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Videos in the Kitchen: The Lesbian Herstory Archives as a Moving-Herstorical-Image

Essay by Shawn(ta) D. Smith

Yes it's true that the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) shelves its videos in the kitchen. Wrapped around the north corner of the room, overlooking the four-seated, semi-round dinette set rests the over six hundred videotapes and DVDs catalogued in the collection. Along the remaining three walls is the countertop, with a microwave, coffee maker, and canister of Special Lesbo Blend coffee, sink, cupboards filled with hand-made pottery, a photocopier, and an ice box. Aside the instructions on keeping dishes clean, a sign exclaims "Welcome home, Lesbians!"

LHA is a home for lesbians and their lives. For preservation purposes, no part of the collection may leave its home, yet films do leave the kitchen for access. The originals of most are stored off-site in a climate controlled storage facility. Dubs, or copies, are kept on-site for viewing purposes. Films are viewed by using one of three portable VHS players, and dubbing is permissible providing that proper procedures are followed and rights are acquired. The option to dub an original is possible if the on-site copy isn't the best quality. But what of this act of dubbing? This duplication?

At the Lesbian Herstory Archives, lesbians multiply! As with most archives, materials are reformatted for preservation. However, at LHA, duplication is a part of our herstory and further demarcates this unique collection as an archive-in-motion. In her 1990 article, "The Will to Remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York," LHA cofounder Joan Nestle describes the traveling slide show. Travel with artifacts in a backpack, her method of making the archives visible and accessible in its early years, became too burdensome on single-edition publications or one-of-a-kind photos and fabrics. A portable moving image made it possible for materials to reach women around the globe. Nestle notes, "more needed to be said than we could cover in the show-and-tell method. So we created a traveling slide show to bring home the message that all lesbians were worthy of inclusion in herstory."¹

I would like to consider the slide show as (interactive) film, and more broadly, LHA as a moving-herstorical-image. The movement of lesbian archiving reflects 1) the actual showcasing of the archive (as in the slide show), 2) the technological changes of access, and 3) the ability for lesbians everywhere to add to the holdings, thereby altering our herstory completely. The slide show is an example of a (traveling) moving image and is a single component of a personalized and complex archival herstory.

Today, this slide show that once required individual film stills has gone digital, transferred to PowerPoint, and in my personal laptop it is stored as a QuickTime, a multimedia technology, requiring simply a click of an encircled side triangle now universally symbolizing "play." What was once a series of clickable slides with accompanying artifacts and live narration has now become a digital video. But does this new digitalization of a once hand-held practice constitute an archiving of lesbian film?

In the past, the slideshow did not exhibit film. Yet, technology has provided the option of interweaving audio-visual content with the moving image of physical artifacts,

creating a newly constructed, communicative lesbian herstory. Our holdings include documentation of marches and conferences, home videos, interviews, TV series, as well as mainstream and alternative films. We keep whatever is donated, and oftentimes films are donated not by the filmmaker but by a lesbian whose life the films have deeply touched. For example, in a digital slideshow, a clip of a Barbara Hammer film could play in the same frame as a letter from a lesbian discussing her coming out to Hammer's work. Although the audio-visual collection is not exhaustive of all lesbian film, the growth of the collection is initiated by dimensions of access.

An inquiry:

A student interested in interviewing Barbara Hammer in celebration of her 2010 autobiographical release, *HAMMER! Making Movies Out of Sex and Life*, called LHA seeking a list of Hammer films. She could be in the next day.

"Do you have the titles for the films you are interested in viewing?" I asked.

"Well, she's made over 80, so can't you just search by her name" she retorted.

"Yes, I am aware of Barbara's filmography" I like to get snippy with overly knowledgeable callers. "However, we don't necessarily catalog by filmmaker. We often catalog by who donated, or title, or film content, or filmmaker, among other things."

We went on like this for some time. Finally I discovered that we had only a handful of Hammer pieces. That the Lesbian Herstory Archive has a less-than-complete collection of Hammer's films helps to demonstrate that lesbians can't merely want to find materials; they must also participate in the archiving. A single inquiry may stimulate a new quest, or a new conversation. This is the case for a moving herstory: like the moving image stories build, and patterns unfold.

At LHA the herstory of lesbian communities is dependent upon our participation. In 2010, the L-Word production donated their press materials and a complete run of the TV

show. Similarly, twenty-year LHA volunteer Morgan Gwenwald, who was once executive director of In the Life Media, will donate a large stack of the broadcast DVDs from In the Life, a TV show that documents queer life. She gave LHA videos of the show some time ago but in VHS form. Now we will receive an entire run in DVD format. These new acquisitions have two effects: 1) they demonstrate that Lesbians are still contributing to our moving herstory and 2) DVDs take up less space, thus fitting snugly into our non-cooking, coffee-brewing kitchen.

Shawn(ta) Smith is a separatist, writer, archivist, and reference librarian. Smith was cofounder and director of the award-winning organization Sister Outsider (2000-2005) in Brooklyn, New York, a peer-education non-profit that employed self-supporting young women. She is a collective member of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the WOW Café Theater, where she produces Rivers of Honey, a monthly Cabaret for women and trans artists of color.

¹Joan Nestle, "A Will to Remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York," *Feminist Review* 34 (Spring 1990): 87.

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