter 1989.

<sup>107</sup> See Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic." Crimp details the ways in which people such as Randy Shilts and Larry Kramer argued for an approach to the AIDS crisis – and AIDS prevention in particular – that was predicated on monogamy and cast gay male sexuality as dangerous and immoral. Crimp himself argues that it is precisely the promiscuity of the gay male community that allowed for the development of safe sex practices. He writes, "We were able to invent safe sex because we have always known that sex is not, in an epidemic or not, limited to penetrative sex. Our promiscuity taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures... It is for this reason that Shilts's and Kramer's attitudes about the formulation of gay politics on the basis of our sexuality is so perversely distorted, why they insist that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact *it is our promiscuity that will save us*" (252-253). This attitude, which held that gay sex had an inherent worth and value, shaped the collections practices of the Historical Society. See also Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009) for a consideration of the changing meaning and implications of gay male sex in the decades since the start of the AIDS crisis.

recognized that the AIDS crisis would vastly change the ways in which people both viewed sexuality and engaged in sexual activities, and sought to document this rapidly changing economy of desire.<sup>108</sup>

This engagement with what might be termed “politically dangerous sexual practices” was not new for many members of the Historical Society. As noted earlier, several of the members and early founders of the Society had been active earlier in the San Francisco Gay and Lesbian History Project. While I do not mean to conflate the work of the History Project with that of the Historical Society, which operated later, under a very different organizational structure, I think it is worth noting that members of both groups were engaged in the study of these politically dangerous sexual practices. In the 1970s, those practices involved butch-femme relationships, female masculinity, and lesbian leather scenes. In the 1980s, the “dangerous” practices being studied were those of gay male sexuality.<sup>109</sup> The AIDS crisis thus had a significant impact on queer public history projects: The crisis itself, and the attendant changes in behaviors and attitudes about sex, provided the lens necessary to critically view the culture of gay male sex. In

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<sup>108</sup> It is useful to consider the work of the Historical Society in light of Foucault’s theories of sexuality. In discussing the repressive hypothesis, Foucault notes that “[t]he central issue, then, is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex ... but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said.” As an institution that *literally* stored a history of the discourses of particular iterations of sexuality, the Historical Society provides a lens for thinking about the ways in which these forms of knowledge both shape and are shaped by individuals and communities. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978), 11.

<sup>109</sup> See Gayle Rubin’s discussion of “the charmed circle” of socially acceptable sex acts (heterosexual, married, monogamous, etc.), which she contrasts to the outer limits of unacceptable behavior (homosexual, kinky, promiscuous, etc.); Gayle S. Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in Carole S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London: Pandora, 1984). Rubin also notes that there is an ever-shifting line between the two circles, as social determinations of what is and is not acceptable shift. Members of the Historical Society, as well as their predecessors in the History Project, were interested in studying those acts that fell outside the bounds of socially sanctioned sex.



other words, AIDS provided a lens for studying gay male sexual cultures, precisely because it plummeted them into change.

### **The Role of Women**

Though the Historical Society was a mixed-gender group from the beginning, with women taking on significant leadership roles, much of the group's work tended to be male-focused. This was, no doubt, due in part to the particular pressures of the AIDS crisis on the gay male community, and the attendant historical urgencies: the preservation of certain stories and materials took priority over all else. The Historical Society was aware of the importance of maintaining gender parity in both its membership and its subject matter, however, and made repeated attempts to provide programming of interest to women. By April of 1986, a year after the first official meeting, the Historical Society membership report indicated 116 individual members and 5 organizational members. The percentage of women members had risen as well, constituting 35% of the total membership as opposed to the 20% with which the Society began.

In 1989, board member Kate Brandt appealed to the female membership through a column in the newsletter. Brandt noted the importance of foregrounding women's collections in the growing new acquisitions of the Historical Society. She also reminded readers that while AIDS was receiving a huge amount of media attention, thus driving some of the Society's collections and preservation efforts, many lesbian women were dying unnoticed of cancer. "Gay history," Brandt wrote, "will be recorded and preserved only if we gay people take the initiative to claim our pasts. And if lesbians are to be as

well-represented in our collective history as gay men, we women must take responsibility for collecting and saving our letters, our photos, our stories -- the record of our lives.”<sup>110</sup>

To encourage women’s involvement in the Society, the Society held a number of events geared specifically toward women. In 1988, for example, the Society hosted several evenings of discussion and music with Edyth Eyde, better known as Lisa Ben, who had published one of the first lesbian magazines in the country, *Vice Versa*, in the 1940s. In 1990, the Society hosted a women-only presentation of “She Even Chewed Tobacco,” Allen Berube’s slideshow about passing women. This event was combined with a discussion led by several members of the Mothertongue Feminist Theater Collective, and offered participants a chance to reflect on their own notions of “herstory.” This conversation was designed to help the women to understand the importance of their own experiences, and the relevance of their lives to a queer archive.

Unfortunately, these events were not always well attended. In the winter of 1990/1991, Kate Brandt again addressed the female membership through the newsletter, this time expressing frustration and concern over women’s lack of attendance at events and, just as importantly, the lack of lesbian-related donations being received into the archives. Though the by-laws of the Board of Directors mandated a 50/50 gender split, she worried about the lack of women’s participation in various committees, and urged women members to contact the Society with suggestions for how to make it more relevant to their lives and interests. However, in spite of this concern, the materials received by the Historical Society that year remained overwhelmingly male-oriented. Indeed, in that same edition of the newsletter, Walker noted that the true mission of the Historical Society was to acquire and preserve archival collections and personal papers.

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<sup>110</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 5:2, Winter 1989, page 8.

A list of 12 men who had recently donated materials followed, leaving Walker to comment, “To varying degrees they illuminate the lives and times of a cross-section of gay men who have lived in this area over the past forty years. We are very pleased to have them and wish to thank each of the donors for helping us to save these collections for use by future generations.” Clearly, though the Society was aware of the gender imbalance in its collections, this was a problem with which it would continue to struggle. The discrepancy in gender-based collecting at the Society points to a weakness in its methodology of archiving, and also points to the limits of its queer vision.<sup>111</sup> In assigning to women the role of recruiting other women, the Society implicitly supported a gendered division of history as well as a gendered division of labor.

### **The Changing Face of the Historical Society**

As the AIDS crisis continued, the Historical Society continued to respond to the changing needs of the community. In January of 1986 the Archives Committee reported on the need for stable, secure space to house the rapidly growing number of AIDS-related collections:

A new direction for our group is being proposed by the Archive committee. We are convinced that before the year is over, more important collections of G/L history will surface in response the deaths and other changes and that the need for storage space will become critical. We are proposing that the Historical Society rent good, accessible storage space for this purpose. If we should decide to do this, we will be in a position to let the AIDS Foundation, Shanti, GLOE and others know of our ability to handle the emergency disposal of important collections. Legal papers would be drawn up giving legal ownership to us and specifying future wishes should we fold in the future.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> See Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) for a discussion of the methodological challenges of documenting the history of women’s sexuality, versus that of men.

<sup>112</sup> Report of the Archives Committee, January 1986, *Records of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 2.

Just nine months after the Historical Society was officially chartered, its members recognized the urgent need for growth and development of resources. From its early days, the Historical Society responded to “history” not as a fixed element of the past, but rather, as an ever-evolving set of cultural, social, and political circumstances. It also recognized that the documentation of this history could not wait: an inability to act in the moment would mean the loss of irreplaceable pieces of the historical record.

Indeed, in September of 1987, the Society’s new collections policy supported this notion of an immediate history, stating, “We are concerned with recording current history as well as recovering the past.”<sup>113</sup> The Society determined to organize its collecting around the following principles: primary materials were to make up the bulk of the collection, with appropriate reference materials and supportive secondary sources. Geographically, the collection was to focus on Northern California. The collections policy called for a documentation of “the broadest range of experience of lesbians and gay men,”<sup>114</sup> and recognized that materials regarding queer life before 1965 were rare and valuable, and thus were a priority for collecting. The policy also made explicit the Historical Society’s commitment to preserving marginalized sexual histories as well. “Materials will not be censured on the basis of political or sexual views or behaviors,” the policy stated. “Erotica, homophobia, repression and unpopular ideologies are all relevant materials.”<sup>115</sup> The collections policy also demonstrated the Historical Society’s commitment to cooperation and collaboration with other queer history projects, making it clear that all efforts would be made to avoid a duplication of local resources.

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<sup>113</sup> Report of the Archives Committee, September 1987, *Records of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 2.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

However, with the acquisition of new collections came new stresses about space and money. At the very first meeting of people interested in forming the new Historical Society, Bill Walker had succinctly articulated his stake in the new group, stating, “My overall goal is to get the periodicals out of my house and provide a home for all of the collections.”<sup>116</sup> Indeed, Walker had been living with much of the collection before the Historical Society was even formed. It was, however, several years before his wish was realized. While the Historical Society began holding open hours at the archives in 1989, the archives still lived in Walker’s apartment. In spite of the unpublicized location, the limited hours, and the need to call ahead, the community responded to the availability of this new resource. In its first three months of open hours, the Society reported that 35 visitors had accessed the collection.

The strain of having the archives housed in his apartment became clear from the correspondence in the communication book between Walker and the other volunteers. The communication book served as the primary point of contact between volunteers working different shifts in the archives. It included notes on what visitors were researching, information requests received, problems encountered, and other archive business, as well as the occasional irreverent comment on the physique or attractiveness of particular visitors. The notes in the book make clear that managing the archive was a full-time job, particularly for Walker, upon whom the burden of “fixing” most of the problems seemed to fall. He repeatedly left notes in the book pleading with the volunteers to return phone calls and answer information requests while on their shifts, as he could not keep up with the volume of work. The Historical Society attempted to offset some of

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<sup>116</sup> Minutes from the “First Meeting for the Formation of a Gay Historical Society.” Records of the GLBTHS, Carton 1. 1984.

the inconvenience of living with the archives by paying a small portion of Walker's rent, and in 1989, Walker requested that the Society increase its payment from \$100 to \$200 a month. This still represented, however, a small proportion of Walker's own \$1,300 a month rental payment.<sup>117</sup>

Finally, in June of 1990, the Historical Society signed a lease for 608 square feet of "general office space" in the basement of the Mission District's Redstone Building, for which they paid \$435/month, and Walker's desire to move the collections out of private residences was finally fulfilled. In September of 1991 the Society moved into a larger space in the same building, paying \$750/month for 1,731 square feet. In 1995 they tripled their space, signing a five-year lease on 3,759 square feet of space, for \$2,518.53 per month. Maintaining secure and appropriate space continued to be a constant struggle for the Society, however, highlighting the very real financial pressures that underlay the group's commitment to providing a safe home for vulnerable collections.<sup>118</sup>

#### *Increased Professionalization, Increased Pressure*

As the Historical Society grew, expanding its collections and programs, its members also became more savvy non-profit administrators. In 1990, the Society determined the need for an Advisory Board. Unlike the Board of Directors, most of whom were hands-on grassroots historians, the Advisory Board was to be a figurehead group of sorts, designed mainly to raise the Historical Society's profile. As a memo to the Board of Directors stated:

We propose that the most important criterion for the Advisory Board, or at least, an overriding criterion, should be name recognition. In keeping with some of the comments made at the retreat, we do not think the Advisory

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<sup>117</sup> Letter from Bill Walker to the Historical Society, May 23, 1989, *Records of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 1.

<sup>118</sup> "Rental History," *Records of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 1.

Board should be composed of people we wish to rely on for possible advice or help on specific issues, at least not to the extent that such people do not fit the other criteria we are recommending.<sup>119</sup>

To meet these other criteria, potential Advisory Board members had to fall into one of following categories of “well-known” people:

1. Politicos (not necessarily office holders, as this has certain downsides to it)
2. Intelligentsia (academics, authors, other artists, publishing types, commentators, etc.)
3. Money (lesbians and gay men who are well connected financially but politically acceptable)
4. Society (well-known types who do not fall into these other categories, but are known for being...known)<sup>120</sup>

The duties for Advisory Board members were to be kept intentionally light. Their main function was to provide for the Historical Society the legitimacy that came with name recognition. As a memo about the selection process noted, the co-chairs felt that people meeting criteria two and three (that is, Intelligentsia and Money) would be the most useful to the Society. In considering Advisory Board members, the Historical Society was also conscious of the need for diversity in terms of gender, class, race, age, and geography, as noted in the memo.

As the Society moved into its new rented office and storage space, it still did not have any paid staff people. It did, however, have the new obligation of a lease and other monthly expenses. As the historical imperative of the AIDS crisis and other important moments in queer history were by no means abating, the Society clearly recognized the need to engage in the kind of long-range planning and strategizing that would attract funders and create a more sustainable organization.

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<sup>119</sup> “GLBTHS Advisory Council” folder, *Records of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 1.

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*

However, as the Historical Society grew, it also faced unexpected new challenges. In 1990, the Society's insurance policy renewal was rejected by the insurance company, Unigard, in a clear case of homophobic discrimination. In refusing to renew the policy, Unigard wrote:

This society presents some probability of higher hazards than the normal society we desire to write. This risk may be subject to community reactions due to the makeup of its members that would create an increased liability or property exposure beyond the expected hazards associated with other historical societies.<sup>121</sup>

In other words, Unigard considered the Historical Society to be "high risk" because its members were predominantly gay, and thus, might engender violent "community reactions." With help from the National Gay Rights Advocates, the Society managed to keep itself insured. However, the Unigard case clearly demonstrates some of the problems with which the Historical Society had to contend as they moved toward a new level of professional accountability.

In 1992, a new possibility for professionalization and development presented itself to the Historical Society. The previous year, the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) had announced its plans to create a Gay and Lesbian Center, funded in part by a half million dollar gift from philanthropist James Hormel. In the spring of 1992, Walker addressed the membership of the Historical Society through the newsletter, informing them that SFPL had invited the Historical Society to place their collections with the new Center.<sup>122</sup> While the Board of the Historical Society was engaged in ongoing discussions with SFPL, they recognized that such an important decision could not be made without

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<sup>121</sup> Letter from Unigard Insurance Company to the GLBT Historical Society, 1990, *Records of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 1.

<sup>122</sup> *Our Stories: Newsletter of the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California*, 7:3/4, Spring/Summer 1992.



the full support of the general membership. Several meetings were thus called to address the questions and concerns raised by the potential merger, and the Board agreed that any negotiated contract would be subject to a vote by the membership at large.

This commitment to a collective decision-making process exemplified the grassroots spirit of the Historical Society, even as it transitioned into a more professionally-managed organization. Indeed, the concerns that underlay the potential merger also highlighted this grassroots consciousness. In his letter, Walker noted that the potential loss of control of the Historical Society's collections was a primary concern. Echoing the sentiments of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, who a decade earlier had committed to keeping their collection out of "straight" hands, Walker wrote, "The experience of the lesbian and gay movement has repeatedly shown that we can never rely on simple promises to preserve our rights or serve our interests. Homophobia and bigotry are deep and hardy forces, and rhetoric and good intentions are not effective instruments against them. We need a more powerful device to uphold our stake in this Center."<sup>123</sup> However, unlike the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Historical Society chose to place some of their holdings with an outside organization. In 1996, the Historical Society signed an agreement with SFPL that allowed them to deposit a portion of their collection in the new Center, while retaining full ownership of and control over these items. This partnership, which bridged public and private, grassroots and professional, and indeed, gay and straight, allowed the Historical Society's collection to reach a larger number of people, and to receive a higher standard of care than it might have otherwise. It also represented a shift in the purely grassroots ethos of the organization, and highlighted the

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*

ways in which the Historical Society recognized the need to develop new strategies for survival in the face of a changing non-profit terrain.

### **Making Queer History Public: Exhibitions, and Public Interactions**

Though the Historical Society's initial impetus was the collection and preservation of an archive of queer history, the Society also realized the value and importance of sharing its work through exhibits, education, and public programming. Indeed, this ethos of community education no doubt carried over from the Gay and Lesbian History Project's frequent and popular slideshow presentations. As the collections grew and were strengthened, the Society actively attempted to share this history with the community at large through exhibits and public programs.

The Society began planning for its first exhibit in 1987, a photographic display illustrating life in the Bay Area from the mid-nineteenth century onward. The exhibit planning committee divided the topic chronologically into the following time periods: 1849-1941, the "Pioneer Spirit"; 1941-1950, "War Loosens the Chains"; 1950-1970, "Opening the Door"; and 1970-present, "Triumphs, Tragedies, and Triumphs." The exhibit was unveiled in June of 1988 in the Civic Center after the Pride parade.

In March of 1992, the Historical Society co-sponsored an ambitious exhibit at the University of California, Berkeley. Entitled "Sex, Gender & Identity: Homosexuality in American Culture," the exhibit represented a significant collaboration between the grassroots Historical Society and the prestigious university. Moreover, locating the exhibit in a gallery of Berkeley's Doe Library meant that this queer exhibit was housed in a "non-queer" space, and thus, was viewed both by members and allies of the LGBTQ

community who sought it out, and by passersby, many of whom had had no previous exposure to gay and lesbian history.

Viewers of the exhibit were invited to leave remarks in a comment book. No demographic data was collected on the exhibit's audience, however the comments represent diverse points of view. The overall response to the exhibit was very positive. Many people expressed the ways in which the exhibit resonated with some aspect of their own experiences. One student wrote:

This exhibit is just one of the many things that will contribute to this Berkeley sophomore figuring out who the fuck she is. Thank you for putting this together – it has distracted me from studying many a time.<sup>124</sup>

However, those who recognized themselves in the exhibit materials were not just the Berkeley elite, as this comment demonstrates:

Greeting and love from an old Bisexual street drag queen. Been on the line for forty years. I view this as a celebration and affirmation of a basic part of my life. Again love and thanks.<sup>125</sup>

Visitors from as far away as Japan left comments such as this one (written first in Japanese, and translated into English directly below):

It's a good thing that you have this display. Seeing this makes me feel very good. It would be great to have this in Japan. Thanks.<sup>126</sup>

However, some visitors found fault with the lack of racial diversity portrayed in the exhibit. As this visitor wrote:

Where are the gays/lesbians/bis of color – from your exhibit it would seem all gays or lesbians are white. Interestingly the only people of color are in the picture of Stonewall...and in the “humor” display – glad we entertain you – but? While a great exhibit, the power is undermined by the exclusion of people of color who are gay or lesbian from it.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Comment Book, UC Berkeley Exhibit, 1992. *Record of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 2.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*

A common complaint was the lack of publicity for the exhibit, as this viewer expressed, along with a desire for more material on queer cultures that transcended a strict “gay/lesbian” definition:

Its sooo refreshing to see something about ourselves – too bad it’s hidden back here in a dark corner. How ‘bout a little publicity? This is a fine exhibit. More more more. More bisexuality. More transsexuality. More S/M. Queer is bigger than gay/lesbian.<sup>128</sup>

However, for other visitors, the more explicit sexual content of the exhibit was intellectually unnecessary and politically counterproductive:

Overall I think this is a wonderful exhibit, whose time has come. Unfortunately, some of the pieces, particularly those discussing sexual acts (i.e. the bondage pamphlet) divert one’s attention from the totality of the exhibit. Its [*unknown word*] only promotes the idea of homosexuality as a sexual life style, which we know is not true. Furthermore, it is fodder for those who believe we should not have exhibits such as the one you put on. Finally, I love seeing children looking through the hall, looking at the exhibit. While I am encouraged by their interest, and hope this exhibit has educated them, the pieces (such as the bondage pamphlet) should not be available to them.<sup>129</sup>

These conflicting visions of how to portray sex, gender and identity were at the heart of the work of the Historical Society, and the comments of the exhibit’s viewers reflected many of the priorities and struggles that took place within the Society itself. For example, while the group had been committed from its beginnings to doing historical work that was inclusive of communities of color, the reality on the ground was that its membership continued to be overwhelmingly white. While the Society made consistent efforts to avoid retelling a whitewashed history, the lack of diversity amongst those conducting research and handling exhibits and acquisitions affected the stories that they were able to tell.

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<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*

On the other hand, the commitment to preserving and exhibiting the histories of those who fell outside of gender norms, and indeed, outside the neat boundaries of “gay” and “lesbian,” had been a hallmark of the Historical Society from its beginnings. While it may have shocked some viewers, the inclusion of sexually explicit and S/M materials was not surprising for an organization whose very first acquisitions included extensive collections of gay erotica.

The following summer, in June of 1993, the Society mounted another exhibit, this one explicitly dealing with gender fluidity and transgression. Opening at San Francisco’s ARU Gallery, and then moving to the Bearded Lady Café, “Crossing the Line: An Exhibit of Gender Transgressions,” highlighted the fluidity and constructedness of gender throughout history. As the text of the opening announcement stated:

This exhibit seeks to explore how gender – a social construct – is inscribed on the body, either through representations in clothing or actually in the flesh. It interrogates the commonly accepted notions of gender as binary and natural by featuring visual and textual representations of individuals and groups who call into question the male/female dichotomy. By showcasing instances of obvious gender construction, the exhibit hopes to encourage an awareness of how we all participate in making our own genders, and to empower people to freely choose how those genders are expressed.<sup>130</sup>

The exhibit drew heavily on the Lou Sullivan collection, which the Historical Society had acquired upon Sullivan’s death in 1991. Detailing Sullivan’s own history as a gay female-to-male transsexual, the collection also contained a wealth of medical and historical research.

The exhibit’s stated objective, “to empower people to freely choose” how they expressed their gender identity, clearly had political as well as historical overtones. Much as its engagement with the AIDS crisis transcended a neutral political stance, the

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<sup>130</sup> Flyer, “Crossing the Line.” *Records of the GLBT Historical Society*, Carton 2.

Historical Society's exhibit on gender construction had a political agenda as well. In asserting that gender was indeed a construct (rather than a "natural" state), the Society created a safe space for the exploration of non-normative, non-binaristic manifestations of gender identity, both in contemporary and historical contexts. Furthermore, it asserted that the expression of transgressive gender identities was indeed a basic human right.

The comment book from this exhibit demonstrates the deep emotional connection many viewers felt with the material. One viewer wrote:

I honor the courage of all the transgender brothers and sisters who have shared their lives and words in this exhibit – especially the people of color who agreed to be photographed. As an exploring Asian dyke I really appreciate this exhibit. Thanks.<sup>131</sup>

For some, the materials presented allowed for a fusion of understanding of medical technologies with lived experience, as one doctor observed:

As a surgeon who has seen and experienced the medical side of transsexual operations and changes – I appreciate the opportunity to learn from Lou – the personal side of crossing the line: the courage and conviction it must have taken. Thanks for the lesson.<sup>132</sup>

Likewise, visiting academics appreciated the consideration of both theory and practice:

Very beautiful. The transgendered body is at once a post-modern theoryhead's wet dream and a starkly real lived experience. Makes both my head and my heart feel like exploding. Thank you for the experience.<sup>133</sup>

The most touching comment, however, highlighted the very personal nature of the work done by the Historical Society, and the ties that bound those who engaged in such urgent historical efforts. A simple note, in Bill Walker's handwriting, read:

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<sup>131</sup> Comment Book, "Crossing the Line."

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*

Lou, I love you and miss you. W<sup>134</sup>

Walker's note to Sullivan (who had died two years earlier) demonstrates the great affection and love that members of the Society felt for one another. These ties were no doubt forged through the process of doing historical work that was also imminently current and incredibly personal. The process of writing about and curating the AIDS crisis as one's friends and lovers died, the process of crafting a narrative of gender transgressions in history while simultaneously fighting for one's own right to freely express a chosen gender identity, these were struggles that removed "history" from the distant and abstract and made it an urgent political matter of life or death.

### **Conclusion: History, Politics, and Radical Memory**

From its beginnings, the members of the Historical Society had been engaged in work that bridged the gap between the personal, the historical, and the political. In 1988, when Will Roscoe presented his work on Zuni berdache culture in the newsletter, he noted the political import of doing historical work that could lead to what he termed "critical consciousness and self-determination." Roscoe noted that the history he created was neither abstract nor amoral, but rather, was a practice that could help students and participants better understand their place in the world. He wrote:

In fact, there are several parallels between the role of history in gay and American Indian communities. Having "a history" is essential to the model of identity championed in both communities since the 1960s. American Indians assert, "We were always here," while the gay community claims, "We are everywhere" – both imply historical continuity. Indeed, historical research is a common adjunct of movements for equality and self-determination... In both cases the assertion of identity is a political as well as a personal act. And, in both cases, it is tied

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<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*

to a reinterpretation of the past in the light of contemporary understanding.<sup>135</sup>

History then, and historical practice, was also the act of asserting an identity. This act of identity formation had clear social and political consequences, a point that was driven home by exhibits such as “Crossing the Line.” It was also driven, in part at least, by the AIDS crisis.

In concluding, I want to consider the consequences of AIDS for the archives, and for our understanding of how to deal with the history of sexuality in general. It is important to note here that while the collecting practices of the GLBT Historical Society explicitly addressed the AIDS crisis through the strategies I have detailed, there was much work being done at the Society that was not strictly or obviously AIDS-related. Indeed, in the 1980s members were working on a diverse number of projects, including Allen Berube’s research on gay soldiers during World War II, Will Roscoe’s aforementioned presentations on cross-dressing men amongst Zuni Indian tribes, and Lou Sullivan’s research on passing women such as Jack “Bee” Garland. Additionally, the Society was collecting a broad range of materials, encompassing papers from P-Flag chapters around the country to early issues of *The Ladder*, and notes from meetings of the Daughters of Bilitis. These were clearly not projects about AIDS. And yet, I posit that the AIDS crisis spurred this work on, made it more timely and urgent. Because the Historical Society was founded in the midst of the AIDS crisis, there existed a need not just to “save” history and memory, but to *rewrite* the historical narrative itself. As people died, it was not enough to merely say, “this person lived.” Rather, it was necessary for the members of the Historical Society to uncover a past, a history, in which gays and lesbians

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<sup>135</sup> *Newsletter of the San Francisco Bay Area Gay & Lesbian Historical Society*, 3:3, March 1988.



had always existed, in one form or another. In the mid-1980s, in a moment in which people's stories were disappearing faster than anyone could write them down, it must have been both comforting and powerful (and given the circumstances, emotionally devastating) to say, we are a part of history; we have existed.

In this way, the work undertaken by the members of the Historical Society wove together the personal and the political with the historical. In responding to a current health crisis, the Society generated new models of history, particularly those that drew on a sexual economy of queer pleasure. It also generated new interpretations of community, and from this, new possibilities for both cultural and political identities. It is important to acknowledge the relationship of this personal, political, and historical nexus to the study of sexuality and desire. As Douglas Crimp writes, in his discussion of sex-positive approaches to the AIDS crisis, "Having learned to support and grieve for our lovers and friends; having joined the fight against fear, hatred, repression, and inaction; having adjusted our sex lives so as to protect ourselves and one another – we are now reclaiming our subjectivities, our communities, our culture...and our promiscuous love of sex."<sup>136</sup> With its unapologetically queer collection of artwork, erotica, and ephemera from many of the sexual subcultures of the 1980s, the GLBT Historical Society recognized that a history of gay and lesbian life and culture must grapple with the slippery and sometimes uncomfortable edges of sex, sexuality, and desire. In the face of a crisis that threatened to obliterate both individual lives and gay culture as a whole, this act of remembering was indeed a radical political act.

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<sup>136</sup> Crimp, 270.

### Chapter Three: “Do Not Feel Shame for How I Live”:

#### Invisibility and Archiving in Black Queer Life

*Do not feel shame for how I live.*

*I chose this tribe*

*of warriors and outlaws.*

-Essex Hemphill, *In the Life*

#### **Introduction**

This chapter tells the story of the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives. As detailed in the previous chapter, the AIDS crisis in San Francisco in the 1980s gave rise to the GLBT Historical Society, a group founded primarily by gay white men. However, AIDS was not just a gay white man’s disease. The rise of HIV in the black community throughout the 1980s and 1990s led to higher stakes for black queer visibility. By 1996, the Harvard AIDS Institute reported that more African Americans were infected with HIV than all other racial and ethnic groups combined.<sup>137</sup> Despite the growing number of HIV cases within communities of color, however, both the mainstream black community and the white LGBTQ community largely ignored this crisis.<sup>138</sup>

Within this context of increasing infection rates, racism, and invisibility, the need to preserve queer black history became critical. In 1999, Steven Fullwood, an archivist at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library, took a freelance job processing the papers of an organization called Gay Men of African

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<sup>137</sup> Harvard AIDS Institute, “Communities of Color,” *Harvard AIDS Review*, Spring/Summer, 1996.

<sup>138</sup> See Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999), chapters 2 and 3, for a detailed analysis of various community responses to the AIDS crisis.

Descent (GMAD). Fullwood was already intimately connected with various aspects of black queer culture. In 1985, he had founded Vintage Entity Press, a small press that continues to publish works by queer writers of color. Through this work and his own writing career, Fullwood had an extensive network of contacts throughout the community. In researching a grant that he was writing for the GMAD project, Fullwood discovered that there were no institutions actively collecting black queer materials.<sup>139</sup> The Schomburg, however, had significant holdings scattered throughout its collection, and was amenable to the creation of a collection specifically geared toward queer black life. Fullwood, with help from Schomburg curator Diana Lachantanere, started the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives (BGLA), a collection within the Schomburg's division of Archives and Manuscripts. Much like the founders of the GLBT Historical Society, Fullwood already had a significant personal collection of black queer materials that reflected his involvement in the community as a writer and activist, including books, magazines, flyers, posters, and photographs. To this he added the GMAD papers, as well as some of the Schomburg's existing holdings. He then continued his work of soliciting materials for the archive from individuals in the queer black community to grow the holdings of the fledgling BGLA.

Just as the founders of the GLBT Historical Society understood their work as a response to the tide of historical erasure brought on by the AIDS crisis, so too did Steven Fullwood. As Fullwood noted in an interview, the political momentum of social movements in the 1970s was severely dampened in the 1980s by the AIDS crisis. By the

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<sup>139</sup> Interview with Steven Fullwood, June 11, 2008. It should be noted that several organizations, including the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the GLBT Historical Society, have been collecting information on queers of color as part of a larger collecting program since their founding. However, none of these organizations has specifically focused on queer communities of color.

1990s, the queer black community was left without a clear organizing force. Now, Fullwood asserts, “Black queers are fighting largely for visibility.” Fullwood sees his work at the BGLA as an explicit act of making visible queer communities of color. Fullwood describes the challenges and urgency faced by this generation: “We just have to go and start doing the work, and then go back and cobble together the histories.”<sup>140</sup> Like all the archival work I have discussed in these chapters, this practice of cobbling together histories is not a politically neutral act, but rather, an assertion of the existence and visibility of communities often rendered powerless and invisible. The BGLA, I claim, uses the tools of the archive to disrupt totalizing narratives of gay history that erase people of color, as well as to disrupt narratives of black history that leave no room for queer sexualities and identities.

### **Invisibility and Queer Black Life**

Invisibility in the black community has long been a pressing issue, made ubiquitous by Ralph Ellison in his 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s unnamed narrator articulates the sense of invisibility he feels in the novel’s first pages: “I am invisible, understand,” he writes, “simply because people refuse to see me.” As the narrator moves through the deep south, an all-black college, and eventually, the streets of New York, he recognizes again and again the ways in which both individuals and society at large are incapable of recognizing or interacting with him as an actual human being, trapped instead in a web of assumptions and preconceptions. Ellison’s novel gave voice to the frustrations of a protagonist (and presumably the many others like him) who is unable to claim his own identity, because the social, institutional and rhetorical structures

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<sup>140</sup> Interview with Steven Fullwood, June 11, 2008.

surrounding him simply will not allow it. While I do not mean to suggest that Ellison's intent in writing *Invisible Man* was to highlight the particular situation of black queers, I think it is useful to consider the trope of invisibility in black cultural production as a whole.<sup>141</sup>

Likewise, an analysis of queer black (in)visibility and cultural production demands a consideration of James Baldwin, who as early as the 1950s was publishing novels and essays that dealt with the complicated relationships between race, sexuality, and identity in America. Baldwin created discursive spaces in which messy, heterogeneous identities could exist. As Dwight McBride states in the introduction to his edited collection of essays on Baldwin, "It is finally possible to understand Baldwin's vision of and for humanity in its complexity, locating him not as exclusively gay, black, expatriate, activist, or the like but as an intricately negotiated amalgam of all of those things, which had to be constantly tailored to fit the circumstances in which he was compelled to articulate himself."<sup>142</sup> I contend that the intellectual spaces thrown open by Baldwin's writing helped to make possible both the work of queer writers of color who came after him, such as Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill,<sup>143</sup> and the work of institutions like the BGLA.

However, the BGLA and other institutions of queer black life faced new challenges to their attempts to create discursive spaces for queers of color. One such obstacle was the rise of a phenomenon known as the "down low." In his 2003 exposé for

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<sup>141</sup> Indeed, for a discussion of the homophobia underlying much of Ellison's novel, see Daniel Y. Kim, "Invisible Desires: Homoerotic Racism and its Homophobic Critique in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Spring 1997.

<sup>142</sup> Dwight McBride, *James Baldwin Now* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>143</sup> See Joseph Beam, ed., *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Boston, Alyson Productions, 1986), and Essex Hemphill, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Boston, Alyson Productions, 1991).

the *New York Times Magazine*, Benoit Denizet-Lewis declared, “Today, while there are black men who are openly gay, it seems that the majority of those having sex with men still lead secret lives, products of a black culture that deems masculinity and fatherhood as a black man’s primary responsibility – and homosexuality as a white man’s perversion.”<sup>144</sup> These words, which permeated the living rooms of millions of liberal white Americans, cast queer black life as something of an oxymoron. Denizet-Lewis asserted that while black men might occasionally have sex with one another, black and gay remain mutually exclusive categories. Denizet-Lewis’s article on the “down low,” the phenomena of non-gay-identified men of color engaging in homosexual acts, portrays the vast majority of same-sex activity amongst black men as happening within this secret subculture. These men, the article claims, do not identify as gay, and indeed, are in such denial about their attraction to other men that they rarely can be persuaded to put on a condom or take an HIV test. Thus, Denizet-Lewis implies that through their culture of denial, black men on the down low are responsible for the AIDS crisis.

Among the many problematic features of this article is the fact that it almost entirely equates black queer life with the down low. Denizet-Lewis draws a totalizing picture of black homosexual culture that casts all black queer desire as happening within a framework of uber-masculinity and denial. He casts gayness as a “true identity” that black men are most often incapable of finding, taking refuge instead in the anonymity and denial of the down low. Indeed, Denizet-Lewis’s own subject position as a gay white male is implicitly set as the norm against which down low culture is measured. He writes, for example:

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<sup>144</sup> Benoit Denizet-Lewis, “Double Lives on the Down Low,” *The New York Times*, August 3, 2003.

By the lockers, I notice a tall black man in his late teens or early 20's staring at me from a dozen lockers down. Abruptly, he walks over and puts his right hand on my left shoulder.

"You wanna hook up?" he asks, smiling broadly.

His frankness takes me by surprise. Bathhouse courtship rituals usually involve a period of aggressive flirtation – often heavy and deliberate staring. "Are you gay?" I ask him.<sup>145</sup>

Here the author equates his own knowledge of (white) bathhouse rituals with the status quo. This may seem like a small detail, but I contend that this privileging of the white subject position in determining what "usually" happens has the effect of casting gay identity in terms that are explicitly white. The article does not even gesture to the existence of any other options for gay black male identity.

Denizet-Lewis's article broke the silence on a subject that had been largely ignored in mainstream white popular culture in recent years, and brought into the spotlight black men who have sex with other men.<sup>146</sup> Unfortunately, it did so in a way that, rather than increasing the visibility of queer black cultures, cast most of them into further shadow.

My critique of Denizet-Lewis's article is not meant to imply that homophobia does not exist in the black community, or that queer blacks do not face particular challenges. In her book, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*, Cathy Cohen examines the black community's response to the AIDS crisis, and

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<sup>145</sup> Denizet-Lewis, 2.

<sup>146</sup> One notable exception is the fiction of E. Lynn Harris. His self-published 1992 novel *Invisible Life*, the coming of age story of a gay black man, became a surprise hit, particularly among straight black women. However, his readership statistics in no compare to that of the *New York Times Magazine*. Denizet-Lewis's piece was followed by J.L. King's 2004 sensationalist exposé, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of 'Straight' Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (New York: Broadway, 2004), which provides a first-hand account of black men on the down low. Keith Boykin's 2005 book, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2005) refutes many of the claims made by both of the previous authors, pointing out that the down low is not an exclusively black phenomena, and that many gay black men are not on the down low.

the invisibility and powerlessness of blacks with AIDS.<sup>147</sup> In studying the various individuals affected by the disease, including men who have sex with men, male and female IV drug users, and women who are infected through sexual contact with others, Cohen finds that a complex mix of classism, sexism, homophobia, and drug phobia combine to shape the response within the black community to the AIDS crisis. These forces combine to render blacks with AIDS (many of whom are gay men) voiceless and invisible. Cohen's work examines political rhetoric and mobilization within the black community, and analyzes the ways in which the AIDS crisis has disrupted a traditional black "politics of respectability." As she notes, black political leaders from the antebellum period onward have grappled with concerns over class, gender, and respectability in determining which issues would be cast as black political concerns.<sup>148</sup>

Cohen details the ways in which the political mobilization of the black community is based on a shared understanding of racial group identity, and a sense that furthering the interests of the racial group is the most effective means of self-betterment. Thus, those issues most likely to be taken up and mobilized around as "black issues" are those that are framed as reflecting the needs of – and affecting the fate of – the entire black community. Cohen notes that rarely does any particular issue inherently fit into this category. However, through a process of framing that privileges certain group members, black politicians and opinion leaders construct some issues as crises that affect the entire black community, while rendering others marginal. She writes, for example:

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<sup>147</sup> Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

<sup>148</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the politics of respectability in black communities, see Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).



Recently in black communities the troubling and very desperate condition of young black men, who in increasing numbers face homicide, incarceration, and constant unemployment as their only “life” options, has been represented as a marker by which we can evaluate the condition of the whole group. The similarly disturbing and life-threatening condition of young black women, who confront teenage pregnancy, state backlash, and (increasingly) incarceration, however, is not portrayed as an equally effective and encompassing symbol of the circumstances of black communities.<sup>149</sup>

Cohen notes that scholars of race and politics have pointed to the seeming political consensus within black communities as a sign of a strong and homogeneous racial identity. She challenges this reading, and suggests instead that we examine the ruptures caused by what she terms “cross-cutting issues,” the problems rooted in the less respectable, the less visible, and the least powerful. It is in these ruptures, she claims, that we find evidence of far more nuanced, complicated, and diverse black identities than would emerge from a focus on mainstream black politics.<sup>150</sup>

AIDS represents one of these cross-cutting issues or ruptures. The issue of AIDS within the black community calls not just upon racial identity, but upon sexual identity as well. As Cohen notes, this affects the ways in which the black community at large interacts with or “owns” the issue. “[S]exuality,” she writes, “in particular gay male sexual identity and behavior, influences the receptiveness of different segments of black communities toward owning this issue. We have to recognize that a gay sexual identity has been seen in black communities as mitigating one’s racial identity and deflating one’s

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<sup>149</sup> Cohen, 11. For a history of sexuality and race in prison, also see Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>150</sup> For a useful articulation of intersectionality and identity, see Kimberle Crenshaw, “Intersectionality and Identity Politics: Learning from Violence against Women of Color,” in Shanley and Narayan, eds., *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives* (University Park, PA : Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997). E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson’s *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) offers a collection of essays that interrogate the intersections of sexuality with race, class, and gender.

community standing.”<sup>151</sup> In other words, the lack of respectability around homosexuality in the black community prevents this community from claiming AIDS as a “black issue,” and diminishes the legitimacy of those who might attempt to do so. Black queers find themselves rendered politically invisible within the black community. This invisibility is compounded by the racism that black queers face within the LGBTQ community.<sup>152</sup>

I do not mean to suggest here that black communities are more homophobic than white communities, or less tolerant of non-normative sexualities. Rather, I wish to stress, as scholars such as Cohen, Evelyn Hammonds, and Hazel Carby have done, that sexuality has long been used as a tool by the white power structure to police and oppress black communities.<sup>153</sup> While self-oppression, internalized homophobia, and racism within the black community have all played a role in determining how sexualities were legitimized (or not), it is important to understand the politics of respectability around sexuality in the black community within the context of a history of systemic racial oppression. Given the long history of oppression and state control based on “abnormal” sexualities, the black community’s desire to fashion political strategies based on

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<sup>151</sup> Cohen, 14.

<sup>152</sup> The 1996 resignation of three of the black members from the board of Gay Men’s Health Crisis, over charges of racism within the organization, highlights some of the tensions around race within the LGBTQ community, particularly as it pertains to AIDS. See David W. Dunlap, “Three Black Members Quit AIDS Organization Board,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1996. See also Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1997; 3: 437-465. Further, according to a 2002 report by the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, the majority of black gay respondents had experienced both racism within the LGBTQ community and homophobia from within the black community (*Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud*, a report of the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce, March 25, 2002).

<sup>153</sup> See Hazel Carby, “Policing the Black Women’s Body in an Urban Context,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (summer 1992), 738-55, and Evelyn Hammonds, “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 6, nos. 2-3 (1994):126-145.

respectability can be understood not as merely homophobia, but also as a response to structural racism.<sup>154</sup>

Further, I do not mean to paint a monolithic picture of the visibility of black queers, or lack thereof. By the late 1970s and early 1980s groups like the SALSA Soul Sisters, Sapphire Sapphos, and National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays were giving voice to the particular political concerns of queer communities of color.

Additionally, writers such as Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Joseph Beam, and Essex Hemphill were publishing both political analyses and creative expressions of the queer of color experience. Nevertheless, a host of social, political, and economic concerns kept many queers of color in a position of marginal visibility throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.<sup>155</sup> Within this context of oppression and contested visibility, Stephen Fullwood formed the BGLA.

### **Inside the Archive**

Today, the BGLA is still a work in progress. The collection has not been fully processed, and as of this writing, no finding aid is available to the public. It is therefore difficult to know exactly what is in the collection. However, some scholars and filmmakers have used the archive for a range of projects. At present, the archive consists of approximately 40 linear feet of materials, including rare books, magazines, journals,

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<sup>154</sup> See Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 35, for an elaboration of the ways in which institutionalized racism in the United States has categorically controlled and pathologized black sexualities, from the regulation of slave relationships to the demonization of “welfare mothers.”

<sup>155</sup> John D’Emilio’s groundbreaking work on capitalism and gay identity recognizes the importance of “gay ghettos” and universities in creating safe havens for the creation and expression of a gay identity. See John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). However, these institutions were often not available to queers of color, who faced economic barriers as well as racism from within the white gay community.

newspapers, brochures, flyers, posters, calendars, photographs, film, video, art, and t-shirts. In order to engage the ways in which the archive increases the visibility of the queer black community, this chapter looks at a number of specific interventions within the BGLA collection: Individuals, Organizations, Events, Publications, Erotica, and House Balls. An examination of these particular areas of collecting highlights the strategies the BGLA undertook to make Black Gay and Lesbian life visible.

### *Individuals*

The BGLA collection on “Individuals” provides information on a diverse group of queer black individuals. The collection contains several boxes of folders, many of which are collections of news clippings, published materials, and flyers. Few contain personal papers or special collections; rather, they exist as an informational resource. The subjects are diverse, from printouts from the website of black gay songwriter Anthony Antoine to a file of clippings on gay, Washington, DC community activist Wanda Allston. A file on writer Cheryl Boyce Taylor, for example, contains a flyer about a June 2003 reading of her erotic writings. The Keith Boykin folder contains news clippings about Boykin, an author, as well as a print-out of an email from Boykin to a listserv about the formation of a black AIDS coalition. Other individuals profiled include Kwame Anthony Appiah (a philosophy professor at Princeton), radio host and columnist Alicia Banks, and television director Paris Barclay.

Most of the materials in these files could be found or accessed elsewhere. And, unlike the subject files at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, these files are not available for browsing by the casual visitor. Indeed, few people would know that they are there. Yet,

the collection clearly speaks to a desire on the part of Steven Fullwood and the other curators to ensure that these individuals are not silenced, not forgotten, but instead, are historicized within an explicitly black and queer context. The importance of the “Individuals” collection transcends the individual stories contained within, and offers a view of queer black life that normalizes and legitimates same-sex relations. Fullwood relates the story of a college student who came to visit the BGLA, after her brother told her that there was no such thing as queer black history. “When I pulled out the boxes to show her,” Fullwood remembers, “she lost her mind... I just remember her freaking out at the table, saying, ‘My brother said there was no such thing. Look at this!’”<sup>156</sup> For this young woman and others who visit the BGLA, the “Individuals” collection serves as evidence of the existence of queers of color, often living relatively “normal” lives. In the face of widespread invisibility, the collection offers the message that queer blacks are out there, and that homosexuality is not a deviant or abnormal thing.<sup>157</sup>

### *Organizations*

The BGLA collection makes visible the hundreds of organizations serving queer black communities. Much like the files in the “Individuals” collection, most of these folders contain only published information that could be found or accessed elsewhere. Files on specific organizations contain flyers from events, brochures, print-outs from organizational websites, and materials handed out at organizational meetings or workshops. One file contains information on “Black Funk,” for example. A Brooklyn-based “sexual culture center for people of color,” the Black Funk collection includes

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<sup>156</sup> Interview with Steven Fullwood, June 11, 2008.

<sup>157</sup> The desire to normalize and legitimate queer life, black or otherwise, is not without its dangers. See my next chapter, as well as Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), for a discussion of the ways in which normalizing discourses render certain queers even *less* visible.

flyers from events including the Erotic Fight club, a sexually-charged wrestling night for men of color.<sup>158</sup> Another file, on Brothers United, an organization providing information and community for gay black men, contains flyers from events, safe sex pamphlets, and a two-year run of the newsletter, “The Source.”<sup>159</sup> The newsletter contains safer sex articles, many of which are explicit in nature.

Other organizations in the collection are explicitly political in nature, and point to the particular form of discrimination and invisibility faced by queer blacks. Baltimore’s Blacks United for Gay and Lesbian Equality, for example, was founded to “end discrimination against gays and lesbians and to particularly end discrimination against Blacks in the gay and lesbian community and beyond.”<sup>160</sup> The folder includes a three-year run of their newsletter (1989 – 1991), which contains announcements about local events, short articles about topics such as Pride celebrations and the potential for legally recognized civil unions, as well as a bar guide to places that were friendly to queers of color. The organization’s founding mission, which recognized that black gays and lesbians have faced discrimination not just from without, but also from within the LGBTQ community, is an important example of the need for organizations that work to create both safety and visibility. Another folder holds information about a St. Louis organization, Blacks Assisting Blacks Against AIDS. The folder contains two of the organization’s original pamphlets on safer sex. These low-production value, cartoon drawings provide graphic images of safer sex practices, showing men of color engaged in various sex acts.

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<sup>158</sup> *Black Gay and Lesbian Archives*, Organizations Collection, Box 3, “Black Funk” folder.

<sup>159</sup> *Black Gay and Lesbian Archives*, Organizations Collection, Box 3, “Brothers United” folder.

<sup>160</sup> *Black Gay and Lesbian Archives*, Organizations Collection, Box 3, “Blacks United for Gay and Lesbian Equality” folder.

Like the “Individuals” collection, the gathering of all of this information in one place provides powerful evidence against the invisibility of queer black communities. The collection speaks to the importance of holding this information together, asserting that these groups (like the black gays who populated them) did indeed exist. For researchers, it provides a resource for understanding the breadth and depth of organizations that served (and in some cases, still serve) queer black communities.

While many of the organization files contain only published or publicly available items (such as the flyers and newsletters noted above), the Gay Men of African Descent collection provides a view into the inner mechanics of an organization that was actively working to increase the visibility of queer black men. In 1986 the Reverend Charles Angel founded Gay Men of African Descent, or GMAD, in response to the AIDS crisis amongst black gay men. Angel noted the invisibility of black gay men, and the lack of programs geared toward them, and founded GMAD to address that. The GMAD papers, appropriately enough, were one of the first acquisitions of the fledgling BGLA.

The 25 boxes of material on GMAD provide a comprehensive view of the organization, including the minutes of early Board meetings, calendars of events, the results of a membership survey conducted in 1997, and evidence of GMAD’s collaboration with other organizations. From its beginnings, GMAD attempted to forge relationships with other groups, including Gay Men’s Health Crisis and the SALSA Soul Sisters. It also articulated a view of social justice that recognized the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. As an early draft of the organizational mission stated:

We commit ourselves to fight to end any and all ills that interfere with the rights of all individuals to exist and co-exist in a free, democratic society.

We are committed to ending racism, sexism, class oppression, and all lesbian and gay oppression, wherever these may exist. As an international network, we are committed to building solidarity with Black Lesbians, Transpersons, and our heterosexual Sisters and Brothers, with the understanding that an end to oppression within the human race requires the full participation and commitment of us all.<sup>161</sup>

This organization, which was committed to fighting queer black oppression, recognized that that could not be done without fighting a host of other oppressions as well. This vision of intersectional politics and liberation was at the heart of much queer black organizing. The inclusion of the GMAD materials within the BGLA is an example of the BGLA's work of increasing queer black visibility by preserving the history of the organizations that fought hard to make that visibility a reality.

#### *Events and Pride Celebrations*

Recognizing the importance of Pride celebrations and other events in creating a community identity, the BGLA has collected flyers from Pride celebrations and other events from around the country and the world.<sup>162</sup> Folders by geographic location contain flyers and postcards from happenings in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, Denver, Los Angeles, London, Memphis, Miami, New Jersey, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Washington, DC, and miscellaneous international locations. The events and organizations described include plays, spiritual events, dance clubs, bathhouses, AIDS clinics, and academic conferences. These cards and flyers provide insight into queer black culture, particularly the parts of it that center around bars, sex, and entertainment. From the New York City folder, for example, a glossy postcard for a party

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<sup>161</sup> *Black Gay and Lesbian Archives*, Gay Men of Black Descent Collection, box 1.

<sup>162</sup> See Rachel Buff's innovative study of American Indian powwows and West Indian carnivals for a analysis of how festivals function not just as entertainment, but as crucial sites of community building. Rachel Buff, *Immigration and the Political Economy of Home: West Indian Brooklyn and American Indian Minneapolis, 1945-1992* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).



called The Workshop describes it as “the place to cum...after a long hard day.” The card is illustrated with a photograph of three black men in various states of undress, two of whom are having sex. The back of the card bears the descriptor, “An erotic safe sex party for Black and Latino men.”<sup>163</sup>

The collection of event information is geared more toward men than women. Though there are flyers for a few events that are mixed or targeted specifically toward women, the vast majority are geared toward men. There is also a clear bias toward urban areas, with significantly fewer materials from smaller towns and rural areas. Of course, it is hard to know to what degree this represents a bias in collecting and to what degree it is indicative of the culture of urbanity versus rurality.<sup>164</sup> Even within major metropolitan areas, however, there are discrepancies in the collection, with much more information existing for New York and Chicago, for example, than Boston.

### *Publications*

For many queer blacks seeking community in the pre-internet era, independent newspapers and journals provided a vital connection both to other individuals (through event listings and personals) and to a larger social and political culture.<sup>165</sup> To document this important means of visibility and community-building, the BLGA contains a number of small-run magazines and journals. This piece of the collection is a great resource for researchers interested in the history of queer black publishing, containing everything

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<sup>163</sup> *Black Gay and Lesbian Archives*, Events Collection, “New York City” folder

<sup>164</sup> While extended considerations of “metronormativity” and rural queer life are beyond the scope of this project, interested readers may wish to see Scott Herring, “Out of the Closets, Into the Woods: *RFD, Country Women*, and the Post-Stonewall Emergence of Queer Anti-urbanism,” *American Quarterly* 59.2 (2007) 341-372, as well as Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

<sup>165</sup> See Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) for an extensive study of gay and lesbian network-building in a pre-internet age.

from small, hand-folded zines to glossy porn magazines. As is evidenced in the “Erotica” section of this chapter which follows, the BGLA was committed to collected sex-positive work. In the “Publications” collection, porn and erotica are well-represented. For example, the collection contains copies of *B-Max* magazine from 1994.<sup>166</sup> This low production value, free LA weekly contains advertisements, personals, and club listings aimed at queer men of color. There is a small section of personal advertisements for women seeking women, but the vast majority of the space is dedicated to men looking for other men. There are also several glossy porn magazines in the collection, including *Banjee* and *Black Fire*. A cover of *Banjee* from 2002 proclaims, “Proud to be America’s Best All Nude Magazine Featuring People of Color.”<sup>167</sup> The collection also contains magazines that are explicitly political. A 1984 copy of Washington, DC’s *Attaché Magazine*, for example, is full of advertisements for gay and gay friendly political candidates in upcoming elections.<sup>168</sup>

A notable feature of the BGLA periodicals collection is an almost-full run of *MOJA=GAY & BLACK*, the first queer black newspaper in the country. First published in June, 1978, the newspaper is mainly written in English, with some sections in Spanish. Much of its content is reprinted from other sources, including *The Blade*, *Gayweek*, and *Body Politic*, but it contains original articles as well. The first issue of *MOJA* includes an editorial that articulates the politics behind the newspaper’s existence:

As Third World Gays:

1. We feel alienated from the white gay movement due to prejudice and an insensitivity to issues affecting our communities.

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<sup>166</sup> *Black Gay and Lesbian Archives*, Magazines and Journals collection

<sup>167</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>168</sup> *ibid.*

2. We must realize that our struggle against the oppression we suffer is inseparable from the struggle against all forms of oppression: social, political, cultural, and economic.[..]
3. We must fight sexism in our communities. Our feminist sisters are fighting for equality, freedom, and economic liberty. We join them in struggle, lending our love and support.
4. We call for organized groups to be formed in all major cities of the United States and give support and needed services to Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American gays.<sup>169</sup>

This manifesto lays out the double bind in which black gays found themselves: fighting not just homophobia, but racism as well, often within the white gay movement. This particular form of double consciousness led the editors of *MOJA* to articulate a vision of liberation that surpassed a single-issue, or single-identity, politics, and responded to multiple forms of oppression.<sup>170</sup> This ethos is echoed in other articles in the publication, which describe gay organizing around the world, analyze the attitudes of the straight black community toward gays, and evaluate the possibilities for blacks and gay liberation.<sup>171</sup> The inclusion of *MOJA* in the BGLA collection is significant, as it represents one of the first published voices of a black gay liberation movement. In collecting these voices, the BGLA is working to create a visible alternative to the mainstream political narrative of (white) gay rights, which has historically ignored race as a determining factor in gay and lesbian oppression or liberation.

### *Erotica*

Like the LHA and the GLBT Historical Society, the BGLA is an unapologetically sex-positive collection. This undoubtedly stems in part from the fact that Steven

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<sup>169</sup> *MOJA*, #1, June 23, 1978, *Black Gay and Lesbian Archives*, Periodicals Collection.

<sup>170</sup> Indeed, *MOJA*'s statement of purpose echoed many of the concerns articulated by the Combahee River Collective in their famous statement on black feminism. See Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement," in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983).

<sup>171</sup> *MOJA*, #1.

Fullwood himself is unapologetically sex-positive; indeed, his press, Vintage Entity, is also known for publishing sexually explicit work by queer people of color.<sup>172</sup> Just as the collections of the LHA and GLBT Historical Society were influenced by the interests and proclivities of their founders, so too is the BGLA. Fullwood has created a collection that affirms the value of erotics, of the pleasures of sex, of the body.

One factor influencing what the BGLA has collected is the internet, and the explosion of online communication, cultural exchange, and community building.

Fullwood notes that the rise of the internet allowed people to connect with each other in new ways, and also to gain access to more information about queer history. Additionally, it allowed for other forms of connection:

[I]t also meant going online, sex parties, it meant all sorts of things. I want to collect that all, because I think it all tells a story... I'm interested in defining and redefining community, and as part of that redefinition of community, I'm interested in all of these stories.<sup>173</sup>

Here, the very definition of community hinges on the knowledge and narration of the erotics of its members. Fullwood goes on to note that these sexual communities have remained virtually invisible to the public at large, and that this invisibility shapes the limits of public understandings of queer life.<sup>174</sup> Collecting items that relate to sex parties, to BDSM workshops, to readings of black queer erotica, Fullwood claims, “has implications for the black community, the white community, for how we view sex, the

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<sup>172</sup> Fullwood, *Interview*.

<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Douglas Crimp considers the dangers of such invisibility in “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic,” noting that “community values” – and AIDS education efforts growing out of them – are utterly useless if they don’t reflect the language and experience of *actual* communities. For Crimp, an understanding of the desires and sexual acts of real people is essential in crafting in effective AIDS prevention messaging. As Crimp notes, “‘Don’t exchange bodily fluids’ is nobody’s spoken language. ‘Don’t come in his ass’ or ‘pull out before you come’ is what *we* say” (265). He is also careful about the implied subjectivity of that *we*, noting the need for outreach strategies and messages that address the specific experiences of working class communities as well as communities of color.

down low, crap that has been going on forever and a day and doesn't seem to want to die for some reason."<sup>175</sup> Here Fullwood asserts that a knowledge of queer black sexual practices has the power to change perceptions about queer communities of color. Rejecting the popularly held view that black sex only happens on the down low, Fullwood notes that a full accounting of queer black erotics would reveal a diverse and sex-positive world in which there is space for a queer black identity based on positivity and pleasure, rather than the denial and negation implied by popular conceptions of the down low. This echoes the work of theorist Robert Reid-Pharr, who claims the importance of an articulation of sexuality and desire in our understandings of identity. In his book, *Black Gay Man*, Reid-Pharr describes in graphic detail his sexual encounters with a poor, white, southerner named Rick. In so doing, Reid-Pharr breaks the unspoken rules of academic writing that insist that if an ejaculating cock should appear in your work, it had better not be your own. As he lays out his own proclivities and pleasures on the page, Reid-Pharr opens up a space for theorizing the ways in which desire is implicated in, and can serve as a lens for exploring, our complicated, intersectional identities around race, class, gender, and sexuality. He writes,

I offer this image of Rick because I believe that in our struggle to produce an American progressivism we are lost if we discount the ways in which desire operates in the production of putatively rational decisions about government and politics. We risk the charge of hypocrisy if we offer only more and more sophisticated expressions of the anthropological gaze. We will clearly fail if give into the fear that our dreams, our obsessions, our grubby secrets can never be vehicles for the articulation of the universal.<sup>176</sup>

This notion that desire (and “perverse” or non-normative desire at that) can serve as a basis for understanding community and identity underpins much of the work of the

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<sup>175</sup> Fullwood, interview.

<sup>176</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, *Gay Black Man: Essays* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 11.

BGLA, and its collections speak to the many ways in which erotics and desire work to constitute both individual subjects and communities as a whole.

In its collections on “Individuals,” for example, the BGLA has a folder about London-based artist and sex-educator Ajamu. The folder contains many of the safer-sex materials Ajamu distributed at his workshops, as well as the program from a 2003 workshop called “The Series,” designed specifically for gay and bisexual men of color. The collection includes extensive information on kinky sexual practices, including how-to guides, exercises, and directions for creating an “alternative shopping list” to turn supermarket items into sex toys.<sup>177</sup> This collection of materials, both frank and sexy in its presentation, rejects a notion of queer black erotics as something hidden or unspoken. Rather, it reveals a world in which queer men of color come together willingly and openly to explore and take pleasure in their sexuality.

Another folder in the “Individuals” collection contains several books by Belasco, also known as James Tucker. Produced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, these erotic comics provide graphic depictions of black gay male sex. These comics quite literally make visible the queer black subject, and revel in images of gay black sexuality.

One of the rarest and potentially most controversial items in the BGLA collection is a hand-produced graphic comic entitled *Rape*. Though the booklet contains no date or attribution, the curatorial staff at the Schomburg date it to the mid-1950s. In the comic, a black protagonist is raped by Frank Sinatra. Indeed, the narrative references fears of gay “predators” lurking behind every door. However, rather than ending on a note of fear or tragedy, the protagonist of the story discovers that he enjoys the sexual encounter. The booklet engages a number of taboo narratives. It portrays a queer black sexuality. It

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<sup>177</sup> BGLA, “Individuals” collection, box 1.

portrays interracial sex and desire. It demonstrates the oppressive power of whiteness over blackness, and exploits the erotic power of that dynamic. Finally, and most provocatively, it introduces rape not as an act of sexual violence, but rather, as the fulfillment of sexual fantasy. In engaging with this facet of the queer erotic imagination, the booklet offers an alternative reading of sexuality and desire that upsets normative narratives. As Steven Fullwood notes, it is impossible to know who produced the booklet, and why. As such, it gives us only the briefest of glimpses into what constituted queer desire in the 1950s. Was it a comic produced by a white man who dreamt of dominating black men? A story told by a black man about his own fantasies? We will likely never know. What it tells us, however, is that these sorts of fantasies and desires were not unthinkable, even in the midst of a decade renowned for its conservative sexual mores.<sup>178</sup>

Regardless of its provenance, its inclusion in the BGLA is significant. Resisting the urge to collect only those objects that spoke to a respectable, or at least, easily understood, history, the curators at the Schomburg (and one imagines, Steven Fullwood in particular) recognized this booklet as something that could illustrate some facet of queer desire. Understanding, or attempting to understand, this desire, is one of the means through which the archive counters black queer invisibility.

### *House Balls*

One of the most dramatic counterings of queer black invisibility comes from the BGLA's collection of materials on New York's contemporary House Ball culture. The House Ball scene, which dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has evolved today into an elaborate subculture in which queer people, often those of color, compete in various

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<sup>178</sup> Of course, scholars have discussed the ways in which the 1950s gave rise to a thriving gay and lesbian pulp fiction culture, in spite of such conservative mores. See Susan Stryker, *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001).

forms of drag at balls sponsored by different “houses.”<sup>179</sup> Performers attempt to replicate various gender and class identities, broken down into categories such as Femme Queen, Male Vogue, and Male Face. These performances challenge existing conceptions of gender, racial, and class identities in a milieu that once involved sequins and gowns, and now invokes the aesthetics of hip hop culture.<sup>180</sup>

The BGLA collection includes programs and flyers from events at many houses, including Allure, Ebony, Chanel, Prestige, Xtravaganz, and Latex. For example, the collection includes the program from the House of Xtravaganza’s July, 1995 ball, which in addition to the standard house ball categories, had a Star Trek theme. The program includes a description of the ball prizes, to be awarded in categories such as Fem Queen, Butch Realness, Runway, and Woman. It also contains an advice column written by House father Hector Xtravaganza, offering young men advice on their relationships with one another, and a photo album of House members participating in Balls, attending parties, and forming a team for the AIDS Walk.

The BGLA is certainly not the first institution to collect materials on House Ball culture. Many people outside of the House Ball scene gained their first exposure to it from Jennie Livingston’s 1991 documentary, *Paris is Burning*, which portrayed the Ball scene as an exotic subculture that remained a mystery to most white gays. However, critics have taken Livingston to task for representing House Ball culture and its

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<sup>179</sup> For more on the historic origins of House Ball culture, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), and Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Bauml Duberman et al (New York: New American Library, 1989).

<sup>180</sup> For an explanation of House Balls and their categories, see Frank Leon Roberts, “There’s No Place Like Home: A History of House Ball Culture,” *Wiretap Magazine*, June 6, 2007.



participants in a way that at once infantilizes and oppresses them even as it claims to give them voice. As bell hooks writes:

[T]he film was a graphic documentary portrait of the ways in which colonized black people (in this case, black gay brothers, some of whom were drag queens) worship at the throne of whiteness, even when such worship demands that we live in perpetual self-hate, steal, lie, go hungry, and even die in its pursuit. The ‘we’ evoked here is all of us, black people/people of color, who are daily bombarded by a powerful colonizing whiteness that seduces us away from ourselves, that negates that there is beauty to be found in any form of blackness that is not imitation whiteness.<sup>181</sup>

*Paris is Burning*, hooks claims, represents the ball participants as lost children who are naïvely grasping at a vision of (white) beauty that they feel will save them. Livingston’s portrayal, critics claim, obscures the ways in which drag functions as not just imitation but appropriation. As cultural critic Guy Trebay has noted, amidst the pity and fascination evoked by the film’s subjects, “scarcely anyone noticed the ways in which their appropriation of labels and symbols constituted a kind of interrogation of power, which is to say of maleness, and white maleness at that.”<sup>182</sup>

In writing about the cultural performances of queers of color, José Esteban Muñoz describes the process of what he terms “disidentification.” Queer of color performance, Muñoz claims, transforms familiar cultural and political tropes to give them meaning for the queer subject. This process of disidentifying with the dominant meaning of a particular stereotype or act is a way for the queer subject to claim power and assert a positive identity in the face of totalizing normative discourses of race, gender, and sexuality. “Disidentification,” Muñoz writes, “is meant to be descriptive of the survival

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<sup>181</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: race and representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 149.

<sup>182</sup> Guy Trebay, “Legends of the Ball: Paris is Still Burning,” *Village Voice*, January 11, 2000. See also Judith Butler, “Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

strategies that the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”<sup>183</sup> We can look at disidentificatory practices as means of undercutting the cultural forces of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny to establish new forms of social relations. Viewed in this light, the House Ball scene is not a childish infatuation with the glamour of whiteness, but rather, a prescient interrogation of the power structures of race, class, gender, and sexuality.

The program from the House of Xtravaganza, along with the rest of the BGLA’s House Ball collection, offers a glimpse into the world of house balls, with its prizes and highly detailed categories. This, of course, is precisely the exotic world that Jennie Livingston attempted to capture in *Paris is Burning*. However, the program also reveals a world that is startlingly familiar: young men who have had their hearts broken writing for comfort and solace; large families coming together for birthday celebrations; teams of civically-minded young people forming a team to walk in a fairly mainstream fundraiser. This vision of community entirely contradicts the notions of black male homosexuality articulated by Benoit Denizet-Lewis in his article on the “down low,” and offers a re-reading of what queer communities look like. The center here is not an anonymous bathhouse where no names are exchanged and no condoms used, but rather, a sex-positive, gay-positive family. In the introduction to his book, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch*, Dwight McBride asks, “Where does the black gay go where he can see himself

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<sup>183</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

reflected back to himself in all the complex ways he exists in the world?”<sup>184</sup> While McBride is specifically concerned with the black gay middle class (indeed, his question arises out of his discomfort at a high-end, all-white tourist resort, and McBride finds his answer in an impromptu gathering of professional black gay men on vacation in San Juan, Puerto Rico), his question is relevant across class lines. I posit that the House Ball culture is one site in which queers of color, many of them poor and working class, find a space in which they can see themselves reflected back in all of their complexities. This culture stands in stark contrast to the pathological representations of black families that have proliferated throughout American culture since slavery. In collecting items that document this culture, the BGLA is attempting to rewrite the standard narratives of both black history and gay history.

### **Conclusion: Archives, Visibility, and a Queer of Color Critique**

In his book *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Roderick Ferguson details the ways in which a queer of color analysis can provide an intersectional lens for critiquing social structures.<sup>185</sup> Race, gender, sexuality, and class are inextricably linked, mutually reinforcing categories of analysis in a queer of color critique. In examining the places in which social practices diverge from normative, nationalistic practices and ideals, Ferguson claims, a queer of color critique can locate and account for the emergence of figures who might otherwise remain unspoken and invisible. In

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<sup>184</sup> Dwight McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>185</sup> Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2004).

discussing critical approaches to dominant historical narratives and representations, Ferguson writes:

My inspection is informed by a single assumption – that epistemology is an economy of information privileged and information excluded, and that subject formations arise out of this economy. I also know that canonical and national formations rarely disclose what they have rejected. Such disclosures require alternatives to those formations, alternatives expressed in those sites excluded from the rigors and official imperatives of canons and archives.<sup>186</sup>

I contend that we can use a queer of color critique to understand the BGLA as a partial site of rupture from the canonical formations of knowledge that structure our understandings of history. Rejecting a view of the past that renders queer blacks invisible, the BGLA, through its collections, creates an “economy of information” that allows for the existence and expression of a queer black subjectivity.

The BGLA is not a perfect institution. I term it a *partial* site of rupture for several reasons. First, its lack of public advertisement or online accessibility means that few people know this collection exists, much less have any sense of what is in it. This is, to some degree, a temporary problem. Once the collection is fully processed, a finding aid will likely be made available, possibly online, allowing more researchers and visitors to access its holdings, or at least to know what those holdings are. However, as the BGLA represents just one aspect of Steven Fullwood’s work at the Schomburg, he does not know when this will happen.<sup>187</sup>

Indeed, the relationship between the BGLA and the Schomburg is at once an empowering force and a limiting factor in increasing the visibility of queer black subjects. Even before the inception of the BGLA, the Schomburg had existed as a queer-

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<sup>186</sup> Ferguson, *ix*.

<sup>187</sup> Interview with Steven Fullwood, June 11, 2008, and personal correspondence with Steven Fullwood, October 16, 2009.

friendly space, and had hosted events of interest to black queers. When Fullwood arrived and proposed the BGLA, his idea was met with enthusiasm and support.<sup>188</sup> However, the institutional culture and structure of the Schomburg, which exists as a branch of the New York Public Library, also functions to keep the collections of the BGLA less visible. Researchers who wish to use or view the BGLA must make an appointment; unlike the LHA, it is not a place to wander in and browse. Further, the very procedures for entering the building clearly mark this collection as belonging to an official and sanctioned body of knowledge: potential researchers must check in at a security desk, show a state or university issued form of identification, and fill out a research application listing their institution affiliation.<sup>189</sup> This process, by its very nature, limits who would even attempt to visit the collection. While its affiliation with the Schomburg clearly offers the BGLA a level of institutional support, resources, and security that the LHA does not have, I argue that the lack of a grassroots ethos and operating model limits who knows about the collection, who feels entitled to access it, and who actually does use it. This model of information dissemination is far more “top down” than the LHA or the GLBT Historical Society; the BGLA relies primarily on researchers, authors, and documentarians to use its resources and spread its message of queer black invisibility. In this way, the BGLA represents the final step in the trajectory toward professionalization that runs through my entire project. As I discuss in my conclusion, such a move toward increased professionalism brings both benefits and losses.

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<sup>188</sup> Interview with Steven Fullwood, June 11, 2008.

<sup>189</sup> See the complete rules for accessing the collection at <http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/admin/specialcollections.html>, accessed November 10, 2009. This stands in stark contrast the LHA’s statement of purpose which explicitly states that the archive is open to all women regardless of whether they are affiliated with an academic institution. Indeed, during my research trips to the LHA I was given a key to the building and the alarm code, and invited to come and go as I pleased. My work at the BGLA happened in a much more institutionally regulated manner, as detailed above.

The BGLA as a collection is also skewed toward the experience of queer black men. While the collection does include the papers of and information about some notable women (it contains, for example, a small collection of manuscripts by author Jewelle Gomez), the majority of the events and organizations it profiles are geared toward men. This is not an uncommon problem. Indeed, archives are always shaped by their stewards, and the BGLA collections have been driven by Steven Fullwood's own experiences as a queer black man, much in the way that the GLBT Historical Society collections were shaped by the proclivities and interests of its founders. However, because the BGLA is managed by a single person (rather than a board or collective), the materials collected – and the identities or subjectivities thus expressed – are potentially more limited than those collected and expressed by an organization with a more diverse leadership.

The BGLA thus stands as a partial or imperfect site of rupture from the dominant narratives of both queer history and black history. It actively works to counter the invisibility of queer black life, even as it is bound by the limitations of its own institutional structure. In studying these sites of rupture, these moments of disidentification, we can work to expand the possibilities for a queer black subjectivity.

## Chapter Four: Queer Discourses in the Political Sphere

### **Introduction**

My previous three chapters have looked at queer archives to understand the ways in which the process of narrating a history is also the process of constituting a community and an identity. As my research has shown, this process is not politically neutral. Archives, and the histories they hold, are the sites of contested identities, radical redefinitions, and in some cases, political empowerment. This final chapter will shift the focus from archives to a different type of institution: LGBTQ political rights organizations. This chapter argues that a comparative study of the discourses of historical and political organizations exposes the limits of queer subjectivity allowed by these political groups. I argue that this limited subjectivity has material consequences for queer subjects. Finally, I contend that a consideration of the queer identities revealed through queer archives could inform LGBTQ politics to create a more inclusive, more representative political vision.

The discourses arising from queer archives and their collections call upon particular notions of the queer subject that have the power to change how we understand identity and community as a whole. Using the language of history, archives paint a picture of various identities, and create a discursive and imaginative (and indeed, sometimes physical) space for these particular identities to exist: butch/femme lesbians, kinky HIV-positive fags, queer black men, and many others. As my chapter on the Lesbian Herstory Archives demonstrates, for example, the LHA's intervention in the debates over butch/femme and lesbian feminist cultures created a space in which women

across this spectrum of identities could feel validated and could safely express their identities.

This final chapter focuses on LGBTQ political organizations because they are, in theory, fighting explicitly for the rights of the communities represented by the archives I have studied. However, as this chapter demonstrates, these organizations often fall short of being truly representative. My study of archives has demonstrated the diversity and complexity of identities within the LGBTQ community, as well as some of the dangers of a politics of respectability. An examination of political organizations provides us an opportunity to see how these identities are – or are not – being represented and accounted for in the public sphere.

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of queer organizing around the AIDS crisis. Using Cathy Cohen's analysis of the possibilities and limitations of a queer politics, I will consider the work of early (late 1980s and early 1990s) groups ACT UP and Queer Nation, and ask how they accounted for (or didn't) the diversity of identity and experience within queer communities. The chapter then moves on to evaluate three contemporary LGBTQ rights groups. Drawing on Lisa Duggan's theory of neoliberalism and homonormativity, I will use documents produced by each of these three case studies – Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) – to examine a representative sample of the current LGBTQ rights movement, and to ask what possibilities and limitations exist in this contemporary political moment.

My investigations of these political organizations are not undertaken with the same depth as my study of the archival organizations discussed in my first three chapters.



I do not attempt here to provide a comprehensive analysis of all of the history, work, and negotiations that shape the mission of each of these organizations. Rather, my concern in this chapter is with the ways in which these organizations, as representatives of the LGBTQ community, publicly talk about LGBTQ rights. This discourse, which shapes popular conceptions of “the gay and lesbian community,” has a profound impact on the ways in which political communities are mobilized, legislation is written and advocated for, and the concerns of LGBTQ people are conveyed to the broader public sphere. Thus, my sites of study are the publications and press releases prepared by these organizations. This chapter analyzes rights discourse based on the publicly disseminated materials of organizations that are working for LGBTQ rights.

While it may seem unrealistic to hold mainstream LGBTQ rights organizations, which are trying to garner widespread popular support, to the standard of inclusive representation, I think that it is precisely their widespread popularity (think of all those HRC bumper stickers you see driving around) that *demands* that we hold them to higher account. As Michael Warner has noted, while a lack of inclusive representation is often framed as a neutral political choice (i.e. not ideal but not damaging either), it actually has the potential to curtail the rights of those who are left outside of the popular discourse. In writing on gay marriage, Warner notes:

Is marrying something you do privately, as a personal choice or as an expression of taste, that has no consequences for those who do not marry? That would be true only if marriage were thought to lack the privileged relation to legitimacy that makes people desire it in the first place, or if the meaning of marriage could be specified without relation to the state. But as long as people marry, the state will regulate the sexual lives of those who do not. It will refuse to recognize the validity of intimate relations – including cohabiting partnerships – between unmarried people or to grant them the same rights as those enjoyed by married couples. It will criminalize our consensual sex. It will stipulate at what age and in what

kind of space we can have sex. it will send the police to harass sex workers and cruisers. It will restrict our access to sexually explicit materials. In the modern era, marriage has become the central legitimizing institution by which the state penetrates the sexuality of its subjects; it is the “zone of privacy” outside which sex is unprotected. To speak of marriage as merely one choice among many is at best naïve; it might be more accurately called active mystification.<sup>190</sup>

In other words, the mainstream LGBTQ agenda is actively shaping the rights of all queers, even those who is seemingly just ignores. For this reason, I argue that paying sustained attention to the discourses of LGBTQ rights organizations is an important piece of understanding how narratives of gay life are created and reproduced. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in these narratives are demands for rights, protections, and legitimacies which are transferred to the larger culture.

### **The Possibilities and Limitations of a Queer Politics**

The notion of a queer politics emerged in the early 1990s, and offered a radical rethinking of gay and lesbian activism. Queer politics promised a destabilization of the dominant categories of gender and sexuality, with attendant radical social change. As Michael Warner wrote in the introduction to his now classic edited collection, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, “in many areas a new style of politics has been pioneered by lesbians and gays, little understood outside of queer circles.”<sup>191</sup> This new style of politics, according to Warner, was based in a specifically *queer* sensibility, one that used the marginal position of the queer subject to create alliances with other social justice movements. Warner writes:

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<sup>190</sup> Michael Warner, “Normal and Normaller: Beyond Gay Marriage,” *GLQ* 5:2, pps. 119-171 (1999), 127.

<sup>191</sup> Michael Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xi.

Because the logic of the sexual order is so deeply embedded by now in an indescribably wide range of social institutions, and is embedded in the most standard accounts of the world, queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts. The dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea of how widespread those institutions and accounts are.<sup>192</sup>

In Warner's view, a queer politics would argue not just for equality within a fundamentally flawed system, but rather, would call into question the very structures and institutions shaping society. Several organizations founded in the late 1980s and early 1990s attempted to do just this. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), a grassroots political group founded in 1987, used civil disobedience, in-your-face demonstrations, and direct action to challenge the policies of drug companies and local, state, and federal government on AIDS education, care, and research. Growing out of ACT UP in 1990, the short-lived but still famous Queer Nation used similarly brash tactics to attempt to advocate for queer visibility and to shift the national dialogue away from heteronormativity.<sup>193</sup> These groups, to greater or lesser degrees, illustrated Warner's ambitious definition of what a queer political sensibility would look like:

Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, reproductive politics, racial and national fantasy, class identity, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about

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<sup>192</sup> Warner, *Fear of a Queer Planet*, xiii.

<sup>193</sup> For more on ACT-UP, see Peter Cohen, *Love and Anger: Essays on AIDS, Activism, and Politics* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1998); Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990); and Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). For a history of Queer Nation, see Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality," in Michael Warner, ed., *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

these issues all of the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences.<sup>194</sup>

This definition of queerness depends not only on a subjectivity that recognizes multiple and intersecting sites of oppression, but on one that constantly engages in a struggle against such oppressions as well. Indeed, Warner implies that the very state of “being queer” is defined by lived experience fighting these oppressions. Warner’s definition is a useful theoretical framework for thinking about how a queer identity might translate into a radical queer politics. It is also, however, so impossibly ambitious that it is hard to imagine how anyone could possibly live up to it. In the slippages between an ideal queer political sensibility and the actual work and experiences of many self-identified queers, the radical potential of a queer political vision is sometimes lost, as Cathy Cohen details below.

In her article, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” Cathy Cohen articulates both the possibilities and the failings of queer politics. In speaking of the charges of racism at Gay Men’s Health Crisis, and subsequent Board resignations, Cohen writes:

This incident raises mixed emotions for me, for it points to the continuing practice of racism many of us experience on a daily basis in lesbian and gay communities. But just as disturbingly it also highlights the limits of a lesbian and gay political agenda based on a civil rights strategy, where assimilation into, and replication of, dominant institutions are the goals. Many of us continue to search for a new political direction and agenda, one that does not focus on integration into dominant structures but instead seeks to transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist and operate efficiently.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Warner, xiii.

<sup>195</sup> Cathy Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?”, *GLQ*, Vol. 3, 1997, 437.

In spite of the early promise of a politics based on queer subjectivity, Cohen claims, the politics that have resulted from queer activism have often failed to transcend another binary: everything heterosexual versus everything queer. For the most part, Cohen states, queer politics leaves unexamined “the ways in which power informs and constitutes privileged and marginalized subjects on both sides of this dichotomy.”<sup>196</sup> Though queer politics has the tools to engage in a radical questioning of identity and power structures, as yet, its potential has not been fully realized. In describing her vision for what a radical, queerly-inflected politics would look like, Cohen writes:

I’m talking about a politics where the *nonnormative* and *marginal* position of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, for example, is the basis for progressive transformative coalition work. Thus, if there is any truly radical potential to be found in the idea of queerness and the practice of queer politics, it would seem to be located in its ability to create a space in opposition to dominant norms, a space where transformational political work can begin.<sup>197</sup>

Cohen is calling for a politics that challenges oppression based on a multi-faceted understanding of the ways in which race, class, nationality, gender *and* sexuality are sites of marginalization. “For many of us,” Cohen writes, “the label ‘queer’ symbolizes an acknowledgement that through our existence and everyday survival we embody sustained and multisited resistance to systems (based on dominant constructions of race and gender) that seek to normalize our sexuality, exploit our labor, and constrain our visibility.”<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Cohen, 438.

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.* This requires, of course, a willingness on the part of these marginalized subjects to engage in such work. Certainly one’s status as a punk, a bulldagger, or a welfare queen is not enough in itself to generate a radical political consciousness. As one reader of this project pointed out, many of us have met bulldaggers who voted for George W. Bush.

<sup>198</sup> Cohen, 440.

However, the problem, as Cohen sees it, is that many groups that claim a queer politics fall short of this potentially liberatory social and political lens. For example, Cohen discusses the now famous “I Hate Straights” flyer, distributed in 1990 at pride parades in Chicago and New York. Written by an anonymous group of queers affiliated with Queer Nation, the flyer describes a world in which queers remain always unheard, always invisible, always on the margins. The authors write, “Year after year I continue to realize that the facts of my life are irrelevant to [my straight friends] and that I am only half listened to, that I am an appendage to the doings of a greater world, a world of power and privilege, of the laws of installation, a world of exclusion.”<sup>199</sup> This recognition of marginality and of a lack of access to power seems to locate the authors of the flyer in a position from which they might form precisely the sort of politics that Cohen describes. However, the manifesto goes on to declare, “The main dividing line, both conscious and unconscious, is procreation ... and that magic word – Family.”<sup>200</sup> As Cohen notes, this analysis of marginalization, which sets sexual deviance vis-à-vis queerness in opposition to all forms of heterosexuality, completely overlooks the myriad ways in which the state regulates, marginalizes, and oppresses those *straight* bodies which do not conform to normative notions of the family and procreation. In other words, Cohen finds lacking in this document a recognition of the shared marginality of the punk, the bulldagger, and the welfare queen.<sup>201</sup> Likewise, Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman note in their article “Queer Nationality,” (which stands as one of the best analyses of Queer Nation to date), “insofar as it assumes that ‘queer’ is the only insurgent ‘foreign’ identity its citizens have,

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<sup>199</sup> Queer Nation, “I Hate Straights/Queers Read This” flyer, New York, 1990.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> I do not mean to suggest that Cohen equates these subject positions, for she does not. She does, however, suggest that the shared experience of marginalization might provide a place from which coalition-building work could happen.

Queer Nation remains bound to the genericizing logic of American Citizenship, and to the horizon of an official formalism – one that equates sexual object choice with individual self-identity.”<sup>202</sup> Queer Nation’s politics, as evidenced by this flyer at least, equate heterosexuality with heteronormativity, and in so doing, lose the possibility for a truly radical political position. Further, Cohen notes, the flyer lacks any analysis of the ways in which race and class might inflect the subject position of the authors.

Likewise, Cohen describes another sort of political action pursued by radical queer groups in the 1990s – shopping mall invasions. In these events, groups of queers would descend upon suburban malls to publicly hold hands, kiss, and visibly disrupt the heteronormative assumptions of a particular brand of consumer culture. However, as Cohen notes, while shopping mall invasions challenged the enforcement of normative (hetero)sexuality within the halls of capitalism, they left unchallenged larger questions about how race and class function to police the mall in other ways. As Cohen writes,

If you are a poor or working class queer the exclusion and alienation you experience when entering the mall may not be limited to the normative sexual codes associated with the mall, but may also be centered on the assumed economic status of those shopping in suburban malls. If you are a queer of color your exclusion from the mall may, in part, be rooted in racial norms and stereotypes which construct you as a threatening subject every time you enter this economic institution.<sup>203</sup>

A “queer” lens that pits queerness against an unexamined heterosexuality is not enough. The radical potential of queer politics, Cohen claims, lies in the possibility for a recognition of multiple and intersecting identities and locations of oppression. She notes, “if we pay attention to both historical and current examples of heterosexual relationships which have been prohibited, stigmatized, and generally repressed we may begin to

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<sup>202</sup> Berlant and Freeman, 215.

<sup>203</sup> Cohen, 449.

identify those spaces of shared or similar oppression and resistance that provide a basis for radical coalition work.”<sup>204</sup> There are, she notes, moments in which we might find evidence of this type of work. For example, both Cohen and Douglas Crimp point to the needle exchange project of ACT-UP New York as a radical political intervention in which people with a range of different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and sexual identities formed a powerful coalition to overturn the city’s needle exchange ban. Together, these individuals challenged prevailing notions about who should receive care, and who deserved safety (in this case, via a needle exchange program). As Cohen notes, none of the particular identities represented in this coalition – gay, straight, black, white, Latino, etc. – was the sole determinant of the group’s political commitments. Rather, they forged a political vision based on their shared position of marginality vis-à-vis the state. This process, Douglas Crimp claims, actually changed the very meaning of the term “queer” itself:

AIDS activists are still – I’m sorry and angry to have to say – mostly a bunch of queers. But what does *queer* mean now? Who, for example, were those queers in the courtroom, on trial for attempting to save the lives of drug addicts? They were perhaps queers whose sexual practices resulted in HIV infection, or placed them at high risk of infection, or made them members of gay communities devastated by the epidemic, and for any of these reasons they were brought to AIDS activism. But once engaged in the struggle to end the crisis, these queers’ identities were no longer the same. *It’s not that “queer” doesn’t any longer encompass their sexual practices; it does, but it also entails a relation between those practices and other circumstances that make very different people vulnerable both to HIV infection and to the stigma, discrimination, and neglect that have characterized the societal and governmental response to the constituencies most affected by the AIDS epidemic.*<sup>205</sup> (emphasis mine)

In other words, through engagement with the intersectional political process that Cohen describes, the very terms of what it means to be “queer” are renegotiated. In forming

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<sup>204</sup> Cohen 453.

<sup>205</sup> Douglas Crimp, “Right On, Girlfriend!,” *Social Text*, No. 33 (1992), 16.



political alliances based on a shared marginal position (or rather, on the recognition of *many different* marginal positions), activists are able to enact a queerness that transcends a heterosexual/homosexual binary, and instead asks for social justice for *all* oppressed peoples. This is, of course, never a perfect practice (it is always possible to identify in the work of political groups something more they could have and should have done), but it provides a basis for reimagining what queer politics might look like, particularly in the context of the AIDS crisis and activism in the early 1990s.

### **Neoliberalism and Homonormativity**

As Cohen and Crimp note, we can locate moments within the history of AIDS activism that gesture toward the radical potential of queer politics. Unfortunately, from the 1990s onward, the overwhelming trend in LGBT rights discourse has not been one of intersectionality and anti-oppression work, but rather, has leaned heavily toward assimilation within existing social, economic, and governmental structures.

In her book, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Lisa Duggan notes the trend toward neoliberalism within U.S. social movements during the 1990s. Defining neoliberalism as “a new vision of national and world order, a vision of competition, inequality, market ‘discipline,’ public austerity, and ‘law and order,’”<sup>206</sup> Duggan writes:

The new liberal centrism of the 1990s converged with the 1980s conservatism in advocating a leaner, meaner government (few social services, more “law and order”), a state-supported but “privatized” economy, an invigorated and socially responsible civil society, and a moralized family with gendered marriage at its center. This convergence defined the location “neoliberal” – an expansive center that might include

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<sup>206</sup> Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), x.

1990s left/center New Democrats as well as George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatives." Leftists, "old liberals," multiculturalist "special interest" groups, and a right wing composed of religious moralists and overtly racist nationalists (referred to in some quarters as "paleoconservatives") were increasingly marginalized and excluded from political power and mainstream visibility.<sup>207</sup>

Throughout the book, Duggan demonstrates the ways in which this impetus has pushed social change movements away from "cultures of downward redistribution," which sought to structurally redistribute wealth and resources across various identities and vectors of oppression, and moved them instead toward the search for a market-based equality, which asks for equal rights within a fundamentally exploitative system of global capitalism.<sup>208</sup>

In her chapter entitled "Equality, Inc.," Duggan turns her eye specifically toward to the LGBTQ rights lobby in the United States. During the 1990s, Duggan claims, virtually all mainstream LGBTQ rights groups moved away from a politics based on grassroots activism and coalition-building toward a notion of "equality" based on centrist neoliberal principles. She writes:

No longer representative of a broad-based progressive movement, many of the dominant national lesbian and gay civil rights organizations have become the lobbying, legal, and public relations firms for an increasingly narrow gay, moneyed elite. Consequently, the push for gay marriage and military service has replaced the array of political, cultural, and economic issues that galvanized the national groups as they first emerged from a progressive social movement context several decades earlier.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> Duggan, "Twilight," 10.

<sup>208</sup> For other critiques of neoliberalism, see Noam Chomsky, *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999); George DeMartino, *Global Economy, Global Justice: Theoretical Objections and Policy Alternatives to Neoliberalism* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Andriana Vlachou, ed., *Contemporary Economic Theory: Radical Critiques of Neoliberalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); and the Spring 2000 special issue of *Public Culture*, "Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism," 12, no. 2.

<sup>209</sup> Duggan, "Twilight," 45.

These organizations, Duggan claims, use a language of universal equality in their rights discourse that obscures the fact that the very institutions to which they seek access are themselves implicated in widespread and systemic inequalities. Duggan labels this trend homonormativity, which she defines as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.”<sup>210</sup> In a 2004 article in *The Nation*, Duggan looks specifically at gay marriage as a case study of this neoliberal, homonormative turn. Examining the discourses of both the anti-gay marriage right and the pro-gay marriage LGBTQ rights organizations, Duggan notes that both uphold a remarkably conservative, patriarchal, and classist view of the family: while conservatives push “traditional” marriage, going so far as to link welfare benefits to marital status, LGBTQ political organizations argue vociferously for the right to be included in this narrowly defined vision of family and community. Critiquing this move by LGBTQ rights groups, Duggan writes:

In a bid for equality, some gay groups are producing rhetoric that insults and marginalizes unmarried people, while promoting marriage in much the same terms as the welfare reformers used to stigmatize single-parent households, divorce and “out of wedlock” births. If pursued in this way, the drive for gay-marriage equality can undermine rather than support the broader movement for social justice and democratic diversity.<sup>211</sup>

In other words, through their discourse around marriage equality, these groups are not just ignoring a host of other social injustices, but are engaged in a rhetorical strategy that discredits and weakens the movements that address these issues.

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<sup>210</sup> Duggan, “*Twilight*,” 50.

<sup>211</sup> Lisa Duggan, “Holy Matrimony!,” *The Nation*, March 15, 2004.

To further engage Duggan's concept of homonormativity within the LGBTQ rights movement, I move now to case studies of three organizations serving the LGBTQ community. My first case study, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), looks at the issue of gay marriage, and engages in a discourse analysis of the materials that GLAD used in support of its 2003-2004 marriage equality campaign in Massachusetts. Of course, I am certainly not the first academic to critique gay marriage. In addition to Duggan, Michael Warner has analyzed the ways in which the arguments for gay marriage limit the possibilities for a queer public discourse that resists state regulation of sexuality and the myriad institutions that enforce a heterosexual, patriarchal social order.<sup>212</sup> My contribution to this conversation is a focus on the discourse of the LGBTQ rights organizations themselves. In looking at the materials produced and distributed by LGBTQ rights organizations, I ask how their language constitutes a particular notion of the queer subject. This focus on organizations parallels my research in previous chapters on archives, looking at the discourse collected and produced by institutions of LGBTQ life.

### **Marriage, Hate Crimes, and People of Color: Queer Politics in the New Millennium**

This section examines how LGBTQ rights groups in the twenty-first century frame their political organizing. I examine the rights discourse emanating from three different contemporary organizations: Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP). Examining the work of these groups around marriage equality, hate crimes

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<sup>212</sup> See Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999).

legislation, and communities of color, I engage in an analysis of each group's public discourse on these issues. Looking critically at the language each group uses and the rights it demands, I ask, what assumptions are being made about who LGBTQ communities are, and who each group's constituents are? Drawing on Cohen's work, I argue that organizations which base their rights discourse on a notion of queer subjectivity that takes into account a diversity of racial, sexual, national, and socio-economic positions are more able to articulate a radical queer political agenda, with the ability to enact meaningful change in the lives of people across the LGBTQ spectrum. Ultimately, I argue that political organizations might look to the queer archives studied in the previous chapters for a framework from which to base their rights discourse. While the archives I have studied are each flawed in some way, taken together they offer a significantly more nuanced view of queer subjectivity than is found in most other public arenas. Such a move would thus help to ensure greater inclusivity and representation in the work of these organizations.

### *Marriage*

In the spring of 2004, Massachusetts made history by becoming the first state in the union to legally recognize same-sex marriage. In the months before the Massachusetts decision, and in the months after the court ruling before the new law took effect, there was an explosion of discourse about marriage in the public sphere. Newspaper articles, television programs, radio talk shows, political groups, social networking sites, people in line at the grocery store – everyone was talking about marriage. Much of this discourse centered on the question of whether or not gay marriage should exist. A national dialogue

developed in which conservative and right-wing voices labeled gay marriage everything from immoral to apocalyptic, and left-wing liberals countered that giving gay couples marriage rights was a matter of basic equality. In listening to this debate, I became increasingly concerned about the assumptions being made about race, class, and nationality.

This section, then, will consider the debate over gay marriage in the light of the following questions. First, does the rhetoric of the gay marriage campaign serve to naturalize social structures in ways that are intrinsically raced and classed? That is to say, does gay marriage call upon us to replicate social structures in order to access benefits and privileges that are only available to certain people? Is allowing “gay people” to marry the best way to build a society based on equality and respect?

In analyzing the rhetoric of the gay marriage campaign, I will draw primarily on materials published by GLAD, Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders. A non-profit organization based in Boston, GLAD was instrumental in the Massachusetts campaign for same-sex marriage. While there are many other organizations advocating for “marriage equality,” I have chosen to focus on GLAD for two reasons. First, its rhetoric is typical of many LGBT civil rights groups in the United States today.<sup>213</sup> Second, through its role as a legal force in the Massachusetts marriage campaign, GLAD was actively involved in reshaping the social structures that govern many people’s lives. For this reason, I think that it is essential to unpack exactly what it is that GLAD was saying.

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<sup>213</sup> A notable exception to this is the Alternatives to Marriage Project (AMP), a non-profit based in Albany, NY, that advocates for equal rights for those people who choose not to marry or cannot marry. While their mission reaches beyond lgbtq civil rights, they advocate for full marriage rights for all people, as well as full social rights *outside* of the institution of marriage. For more information see their website, [www.unmarried.org](http://www.unmarried.org). See also Lisa Duggan, “What’s Right with Utah,” *The Nation*, July 13, 2009 for a description of more broad-based LGBTQ coalition building on a state-rights level.

My analysis of the organization draws on materials that were published on the marriage equality section of their website in 2003 and early 2004, during the height of the gay marriage debates in Massachusetts. As this was the first successful gay marriage case argued in the United States, it set a discursive precedent and established many of the terms of the debate for LGBTQ rights groups in the years that followed.

GLAD's mission, as printed on their website, is as follows:

Founded in 1978, Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD) is New England's leading legal rights organization dedicated to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation, HIV status and gender identity and expression. Providing litigation, advocacy, and educational work in all areas of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender civil rights and the rights of people living with HIV, GLAD has a full-time legal staff and a network of cooperating attorneys across New England.<sup>214</sup>

These are certainly laudable goals, and perhaps this is the appropriate time to take a moment to acknowledge the difficulty of critiquing an organization that is attempting to secure rights for a group of people that has historically been ignored or subjugated.

However, it is precisely because GLAD claims to provide "litigation, advocacy, and educational work *in all areas* of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender civil rights" that I think we must hold them accountable and ask whether or not this is what they are doing.

The majority of the materials on GLAD's website in 2004 dealt with the issue of gay marriage.<sup>215</sup> A close reading of these materials shows that GLAD had very specific ideas about what these areas of GLBT civil rights are.

The definitions of marriage that emerge from a reading of GLAD's materials are remarkably conservative. A page on the website is devoted to explaining the differences

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<sup>214</sup> [http://www.glad.org/About\\_GLAD](http://www.glad.org/About_GLAD), accessed April 1, 2004.

<sup>215</sup> Since that time, GLAD has expanded its work to include several new initiatives, including a Transgender Rights project.

between civil unions and civil marriage, and thus, the need for same-sex marriage rights.

In answering the question, “what is marriage?” GLAD offers the following:

Marriage is a unique legal status conferred by and recognized by governments the world over. It brings with it a host of reciprocal obligations, rights, and protections. Yet it is more than the sum of its legal parts. It is also a cultural institution. The word itself is a fundamental protection, conveying clearly that you and your life partner love each other, are united and belong by each other’s side. It represents the ultimate expression of love and commitment between two people and everyone understands that. No other word has that power, and no other word can provide that protection.<sup>216</sup>

This is problematic in several ways. In addition to using language that glorifies marriage, this statement makes several assumptions. First, it assumes that all marriages are happy, and that all people marry for love, rather than for a host of practical and economic reasons. Second, it reduces our opportunities for understanding love in a structural context. In other words, it posits marriage as the primary social institution through which people manifest affection, desire, and care for one another.

Without denying that many people choose to marry because they are in love, to define marriage as a pure choice ignores the myriad social pressures acting upon individuals. As Adrienne Rich states in her now-classic essay on compulsory heterosexuality, “Women have married because it was necessary, in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of woman...”<sup>217</sup> GLAD’s insistence that marriage is “the ultimate expression of love and commitment” obscures the many people who marry for reasons other than love.

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<sup>216</sup> <http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/OP7-marriagevcu.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2004.

<sup>217</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Nancy K. Miller, eds., *Feminism and Sexuality – a Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, page 138. For a further consideration of why people continue to marry – and why they might consider other choices – see Laura Kipnis, *Against Love: A Polemic* (New York: Pantheon, 2003).



Conversely, it ignores the many people who live lives full of loving relationships, but who do not marry because *it does not benefit them to do so*. Carol Stack, in describing kinship structures among poor urban blacks in the United States, notes, “Black families...and the non-kin they regard as kin have evolved patterns of co-residence, kinship-based exchange networks linking multiple domestic units, elastic household boundaries, lifelong bonds to three-generation households, [and] social controls against the formation of marriages that could endanger the network of kin.”<sup>218</sup> In other words, for the families Stack studied, marriage sometimes presented a potential *threat* to the stability of the family and community at large. GLAD’s definition of marriage seems very much predicated on middle-class values that privilege the nuclear family unit over extended kinship networks. These values, of course, presume a level of economic stability that allows a family to survive on one or two incomes without the help of family and friends.

This brings us to an important question: Gay marriage for whom? GLAD states, “This discussion is about substance – not symbols. The human stakes are enormous[...]. [C]ivil marriage, and not civil unions, is the only way to make sure that gay and lesbian couples have all of the same legal protections as other married couples.”<sup>219</sup> This statement implies that these gay and lesbian couples have access to the rights and benefits that would make marriage beneficial and desirable. Let’s look at what some of these rights are, and who exactly GLAD has in mind when it talks about “the human stakes.”

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<sup>218</sup> Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), page 124.

<sup>219</sup> <http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/OP7-marriagevcu.shtml>

GLAD's website profiled the six couples who were the plaintiffs in the 2003 *Goodridge* case<sup>220</sup> that legalized same-sex marriage in Massachusetts. Two of the six couples contained one non-white partner. All of the couples were middle or upper-middle class. Five of the six couples had children. This is significant, as discussions of family played a prominent role in the plaintiffs' profiles. I will discuss the use of family in gay marriage rhetoric later in this section. Let us begin by examining the rights that GLAD is claiming.

Julie and Hillary Goodridge are one of the six couples who acted as plaintiffs in the case. Their profile on the GLAD website discusses their child, their jobs (Julie is president of an investment firm that manages \$50 million in assets; Hillary is program director for a foundation), their commitment to their relationship, and where they spend their holidays (with family, of course). After two paragraphs devoted to describing this quintessential "family next door," GLAD goes on to describe the rights that the Goodridges are denied:

Hillary and Julie, while sharing a home and all the financial responsibilities of raising a daughter, still cannot completely protect themselves and Annie. "We've done all the legal work we can to protect our rights and the rights of our daughter," says Julie, "but we still can't transfer assets to our spouse, benefit from each other's social security should one of us die, and we worry about emergencies when we travel, even with all the proper documentation. We have a beautiful child, a nice home and we volunteer at school, but we're still left out. It just doesn't make any sense to us." <sup>221</sup>

Likewise, David Wilson and Robert Compton face similar problems, according to their profile:

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<sup>220</sup> *Goodridge vs. Department of Public Health*, Massachusetts Supreme Court SJC-08860, March 4, 2003. - November 18, 2003.

<sup>221</sup> <http://www.glad.org/marriage/Julie&Hillary.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2004.

Rob and David feel a sense of urgency in securing the significant tax and other protections awarded to married couples as they begin facing issues of retirement and estate planning. In addition, Rob has been rushed to the emergency room four times over the last three years. Each time, they've been uncertain about David's ability to be by Rob's side and ensure that he receives appropriate care.<sup>222</sup>

The problems facing the other four couples are remarkably similar. As GLAD says, “Married couples can take for granted rights of hospital visitation, security for their children, and rights of inheritance. This security has long been unavailable to same-sex couples.”<sup>223</sup>

This is true. This security is unavailable to same-sex couples. However, it is also unavailable to the many “straight” couples, married or otherwise, who do not have access to hospital visits, incomes with which to support their children, or property to pass on to their spouses when they die. In claiming these as the primary benefits of marriage, GLAD assumes that gay couples who would marry do in fact have insurance policies to share, houses to co-own, inheritance-taxes to avoid. Again, marriage is implicitly posited as a class-specific benefit.

“Marriage,” says GLAD, “is a major building block for strong families and communities.”<sup>224</sup> The theme of families and children is one that dominates GLAD’s literature. A major part of each plaintiff profile is dedicated to a discussion of children and other family ties. We learn, for example, that seven year-old Annie Goodridge, daughter of Julie and Hillary, in addition to being, “completely adorable,” has lots of friends at school, participates in a dance troupe and a swim team, and is adored by her

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<sup>222</sup> <http://www.glad.org/marriage/Robert&David.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2004.

<sup>223</sup> <http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/OP1-whymarriagematters.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2004.

<sup>224</sup> *ibid.*

grandparents and other extended family.<sup>225</sup> Rich Linnell and Gary Chalmers are both legal parents of ten-year-old Paige. They participate in the local PTA, chaperone field trips, and support Paige in her artistic and athletic pursuits.<sup>226</sup> Even the one couple without children, Gloria Bailey and Linda Davies, are depicted as being extraordinarily family-oriented. They are faithful aunts to their many nieces and nephews, hosting them all in their house on Cape Cod for summer vacations.<sup>227</sup>

In making such a concerted effort to portray these couples as family-oriented, GLAD is no doubt trying to garner support by making gay couples seem as much like straight couples as possible. Additionally, they are attempting to counter popular arguments made by opponents to gay marriage who argue that same-sex unions will confuse children and lead to the destabilization of life as we know it. While there is perhaps a political advantage to this, it comes at a great cost. In naturalizing the two-parent nuclear family, GLAD again presumes a particular social position and value set. It ignores alternative patterns of kinship. And most disturbingly, it claims marriage as the only recognized building block of family and society. "If marriage is a good setting for raising children," GLAD says, "then it is a good setting for children raised by gay and lesbian parents, too[...]. [T]he most important ingredient for children is that they have two committed and loving parents. The fact that a child has two mothers or two gay fathers simply does not matter in terms of normal child development."<sup>228</sup> Fair enough. But what about children raised by one parent, extended families, more than two parents,

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<sup>225</sup> <http://www.glad.org/marriage/Julie&Hillary.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2004.

<sup>226</sup> <http://www.glad.org/marriage/Richard&Gary.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2004.

<sup>227</sup> <http://www.glad.org/marriage/Gloria&Linda.shtml>, accessed April 1, 2004.

<sup>228</sup> [http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/Marriage\\_Myths.shtml](http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/Marriage_Myths.shtml), accessed April 1, 2004.

grandparents, aunts and uncles, or a combination of any of the above?<sup>229</sup> GLAD rejects the notion that these sorts of families need recognition and rights as well, by focusing solely on the two parent nuclear family.

The raising of children and the creation of families is a potentially radical site for reimagining ways to organize society. GLAD takes a step in that direction by profiling male couples who are successfully raising children. In so doing, it refuses a view of parenting that links child-care to the female body. However, it quickly quashes any idea that the move to secure civil rights for the LGBTQ community has a radical aim.

In its document entitled, “Marriage Myths,” GLAD debunks what are presumably conservative fears about gay marriage. Myth #9 reads: “If we say two men or two women can marry, three people may marry.”<sup>230</sup> Based on the rationale presented in GLAD’s case for marriage – that is, that it allows access to benefits and provides legal recognition of the relationships of those who parent children – it would seem like allowing three people to marry might in fact be a good idea. After all, if children are being raised in some communities by extended kinship networks, consisting in many cases of people who are not legally related, why shouldn’t these “parents” have as much access to marriage as anyone else? GLAD, however, has a different view. “Discriminating against gay people in marriage based on their sex and sexual orientation,” GLAD says, “is discrimination based on personal characteristics. It’s a very different thing to discriminate based on numerosity or the number of people a person wants to marry.” It is not entirely clear how “personal characteristics” such as sex and sexual orientation differ all that much from “personal characteristics” such as class status or family style, or for that matter, from the

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<sup>229</sup> For more on the representation, culture, and agency of single mothers, see June Juffer, *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

<sup>230</sup> [http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/Marriage\\_Myths.shtml](http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/Marriage_Myths.shtml), accessed April 1, 2004.

desire to have more than one life partner. Furthermore, in asserting the right of two people to form a union, but denying the legitimacy of three or more people to do so, GLAD buys into the idea that heterosexual marriage is a natural building block of society. Rather than using the struggle for LGBTQ civil rights as a queering lens on family institutions, GLAD essentially asserts that marriage is a fine system, and we just need to let gay people in.

Myth number #10, potentially the most exciting of all, reads, “Allowing gay people to marry will lead to sudden and destabilizing changes.”<sup>231</sup> Promising as this claim sounds, GLAD quickly assures the reader that this is merely a scare tactic. Using Vermont, the only state to offer civil unions, as an example, GLAD writes, “Life went on as before when Vermont allowed civil unions for gay and lesbian couples, and despite dire predictions, no one’s family will be threatened if Massachusetts allows gay and lesbian couples to marry.”<sup>232</sup> This language assures readers that the nuclear family will remain intact in the face of gay marriage (for those who are able to access it and its benefits). This assertion forecloses the possibilities of a politics that might use an understanding of shared oppression as a way to critique dominant social structures, and instead asserts the desirability of the status quo.

The final GLAD publication that I will discuss today is their “Warning for Same-Sex Binational Couples.”<sup>233</sup> This document, posted on their website and circulated widely in print and via e-mail in late 2003 and early 2004, anticipates a desire for an often-accessed right of marriage that is strikingly absent from the discussion of marriage

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<sup>231</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> [http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/Binational\\_Couples\\_Warning.shtml](http://www.glad.org/Publications/CivilRightProject/Binational_Couples_Warning.shtml), accessed April 1, 2004.

benefits that takes place throughout their other materials. “Marriage,” a large banner at the top of the page tells us, “will not fix immigration problems, may cause new ones.”<sup>234</sup>

Now this is an interesting statement, because I know a lot of people who have gotten (heterosexually) married precisely because it will fix their immigration problems. So why isn’t GLAD claiming this as one of the 1,400 rights and benefits of marriage that the LGBTQ community will claim in this new gay utopia?

“Foreign nationals,” GLAD says, “should not marry without consulting an experienced immigration attorney. Marrying your partner will not help fix immigration problems. In fact, marrying your same-sex partner or applying for a change in immigration status based on a marriage to a same sex partner could lead to deportation or future denial of visa applications.”<sup>235</sup> GLAD goes on to warn binational couples against litigation. “Litigation attempting to obtain immigration benefits based on marriage to a same-sex partner could have disastrous consequences,” GLAD writes. In addition to facing possible deportation, “a negative ruling in such a case could create a damaging precedent and set back the equal marriage movement for years.”

This is a somewhat startling statement from an organization that proudly boasts its full-time legal staff in addition to its mission to provide “litigation, advocacy, and educational work *in all areas* of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender civil rights.” Marriage becomes figured here as a national right, and those unions that would span national boundaries are inherently less privileged. This is all the more disheartening because immigration rights represent an area in which GLAD has an opportunity to advocate for a set of rights that disproportionately affect poor people of color. Once

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<sup>234</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> *ibid.*

again, however, the rights of marriage are ranked hierarchically; just as the right to a family structure that contains more than two parents is subjugated to the demands for inheritance rights and tax breaks, so too are immigration rights de-prioritized.

As this unpacking of GLAD's discourse reveals, the language with which organizations have advocated for marriage equality is far from neutral. It privileges what Lisa Duggan terms homonormativity, shifting the terms of "equality" into a neoliberal framework that asks for "equal rights" for gays within a system that is fundamentally unjust. As my next case study reveals, this trend toward homonormativity and neoliberalism extends beyond calls for "marriage equality."

### *Hate Crimes*

As noted, marriage is not the only issue on the table for LGBTQ rights groups these days. Even the most mainstream organizations have diversified their approaches to LGBTQ rights to focus on a range of issues including employment non-discrimination, family rights, and hate crimes legislation. This section of the chapter will examine current discourses around hate crimes laws emanating from two very different LGBTQ rights organizations, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP). This comparison will highlight the different strategic approaches to gaining and protecting rights that emerge based on the subject position of the organizations in question.

The Human Rights Campaign bills itself as "America's largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality."<sup>236</sup> With a budget of over \$5 million in 2009,<sup>237</sup> HRC is one of the country's most well-funded

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<sup>236</sup> [http://www.hrc.org/about\\_us/index.htm](http://www.hrc.org/about_us/index.htm), accessed January 22, 2010.

<sup>237</sup> Human Rights Campaign, IRS Form 990 (2009), publicly available via guidestar.org.



LGBTQ rights groups. While HRC, like GLAD and other mainstream LGBTQ rights groups, has advocated strongly for marriage equality in recent years, it has also taken up a number of other issues, including that of hate crimes legislation. As HRC states on its website,

All violent crimes are reprehensible. But the damage done by hate crimes cannot be measured solely in terms of physical injury or dollars and cents. Hate crimes rend the fabric of our society and fragment communities because they target a whole group and not just the individual victim.[...] A violent hate crime is intended to “send a message” that an individual and “their kind” will not be tolerated, many times leaving the victim and others in their group feeling vulnerable.<sup>238</sup>

Hate crimes, HRC asserts, are more pernicious than other forms of violence. As such, HRC has lobbied for over a decade to pass legislation to expand the definition of a hate crime to include sexual orientation and gender identity (existing hate crimes laws already covered race, religion, and national origin), and to expand the powers of the federal government (the Department of Justice) in prosecuting such bias motivated crimes. Since 1998, versions of a hate crimes act have floundered through congress, without ever being advanced to the President for a signature. In 2009, however, both the House and the Senate voted to proceed with hate crimes legislation, in the form of an amendment to the Department of Defense authorization bill.<sup>239</sup> On October 28, 2009, President Barack Obama signed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act into law, signaling a long-awaited victory for HRC in securing this hate crimes legislation.

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<sup>238</sup> [http://www.hrc.org/issues/hate\\_crimes.asp](http://www.hrc.org/issues/hate_crimes.asp), accessed on January 14, 2010.

<sup>239</sup> S. 1390/Public Law No. 111-84. Hate crimes legislation was passed as an amendment to this bill, whose primary goal was to provide funding for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition to the criticism of hate crimes legislation that I discuss later in this section, some activists have criticized HRC and other groups for failing to consider the moral implications of supporting these wars.

In analyzing HRC's position on hate crimes legislation, I am interested in the following questions: First, why is hate crimes legislation so important to HRC? That is, what is at stake for the organization and the community it serves? Second, what can we infer about the community HRC represents from the claims it makes around hate crimes legislation? What are the implications of this for their goal of achieving "lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender equality"? Finally, what might their stand on hate crimes look like if they approached the issue from a fundamentally different subject position?

It is perhaps helpful to begin with HRC's definition of what a hate crime is. "A hate crime," HRC states on the "Questions and Answers" page of its website, "occurs when the perpetrator of the crime intentionally selects the victim because of who the victim is."<sup>240</sup> HRC goes on to note that hate crimes, by definition, affect not just the victim, "but an entire community or category of people and their families."<sup>241</sup> Continuing in this vein, HRC asserts that "a random act of violence resulting in injury or even death is a tragic event that devastates the lives of the victim and his or her family, but the intentional selection and beating or murder of an individual because of who they are terrorizes an entire community and sometimes the nation." In other words, hate crimes are violent acts targeted specifically at members of a particular community or identity group. A hallmark of hate crimes, per the HRC's definition, is that they affect not just the victim and people who knew him or her, but an entire community of people who share a similar identity.

Notable in the HRC's definition of hate crimes is the subjectivity of determining what constitutes a bias motivated crime. HRC writes, "it is easy to recognize the

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<sup>240</sup> [http://www.hrc.org/issues/hate\\_crimes/10454.htm](http://www.hrc.org/issues/hate_crimes/10454.htm), accessed on January 14, 2010.

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.*

difference between check-kiting and a cross-burning; or the arson of an office building versus the intentional torching of a church or synagogue. The church or synagogue burning has a profound impact on the congregation, the faith community, and the nation.”<sup>242</sup> I find this attitude of “I know it when I see it” troubling for several reasons. First, *is* it always easy to recognize a bias motivated crime? What if the office building burned is occupied by workers from abroad? How are prosecutors to make decisions about what does and doesn’t constitute bias? Second, and more importantly, is the implicit assumption that hate crimes, crimes which affect “an entire community or category of people,” are always enacted by violent and deranged individuals who, for whatever twisted reasons, hate jews or dykes or blacks or trans people. This definition of hate crimes ignores the underlying structures of institutional violence that shape – and terrorize – many communities in America today.

HRC’s language thus imagines an LGBTQ community that is susceptible to the violence of hate crimes committed by ignorant, homophobic individuals, and posits as its solution more government regulation and oversight. What this ignores, however, are the many communities of LGBTQ people who are oppressed and terrorized by the government itself. To clarify, it is helpful to examine the position on hate crimes legislation taken by the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP), a non-profit legal advocacy group for transgender, transsexual, intersex, and gender non-conforming people based in New York.

Though SRLP and HRC both exist to serve members of the LGBTQ community, they are in many ways polar opposites. With an annual budget of approximately

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<sup>242</sup> *ibid.*

\$500,000<sup>243</sup>, SRLP operates with about a tenth of the financial resources of HRC.

However, size is not the only, or the most significant, difference between the organizations.

SRLP's mission is as follows:

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP) works to guarantee that all people are free to self-determine their gender identity and expression, regardless of income or race, and without facing harassment, discrimination, or violence. SRLP is a collective organization founded on the understanding that gender self-determination is inextricably intertwined with racial, social and economic justice. Therefore, we seek to increase the political voice and visibility of low-income people and people of color who are transgender, intersex, or gender non-conforming. SRLP works to improve access to respectful and affirming social, health, and legal services for our communities. We believe that in order to create meaningful political participation and leadership, we must have access to basic means of survival and safety from violence.<sup>244</sup>

I have quoted the mission statement in its entirety because it articulates SRLP's vision of the relationship between gender self-determination and racial and economic justice.

Indeed, SRLP believes that the right to gender self-determination is just one facet of a larger struggle for social justice. SRLP notes that trans and gender non-conforming people consistently face discrimination in nearly every realm of daily life (including housing, employment, health care, education, the criminal justice system, and many others). Simultaneously, SRLP notes, poor people, and particularly communities of color, are facing cuts in state services, increasing unemployment, and rising incarceration rates.<sup>245</sup> It is at this intersection of poverty and gender non-conformity that SRLP locates the most vulnerable members of society:

Low income people and people of color who experience gender identity discrimination are particularly vulnerable in this climate. Low-income

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<sup>243</sup> Sylvia Rivera Law Project, IRS Form 990 (2008), publicly available via guidestar.org.

<sup>244</sup> <http://srlp.org/about>, accessed on January 13, 2010.

<sup>245</sup> *ibid.*

people and people of color are overrepresented in systems such as prisons, groups homes, shelters and detention facilities. Because so many of the systems are sex-segregated, many people face serious problems of inaccessibility, harassment or violence if their gender identity or expression does not conform to their birth sex.<sup>246</sup>

For SRLP, this understanding of oppression as intersectional drives the organization's approach to fighting gender based discrimination:

We believe that justice does not trickle down, and that those who face the most severe consequences of violence and discrimination should be the priority of movements against discrimination. Our agenda focuses on those in our community who face multiple vectors of state and institutional violence: people of color, incarcerated people, people with disabilities, people with HIV/AIDS, immigrants, homeless people, youth, and people trying to access public benefits.<sup>247</sup>

This approach to justice and self-determination for the trans and gender non-conforming communities shapes SRLP's work. The organization's goals are the provision of free legal services for low-income trans and gender non-conforming people; the use of trainings, advocacy, and lawsuits to end "state-sanctioned and institutional discrimination, violence, and coercion on the basis of gender identity and expression"; the development of a collective organizational structure that empowers trans and gender non-conforming people of color; and participation in a larger movement for racial, social, and economic justice.<sup>248</sup>

This particular vision of justice shapes SRLP's position on issues such as hate crimes. Though SRLP, like HRC, works to ensure equality for the LGBTQ community, SRLP approaches hate crimes from a fundamentally different perspective. While HRC and other mainstream LGBTQ rights groups hailed the passage of the Matthew Shepard

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<sup>246</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *ibid.*

and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act as a monumental win, SRLP issued a statement in opposition to it:

The recent expansion of the federal hate crimes legislation has received extensive praise and celebration by mainstream lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organizations because it purports to “protect” LGBT people from attacks on the basis of their expressed and/or perceived identities for the first time ever on a federal level. The Sylvia Rivera Law Project does not see this as a victory. As an organization that centers racial and economic justice in our work and that understands mass imprisonment as a primary vector of violence in the lives of our constituents, we believe that hate crimes legislation is a counterproductive response to the violence faced by LGBT people.<sup>249</sup>

Hate crimes legislation, SRLP claims, expands the powers of a criminal justice system that is inherently biased and unjust. In their statement on hate crimes legislation, SRLP notes that hate crimes laws are disproportionately used to arrest, prosecute, and imprison already marginalized communities. The result of such laws is that the very communities supposedly being protected from hate crimes (poor people, queer and trans people, people of color) are instead targeted by hate crimes laws: “As we see trans people profiled by police, disproportionately arrested and detained, caught in systems of poverty and detention, and facing extreme violence in prisons, jails and detention centers, we believe that this system itself is a main perpetrator of violence against our communities.”<sup>250</sup>

This approach to hate crimes, which views the state (rather than lone deranged individuals) as the perpetrator of violence against queer and trans communities implies a markedly different imagined LGBTQ community than that posited by HRC. For SRLP, the subject position of the queer is one that is inherently marginalized, along the axes of race and class as well as sexuality and/or gender identity.

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<sup>249</sup> <http://srlp.org/fedhatecrimelaw>, accessed January 13, 2010.

<sup>250</sup> *ibid.* For an analysis of the efficacy (or lack thereof) of hate crimes laws, see Liliana Segura, “Do Hate Crime Laws Do Any Good?”, published August 4, 2009 on [www.alternet.org](http://www.alternet.org).

Similarly, in April 2009, SRLP issued a press release announcing its non-support of the New York State Gender Employment Non-Discrimination Act. Though SRLP had advocated for years for legal protections for transgender and gender non-conforming in the workplace (amongst other arenas), the organization publicly withdrew its support from a bill making its way through the New York Assembly because in addition to adding gender identity and expression to the protected categories recognized under the state's Human Rights Statute, the bill also added gender identity and expression to the "protected" categories under New York's hate crimes laws. SRLP wrote:

It pains us that we nevertheless cannot support the current GENDA [Gender Employment Non-Discrimination Act] bill, because we cannot and will not support hate crimes legislation. Rather than serving as protection for oppressed people, the hate crimes portion of this law may expose our communities to more danger – from prejudiced institutions far more powerful and pervasive than individual bigots.<sup>251</sup>

New York's hate crimes legislation (already in place for racially and religiously bias motivated crimes) mandates higher mandatory minimum sentences for those crimes deemed hate crimes. As SRLP notes, this is extremely problematic given the existing inequalities in the criminal justice system: "By supporting longer periods of incarceration and putting a more threatening weapon in the state's hands, this kind of legislation places an enormous amount of faith in our deeply flawed, transphobic, and racist criminal legal system."<sup>252</sup>

Moreover, SRLP recognizes that poor people, trans people, and people of color are not just overrepresented in the prison system, but are regularly harassed and arrested by police for doing nothing more than walking down the street. Indeed, SRLP states, trans people and people of color are often arrested by police when they have been the

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<sup>251</sup> <http://srlp.org/genda>, accessed on January 19, 2010.

<sup>252</sup> *ibid.*

*victims* of violence. Given this fact, how can these communities realistically look to hate crimes laws to protect them? Even more dangerous are the ways in which hate crimes laws are used *against* poor people, trans people, and people of color. As SRLP notes, black men are already disproportionately arrested for race-based hate crimes, compared to white men. With the addition of gender identity to the State's hate crime laws, trans people could be prosecuted for hate crimes against non-trans people. As SRLP states:

In popular conception, hate crime laws were enacted to protect oppressed minorities against bigots who would seek to terrorize a community through violent crime: racist lynchings, anti-Semitic violence, and so forth. Unfortunately, the popular imagining of the operation of hate crime laws does not bear out in reality. Hate crime laws do not distinguish between oppressed groups and groups with social and institutional power.[...] In the case of the "New Jersey 4," a group of young queer women of color were incarcerated for defending themselves against the homophobic attacks and slurs of a straight man, who accused them of committing a "hate crime" against him.<sup>253</sup>

Hate crimes laws are thus figured as part of the very system that systematically oppresses the most marginalized communities in society.

The Sylvia Rivera Law Project's position on hate crimes legislation reflects its conception of the queer subject. For SRLP, fighting for the rights of the LGBTQ community, and the trans and gender non-conforming community in particular, means doing the work to ensure that those in the most marginal positions of society are given the tools to live safely and with dignity. For SRLP, there is no consideration of queerness outside of a consideration of race and class; the categories are inextricably linked. As such, SRLP's approach to social change involves more than just assimilation into and reform of the existing system of government, laws, and social structures; indeed, it involves a reconsideration of and commitment to changing the racist, classist, and

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<sup>253</sup> *ibid.*



transphobic structures that underlie our society as a whole. As SRLP states in its Core Values and Vision, “We can’t just work to reform the system. The system itself is the problem.”<sup>254</sup>

Obviously, this approach to hate crimes legislation is fundamentally different from that of the Human Rights Campaign. While SRLP’s notion of its constituents is based on an ideology of radical social change, HRC’s notion of its constituents is based on a model of assimilation. In its advocacy for hate crimes legislation, HRC ignores those members of the LGBTQ community who not only won’t be helped by such laws, but may actually be hurt by them.

Indeed, HRC’s attempts to represent a more “diverse” LGBTQ community again reveal the limitations of its conception of just who belongs in that group. In response to criticism about its lack of diversity, HRC has launched several initiatives to meet the needs of LGBTQ communities of color. I will examine two of these initiatives: the Equality Forward study, which gathers stories and information about LGBTQ people of color; and the ¡Ya Es Hora! campaign, a national effort in which HRC participates, which involves hosting workshops to help immigrants apply for U.S. citizenship. I argue that these initiatives, while working to gain rights for (some) people of color, ultimately limit the possibilities for a truly inclusive social change movement. While there are certainly other groups working on more progressive agendas, the HRC’s popularity, name recognition, and reach ensure that it is setting the tone for much mainstream political discourse.

HRC’s Equality Forward campaign is an initiative that aims to “unite lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people and straight allies of all races and backgrounds to win

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<sup>254</sup> <http://srlp.org/about/collective>, accessed on January 13, 2010.

equality for all.”<sup>255</sup> The focus of the initiative thus far has been the creation of a report entitled, “At the Intersection: Race, Sexuality and Gender,” which attempts to “better understand what’s important to LGBT people.”<sup>256</sup> HRC compiled data for the report through in-person and online focus groups with self-identified LGBTQ people of color, asking participants to share their experiences and talk about the most pressing issues facing them.

The findings of the report suggest, not surprisingly, that LGBTQ people of color face racial discrimination as well discrimination based on their sexual or gender identity.

In a section of the report findings entitled, “Race Still Matters,” the report states:

LGBT people of color view the world first from the point of view of race and gender. Most feel there is as much racism and sexism among LGBT people as there is among non-LGBT people, and racially motivated violence and discrimination are more prevalent than violence or prejudice based on sexual orientation. Race matters, and partnerships among groups of LGBT people must respect that. Human rights groups have to ask for and listen to the concerns of LGBT people of color in large forums and in one-on-one conversations. LGBT groups should recognize that for some, the desire to achieve racial equality is more important than the desire for marriage equality. We should support efforts to combat racial profiling, ensure fair immigration laws, fight HIV/AIDS, stop discrimination in housing and end disparities in healthcare.<sup>257</sup>

In producing this report, HRC is clearly grappling with how to expand its definition of what the LGBTQ community is, and what it needs. It recognizes that improving the lives of LGBTQ people of color involves working on issues that relate to race, class, and nationality, as well as sexual orientation. And yet, a look at the ways in which HRC attempts to enact these findings points to some of the limitations of its approach.

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<sup>255</sup> <http://www.hrc.org/issues/equalityforward.asp>, accessed on January 14, 2010.

<sup>256</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> Human Rights Campaign, *Equality Forward* study, 2009.

For example, HRC is a participant in the ¡Ya Es Hora! campaign, a nation-wide effort sponsored by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Education Fund (NALEO), Univision, and the National Council of La Raza, to help eligible immigrants apply for naturalization, and eventually, citizenship. As HRC notes in its informational materials, approximately 8 million immigrants in the U.S. are eligible for naturalization, and yet, few actually seek citizenship. HRC states, “Latino/a voters face two primary barriers to full political participation: lack of meaningful engagement and access to the electoral process.” Billing ¡Ya Es Hora! as “the largest and most inclusive effort to incorporate Latino/a immigrants into the American political process,” HRC explains its participation in the campaign in the following terms:

To broaden support for LGBT equality in communities of color, the Human Rights Campaign joins a coalition of faith, labor, media, and community-based organizations, hosting volunteer citizenship workshops as part of a civic engagement campaign aimed at providing immigrants with resources to apply for citizenship and to become active participants in U.S. democracy.<sup>258</sup>

Several things are striking about the preceding statements. First, ¡Ya Es Hora! is the only initiative on HRC’s website that is geared specifically toward LGBTQ Latino/as. As such, it is clearly meant to stand as “The Issue” for Latino/as, and to demonstrate HRC’s commitment to inclusivity and racial diversity. And yet, as HRC clearly states, the campaign is geared only toward those immigrants who are eligible for naturalization. The many immigrants, Latino/a and otherwise, who are *not* eligible for naturalization are not even referenced in the ¡Ya Es Hora! materials, even though the Pew Research Center estimates their numbers at 11.9 million<sup>259</sup> – far more than the population targeted by

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<sup>258</sup> <http://www.hrc.org/issues/13702.htm>, accessed on January 14, 2010.

<sup>259</sup> Jeffrey S. Passel and D’Vera Cohn, “Undocumented Immigration Now Trails Legal Inflow, Reversing Decade-Long Trend,” Pew Research Center, October 2, 2008.

¡Ya Es Hora!. The vast majority of these ineligible and unspoken immigrants belong to the poor and working classes, and are indeed among the most vulnerable U.S. populations. The gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, and queer people within this group are even more vulnerable still. But HRC's outreach to the Latino/a community does not even nominally include them. Returning once again to the notion of a politics of respectability, HRC's choice to support only this effort (rather than, say, an organization that supports the rights of undocumented workers) says a lot about which members of society it feels are worth working for and worth protecting.

Also significant is the fact that HRC attributes its participation in ¡Ya Es Hora! not to a desire to enact social justice, but rather, "to broaden support for LGBT equality in communities of color." Without diminishing the importance of fighting homophobia and transphobia everywhere, including in communities of color, it is hard not to read this statement as somewhat opportunistic attempt to garner support for LGBT equality without considering the broader context of equality overall.

Comparing HRC to the Sylvia Rivera Law Project reveals the differences between what might be termed a homonormative, neoliberal politics, and a queer politics that achieves the intersectional lens for which Cathy Cohen advocates. In the end of her article, Cohen calls for an intersectional analysis that is linked to concrete coalition work. She writes:

A reconceptualization of the politics of marginal groups allows us not only to privilege the specific lived experience of distinct communities, but also to search for those interconnected sites of resistance from which we can wage broader political struggles. Only by recognizing the link between the ideological, social, political, and economic marginalization of punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens can we begin to develop political

analyses and political strategies effective in confronting the linked yet varied sites of power in this country.<sup>260</sup>

Cohen's article, published in 1997, called for a radical rethinking of queer politics in America. As Lisa Duggan has demonstrated, and evidence from GLAD and HRC bears out, what mostly happened instead is that "queer" was taken off the table, in favor a mainstream, status quo driven LGBTQ rights agenda. However, organizations like Sylvia Rivera Law Project stand as evidence that a radical queer political agenda can create meaningful change in the lives of oppressed people.<sup>261</sup> A recent victory claimed by SRLP, for example, is the adoption by the New York Human Resources Administration of policies specifically designed to meet the needs of trans and gender non-conforming clients. These policies ensure that low-income trans and genderqueer people will be able to access New York's welfare agency and get the services that they need.

### **Conclusion: Lessons from the Archives**

Perhaps not surprisingly, my analysis of the materials produced by these LGBTQ rights organizations demonstrates that organizations that take an expansive notion of queer subjectivity, one that recognizes intersectionality and the value of coalition building amongst marginalized peoples, are the organizations that fight for and enact change that is meaningful for the most vulnerable LGBTQ people. I offer my critiques of these organizations not in a spirit of tearing down. Rather, I want to ask, what could a consideration of the archives offer these groups in their work? That is to say, if a group like HRC approached its work with a more nuanced understanding of the identities,

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<sup>260</sup> Cohen, 461.

<sup>261</sup> Other organizations doing notable work along these lines include the Audre Lorde Project, Queers for Economic Justice, FIERCE, and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence.

struggles, and complexities of the communities it is trying to serve, what might be the outcome? I posit that a consideration of the actual needs of LGBTQ people, as evidenced by the artifacts of the archives, might lead to radically different organizational missions for groups such as HRC. For example, Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* identifies and unpacks lesbian sites of trauma. Indeed, our subjects of study overlap at times, as with the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Importantly, Cvetkovich also notes the implications of the deeply nuanced knowledge of the archive, noting, "My investigation of the affective life of lesbian culture is motivated in particular by my dissatisfaction with responses to homophobia that take the form of demands for equal rights, gay marriage, domestic partnership, and even hate crimes legislation; such political agendas assume a gay citizen whose affective fulfillment resides in assimilation, inclusion, and normalcy."<sup>262</sup> Cvetkovich's work uncovers complicated cultural and political actors who are not easily categorized. In her series of oral histories with lesbian participants of New York's ACT UP, for example, she discovered that in spite of a deeply professed lesbian separatism, many of the of the lesbian women in ACT UP New York were engaged in sexual relationships with the men in the group. This complicates a reading of ACT UP as a queer space if queerness is based on sexual object choice alone. I contend that further sustained analysis of the work of political rights groups, and the actors within them, can open up more of these complicated spaces. Using the tools of the archive – that is, an understanding of history and identity as both nuanced and expansive – we can come to more thorough analysis of the work of political rights groups.

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<sup>262</sup> Cvetkovich, 11. Likewise, José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009) locates a potentially radical queer politics in the spaces created by queer performance art, photography, and literature.

One vast discrepancy between the subjects who emerge from a reading of the archives versus those who emerge from a consideration of mainstream LGBTQ rights organizations has to do with sex. While each of the three archives I have studied has revealed the diverse and sex-positive character of sexualities and identities across the LGBTQ spectrum, the political organizations ignore sex almost entirely. If, as Douglas Crimp claims, fighting AIDS requires embracing the language of diverse and specific communities and creating AIDS education materials that speak to them, then the pleasures and practices of the archives might teach us something. Crimp writes:

When “community values” are invoked, it is only for the purpose of *imposing* the purported values of those (thus far) unaffected by AIDS on the people (thus far) most affected. Instead of the specific, concrete languages of those whose behaviors put them at risk for AIDS, “community values” require a “universal” language that no one speaks and many do not understand. “Don’t exchange bodily fluids” is nobody’s spoken language. “Don’t come in his ass” or “pull out before you come” is what *we* say. [...] It is therefore essential that the word *community* be reclaimed by those to whom it belongs, and that abstract usages of such terms be vigorously contested. “Community values” are, in fact, just what we need, but they must be the values of our actual communities, not those of some abstract, universalized community that does not and cannot exist.<sup>263</sup>

A look at the archives reveals communities of people fighting for the right to sexual self-expression. From the women of the Lesbian Herstory Archives battling pornography laws, to the AIDS activists at the GLBT Historical Society who were archiving gay erotica as they fought for AIDS funding, to the men of the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives who were creating safer sex workshops just for queer men of color, each of these archives demonstrates that the concerns of LGBTQ communities go far beyond gay marriage. The letters written to the LHA by poor women and women in prison

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<sup>263</sup> Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in An Epidemic,” in Crimp, ed. *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1988), 265-266.

demonstrate the need amongst the lesbian community for economic justice and an overhaul of the criminal justice system. The fundraisers documented by the GLBT Historical Society, benefits thrown to raise money for a friend's medical care, speak to the need amongst LGBTQ people for accessible health care. The extensive documentation at the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives of organizations attempting to put together culturally specific AIDS education materials speaks to the AIDS crisis within the black community. And yet, these voices are absent from the mainstream LGBTQ rights organizations, and these issues remain invisible.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, in his writings on the “silenced” Haitian revolution, states:

The play of power in the production of alternative narratives begins with the joint creation of facts and sources for at least two reasons. First, facts are never meaningless: indeed, they become facts only because they matter in some sense, however minimal. Second, facts are not always created equal: the production of traces is always also the creation of silences. Some occurrences are noted from the start; others are not. Some are engraved in individual or collective bodies; others are not. Some leave physical markers; others do not. What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete – buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries – that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative.<sup>264</sup>

Trouillot notes that accounts of political upheaval are always marked by the facts and sources that have been collected. From these facts and sources, narratives of both the historical and the political emerge. Critical readers of these narratives must be attuned to the production of facts and sources. To apply this to queer archives and politics, one might ask, what might a political rights agenda look like if it were put together in consultation with the facts, voices, and silences of an institution like the Black Gay and

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<sup>264</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 29.



Lesbian Archives? The subjects who emerge to claim rights might consider culturally specific AIDS education, accessible health care, and safe community spaces to be top priorities, rather than marriage or hate crimes laws.

In conclusion, I posit that a political vision forged in conversation with diverse members of the LGBTQ community and other marginalized peoples might yield a rights discourse with the potential to enact radical positive change in the lives of all oppressed people. I locate queer archives as one potential site of information for political organizations that wish to generate a more expansive view. Archives can also serve as sites for dialogue and conversation within various communities. Recently, for example, the GLBT Historical Society hosted a public panel discussion of black lesbians from the Bay Area. The panel happened in conjunction with several exhibits on black lesbian life, including a traveling exhibit on loan from the Lesbian Herstory Archives.<sup>265</sup> Panel participants and audience members discussed thirty years of strategies for finding community, gaining a political voice, and dealing with racism both within the LGBTQ community and without. These conversations, these spaces in which *actual community voices* speak about the issues and challenges of their lives, might provide the basis for a nuanced and meaningful representation of LGBTQ political needs and interests.

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<sup>265</sup> See Heather Cassell, "Black Lesbians Display their Sapphic History," *Bay Area Reporter*, December 17, 2009, for a detailed description of the event. Projects such as the ACT-UP Oral History Project also have the potential to serve as these sites of dialogue and communication.

## Conclusion: The Possibilities of Pleasure

*I believe in the radical possibilities of pleasure, babe.*

*I do. I do. I do.*

-Bikini Kill<sup>266</sup>

At its core, this is a project about how we talk about sexuality and identity. Each of these chapters engages with institutions that, in one way or another, narrate versions of queer life. In examining the discourses of archives and political rights groups, I have attempted to uncover the ways in which institutions – both historical and political – produce stories about queer life. At stake in *Claiming History, Claiming Rights* is a critical understanding of how public history and political activism are mutually reinforcing projects. Queer history, this project finds, can build community and enable political empowerment.

In looking at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, the GLBT Historical Society, and the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives, I demonstrate the ways in which the process of forming an archive of materials related to LGBTQ sexualities creates a space for asking questions about what constitutes these identities. For example, the women who founded the Lesbian Herstory Archives engaged with both sides of the so called “sex wars,” and collected materials relating women who were lesbian feminists, women who were into S/M, women who had long been active in butch-femme culture, and women who fell into all of these categories and others as well. By refusing to recognize one of these identities

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<sup>266</sup> Bikini Kill, “I Like Fucking,” *I Like Fucking/I Hate Danger 7*” (Olympia, Washington: Kill Rock Stars, 1995)

as more legitimate than the others, the LHA asserted that *all* of these women were lesbians, and wrote them into the narrative of lesbian history that is constituted by the archive itself. Likewise, the GLBT Historical Society affirmed the value of “deviant” gay male sexualities even in the midst of the AIDS crisis, and helped to carve out a discursive space for talking about pleasure in the midst of an epidemic. The Black Gay and Lesbian Archives attempted to counter the invisibility of queer black life by constructing an archive full of diverse and explicit representations of queer black life and queer black desire. In each of my first three chapters, I contend that queer archives engage in the study of what might be termed “politically dangerous” sexual practices. Through their historical interventions, these archives challenge prevailing notions of sexuality and identity, and serve as sites of legitimacy for marginalized members of the gay and lesbian communities.

My final chapter, “Queer Discourses in the Political Sphere,” analyzes how organizations such as GLAD and the Human Rights Campaign make political claims using specific notions of queer history and identity. I contend that the rhetoric surrounding issues like gay marriage privileges a particular conception of the queer subject, and renders invisible those who do not conform to this identity. Finally, I claim that political organizations might draw on the notions of queer identity found in the archives in order to craft political platforms that meet the needs of a nuanced and diverse queer community.

Central to this project is the belief that race and class help to shape sexual identities. As my chapter on the Lesbian Herstory Archives demonstrates, race relations in America in the 1970s (and indeed today as well, though the terms of the debate are

different) profoundly affected how women conceived of and talked about their sexual identities. Likewise, the materials in the Black Gay and Lesbian Archives speak to the unique subject positions of queers of color. The BGLA's House Ball collection demonstrates the ways in which class is also a determinant in shaping sexual and gender identities. My final chapter, on political organizations, makes evident the ways in which race and class shape not just the identities but also the material needs of the LGBTQ community. It also points to the ways in which the failure of political organizations to grapple with these complicated identities and needs prevents them from crafting truly inclusive platforms.

This dissertation is also concerned with the complicated and overlapping spheres of the public and the private. Each of the archives I study began as a collection of materials gathered and stored by individuals in their private apartments. The roots of these archives are incredibly personal. Born out of the experiences of individual grassroots historians, who sought to document their particular subcultures through the creation of personal collections, the archives I study are intimately linked to the histories of their founders. Of course, through ambitious archiving and collecting projects, each of these organizations has grown to encompass many more stories, identities, and perspectives. Nevertheless, the relationship between public and private is a theme of this work.

Also central to my project is a consideration of pleasure and the body. Each of the archives I have studied has explicitly rejected a "sanitized" view of history, in which sex is removed and people's desires are rendered mute. Rather, these archives have embraced a sex-positive view of history, in which desire, even when manifested in unpopular terms,

is considered a legitimate site of inquiry and preserved in the archival record. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, for example, collected photographs of women in bondage gear as part of their lesbian photographs collection. The GLBT Historical Society's first artifact acquisition was a series of murals from the wall of a bathhouse that was being demolished, which explicitly portrayed the acts in which patrons had engaged. The Black Gay and Lesbian Archives collection includes materials from workshops on kinky safer sex, geared specifically toward men of color. These collections speak to the diversity of desire within the LGBTQ community, and position these archives as safe spaces for the preservation, investigation, and discussion of kinky and deviant sexual practices.

This project has several important implications. Its focus on identity and discourse suggests that a careful reading of the contents of queer archives can help us come to a more nuanced and representative understanding of queer subjectivities and desires. This understanding gives us the tools to evaluate the work of political organizations and to ask if they really are advocating for the needs of the communities they purport to serve. It also suggests that we should look to archives as important sites of cultural production. In uncovering the tensions, politics, successes, and failures of various archives, this project demonstrates the ways in which the production of both history and identity is a contested and subjective process.

This dissertation also has implications for how we think about the political process, particularly with regard to advocacy on behalf of LGBTQ people. Readers of my chapter on the discourses of political organizations have suggested that I am holding these organizations to an unrealistic standard, that these organizations are trying to win

concrete political gains and in order to do so, they cannot be all-inclusive. My goal in this work is not to point fingers at LGBTQ rights organizations that fail to meet the needs of all queer people, but rather, to demonstrate how the discourse of these organizations constructs a particular notion of the queer subject, with a particular set of concerns. Recognizing the ways in which these concerns privilege white, middle-class, first-world subjects is essential, as these organizations help to set the terms of a national dialogue around sexual identity and the needs of the LGBTQ community. Because organizations like Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders and the Human Rights Campaign claim to serve the needs of *all* LGBTQ people, and publicize their political agendas in such a way as to imply that that is precisely what they are doing, the needs and concerns of subjects who fall outside of these discourses are silenced. This project analyzes the work of political groups in light of the identities that emerge from the archives. This uncovers gaps in the national dialogue about LGBTQ rights, and suggests ways in which these gaps might be addressed.

This project gestures toward several potential sites of study that represent fertile ground for future work. First, and perhaps most obviously, is the study of any or all of the queer archives and history projects that were not covered in this dissertation. Because my scope of work was necessarily limited by time and space, I left out of this study a discussion of many exciting projects and organizations. Future work might look at Boston's History Project, an all-volunteer group which has, since 1980, attempted to preserve Boston's LGBTQ history and make it accessible to the general public through exhibits and publications. The History Project's 1996 exhibit, *Public Faces, Private*

*Lives*, brought more visitors to Boston's public library than had ever before been recorded. Scholars might examine the ways in which The History Project chose to portray LGBTQ history for this exhibit, and ask what the implications of that were, given its massive public exposure. Future work might also consider looking at archives and historical societies located outside of major metropolitan areas and away from the east and west coasts. The Ohio Lesbian Archives, for example, is a grassroots effort founded in the 1970s by women deeply engaged in lesbian feminist work. Researchers might trace its development in a comparative study with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which was founded at a similar time. Questions might include, how was sexual diversity and a politics of the body accounted for in the Ohio Lesbian Archives? Did its location outside of a major city change the dynamics of its founding and of the community that nurtured it? What did diversity look like in Ohio, versus New York City?

In a similar vein, future work might consider the effects of new technologies on the world of archives and public history. Specifically, scholars might evaluate several online history projects that have been created in the past decade. For example, OutHistory.org, a project of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at City University of New York, provides free online access to historical scholarship, online exhibits, archival documents, and discussions. The rise of web-based technologies raises a host of interesting questions. How has the development of the internet changed who can access queer history? Are particular types of stories, documents, and histories more adaptable to the online medium? What are the repercussions of this? How do online archives support the development of the community relationships that have been the hallmark of many brick and mortar archives in the past? I hope that my scholarship in this dissertation has

provided a historical base for moving forward with questions about new technologies and the future of the archive.

A theme that runs through this dissertation is that of increased professionalism. My work traces queer public history and political organizations from the early 1970s to the late 2000s. During that time, non-profit organizations in many sectors experienced rapid growth and change. With this came the adoption of new business models, including an increased focus on fundraising, branding, and consumer satisfaction. While I have touched briefly upon the ways in which various organizations responded to this changing non-profit climate, future studies might take up more thoroughly an investigation of how increased professional pressures affected the work of these groups, and situate this work within a larger study of non-profit development in general. Did the missions of these organizations change over time in response to the needs of generating donations and remaining sustainable? Did having paid staff (as opposed to an all volunteer workforce) change the culture of the organizations? What advantages did new technologies bring, and conversely, were there risks as well? With specific regard to the archives, one might ask, did they accept different types of items? Mount different types of exhibits? Reach out to different constituencies? Questions that might be asked of the political organizations include, did the nature of what groups were asking for change in response to funding pressures? How did changing political climates affect the priorities of rights groups?

Another potentially fruitful site of inquiry is that of the users of the archives. This dissertation has paid sustained attention to the founders of these organizations, as well as to the collections of each archive. The voices of users of the archives have appeared in



letters and visitor logs referenced throughout this project. Future work, however, might engage these voices more fully through an ethnographic study and series of oral histories. Another project might include the compiling of a bibliography that details all of the ways in which scholars and researchers have used the materials of the archives for various films, exhibits, and publications.

Perhaps the richest site of future inquiry lies in the relationship between queer archives and LGBTQ rights organizations. This dissertation has provided the groundwork for thinking about how discourses of queer identity vary from archive to political organization. It has gestured toward the connections between these two types of discourse, and between these two types of organizations. Future work might consider a number of questions, including, how have political organizations used the materials of archives to advance various causes? As the chapter on the Lesbian Herstory Archives demonstrates, the LHA was an important resource for lawyers and organizations advocating for lesbian mothers' custody rights. How have other political/archival partnerships functioned? Future studies might also engage in a more thorough investigation of the institutional culture of the political organizations themselves. Through interviews with staff and founders, an analysis of institutional records, and a comprehensive evaluation of the issues addressed by different groups at different moments, further research could better situate these organizations in a social/historical context, and trace the development of their work alongside that of the archives.

The final contribution that this project makes to the existing world of scholarship is harder to quantify, or even to articulate. Indeed, as I finish this dissertation and read

back over my chapters, I feel a sense of failure. What I have perhaps neglected to convey is the almost unbearable emotion I felt as I spent years of my life reading through the traces of other queer lives. It feels like a failure to have written a dissertation that does not adequately express the stab of exquisite pain and pleasure I felt upon seeing echoes of my own consciousness, my own experience, my past and my future, laid out before me on the table of a reading room. There was the clean sharp fear of subject matter that cuts too close, that sliced through my chest so dangerously close to my heart, my lungs, that I felt short of breath. Every time I opened a folder containing the lives of butches and femmes, queers and trannies, the sexual outsiders who speak my language and walk the terrain of my psyche like a well-known room navigated effortlessly in the dark, my academic mind shut down and my heart opened up. It filled with all the fear and vulnerability that seeing one's self committed to the page entails, and it left me immobilized, often on the verge of tears. I would ask myself, what if I fail at this? What if I fail myself, my very own people? Perhaps the stakes for academic work are always this high, and it is just here, at the edge of my own experience, that I recognize the terror and power (and possibility) of this highly structured institution of knowledge production. Regardless, it was an experience that shook me to my core, and I feel a certain sense of apprehension that I have not adequately expressed how powerful my time in these archives was.

Because it is here, in the archives, that I locate the final possibility for future work, and the legacy that I hope this dissertation will carry forward. The ultimate power of these archives lies in the stories they tell, and in the connections that they allow people to make. Connections between the past and the present, connections between one's own

lived experience and that of someone who lived fifty years before. While I certainly don't claim that discourses of history are inherently radical, I do believe that they have the power to be. In the archives, in these sites of complicated identities and desires, live stories of people on the outside, people who challenged the status quo by their very existence, people who dared to claim pleasure and love and family in ways that were not commonly modeled or accepted. I contend (or at the very least, hope) that it is through engagement with and connection to these stories that a future generation of queers will locate some of their own life possibilities, and forge their own political agendas.

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