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Polly Thistlethwaite
CUNY Graduate Center

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The Lesbian and Gay Past: An Interpretive Battleground

Polly Thistlethwaite

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Mainstream research institutions are currently courting lesbian and gay collections at an unprecedented rate to bolster sorely lacking holdings. This recent academic interest in lesbian and gay archival material is a result of both the success and the defeat of grassroots archives. Our success is that a liberal mainstream now "gets it" that lesbian and gay people have been assaulted by historical record, and some institutions are attempting to remedy this at long last by adopting folded grassroots collections or affiliating with active ones. But assimilation of grassroots archives threatens to undermine what little hard won control community-based institutions have over the construction of lesbian and gay histories. If all lesbian and gay archives were folded into the mainstream, we would turn over control of our history and memory to a system still structured to work against us.

With few exceptions, academic archives today continue to code lesbian and gay collections, and to discount the self-documenting efforts of lesbians and gays in constructing an uncloseted history. "There have always been moments of archival heroism in mainstream settings," said Deborah Edel, co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. "But these are individual acts set against a backdrop of institutional hostility." Newly interested in lesbian and gay archival material, mainstream cultural institutions are positioned to appropriate the ownership, the presentation, and the very nature of lesbian and gay history. As colonized people deeply invested in the integrity and utility of our histories, we face a different struggle than we did a generation ago.

"We insisted on autonomy from the university," said Degania Golove of the June L. Mazer Lesbian Collection describing their recent agreement to move to rent-free space on the University of Southern California campus. "We didn't want to give the collection over to USC. But if we can get more volunteers and save money out of this, then it's good for us," Golove said. USC announced in January that the Los Angeles-based collections of the International Gay and Lesbian Archives and the One Institute were coming to campus, with the two mostly-male collections merging into One. Both One and Mazer will continue to govern and staff themselves, raising money for independent housing during this rent-free opportunity.

Grassroots lesbian and gay archivists display ample suspicion about merging with mainstream institutions. And with good reason. Nothing less than the integrity and control of our collective memory is at stake. Negotiations for a merger or partnership between the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) and the

community-based Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California (GLHS) have been underway for over two years. At the heart of the negotiations are concerns about the collection's future integrity and accessibility. "San Francisco currently has a queer-friendly climate, which extends to city government and to the administration of San Francisco Public," said Bill Walker of the GLHS. "As an historically conscious organization, however, we are not willing to gamble on the long-term kindness of strangers." Walker said GLHS is determined to obtain a contract with SFPL that insures the safety of the collections entrusted to them.

In classic appropriation of the margins by the center, the product of the risk and labor of naming, claiming, and collecting lesbian and gay lives first assumed by alternative institutions is embraced now, years later, by mainstream ones. It is less risky and less work for a university to absorb or to affiliate with an established community-based gay or lesbian archive than to create their own. At the core of Cornell's Human Sexuality Collection is the Mariposa Education and Research Foundation collection; the International Gay Information Center collection comprises the bulk of gay material the New York Public Library, and the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance recently offered their sizable lesbian periodical collection to Duke University. Yale, Brown, UCLA, and Columbia, among others have announced an intent to acquire lesbian and gay archival material, building their collections from scratch.

Even with academics supporting the new queer studies classes, American libraries and archives still on the whole fail to acquire and adequately identify lesbian and gay material. Libraries and archives have encumbered access to gay and lesbian material, turning the quest for self-discovery into an exercise in frustration and humiliation. Gays and lesbians have not been alone in confronting classification deficiencies, but we are saddled with unique brands of invisibility, homogeneity, and degradation reflected in Library of Congress subject headings. The word "gay," for example, in widespread use since the 1920s, was only sanctioned as a heading in 1987. Until 1972, libraries continued to refer readers from "Homosexuality" or "Lesbianism" to "Sexual perversion." Most larger libraries have not converted or linked their old subject headings to the new ones, so even today to find books acquired before 1987 you have to use some form "Homosexual," "Sexual perversion," or another word used by local catalogers at the time.

Subject headings freshly applied today are still scarce and inexact, foiling subject and keyword searches in library computer catalogs. "Gays" is used as an umbrella term instead of "Lesbians and Gays," for example. Headings do not exist for "Butch-Fem," "Transgender," or "Queer." There are no headings for "American Literature--lesbian authors" or "American Literature--gay authors" equivalent to "American literature--Asian American authors" or "American literature--women authors."

"Queer materials often stay in the backlogs long after less `problematic' items have been processed. Perhaps the subject headings are too difficult to assign properly," remarked Marvin Taylor, a librarian at New York University. "Queer materials go beyond pointing out the problems of these library procedures - they question the structure of knowledge on which the procedures are based. In response, these materials are the most closeted of all."

Even in the presence of explicit archival evidence, mainstream archivists often decide not to use the rudimentary lesbian or gay subject headings available. The Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe College, one of the leading women's archives in the United States, will not assign a lesbian subject heading to a collection unless it belongs to a self-identified, unavoidable lesbian. Adrienne Rich and Charlotte Bunch have Schlesinger collections bearing explicit subject headings, but Eleanor Coit and Pauli Murray do not. The Murray collection is assigned the subject headings "women--sexual behavior" and "friendship." The Schlesinger habitually employs the "friendship" and "single women" headings to code lesbian materials.

A woman who was once actually doing research on friendship between women told Susan von Salis of the Schlesinger Library, "you know it's curious, all these collections that are supposed to be about friendship seem to be about lesbians."

The Schlesinger's omissions and euphemisms are attributed to uncertainty about a woman's sexuality and the Schlesinger's opposition to "outing" lesbians, be they dead or alive. The practice also speaks to a fear of offending family members or funding sources (often one in the same) and the interpretive "risk" the Schlesinger is unwilling to take to offer us a history knowable and findable on our own terms. Instead, the Schlesinger leaves us a veiled, closeted history - a silent inheritance little changed from the pre-Stonewall era. To date, only 85 out of over 410,000 records on the Research Library Information Network's archival database (the database of the largest American academic libraries) contain some form of "lesbian" as a subject word. The traditions of archival cloaking and exclusion are at the root of gay and lesbian invisibility in the historical record.

The lesbian and gay past continues to be an interpretive battleground that mainstream archives have largely refused to enter, assuming few risks in collecting, naming, or identifying archival collections. At the same time, though, libraries offer up worlds to those who work hard enough to unearth the secrets there. Struggling against a powerful legacy of historical dispossession, lesbians and gays sustain and even empower ourselves in libraries where we break the codes to uncover the secrets buried there.

As self-discovering, self-documenting people, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered people have mined a history from mainstream settings where it has lingered, camouflaged and neglected. The Lesbian Herstory Archives' found image collection, for example, contains several photos discovered in mainstream institutions - including Columbia University, the Schlesinger Library, and the New York Public Library - otherwise unidentified as relevant to lesbian history. Radical historians and community-based archives have assumed the interpretive risks and should be rightly recognized for championing and preserving what we know of lesbian and gay pasts - for bringing "out" and keeping "out" our history.

The New York Public Library's "Becoming Visible" exhibit this past summer trumpeted The Arrival of lesbian and gay history to New York's cultural mainstream. The exhibit was a significant political marker, both shaping and reflecting our Coming Out in new territory. Billed by New York Public Library as the country's first "major" exhibition on the topic (though several exhibits have been assembled by community-based organizations), "Becoming Visible" was extensive, informative, and teeming with implications about inveterate historical institutions and their stake in representing lesbian and gay lives.

The failure of "Becoming Visible" is that the New York Public Library denied its own role in secreting lesbian and gay history, and diminished the contributions of self-documenting people in bringing us this exhibit. "Becoming Visible" existed in its depth and variety because lesbian and gay people have waged a battle for historical survival in the face of systemic disrespect by institutions such as the New York Public Library. The show reflected the enormous documentary efforts of lesbians and gays, only now (and perhaps only momentarily) displayed with great fanfare by this mainstream institution. This is similar to the experience of any colonized people whose cultural artifacts find new "value" and "significance" on display in Western museums.

In keeping with mainstream library and archival tradition, the Becoming Visible logo on the enormous banner strung over the steps of the New York Public was a coded one. It read: "Becoming Visible: The Legacy of Stonewall." For most gays and lesbians, the pink triangle incorporated into the graphic, along with the word "Stonewall" were tip offs that there was an exhibit of interest inside. The absence of the words gay or lesbian allowed anyone else to remain oblivious to the nature of the exhibit, though, unless they happened to see the words "gay and lesbian" on another advertisement. Becoming Visible, indeed.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives provided the Library with the backbone of material and referrals used for the lesbian part of the exhibit. Neither in the exhibit itself, though, nor in the plethora of promotional and fund-raising material was there significant information about the Lesbian Herstory Archives or any other contributing organization. At the insistence of the

Lesbian Herstory Archives, curators assembled a Donors and Lenders panel only days before the exhibit opened. It represented a break with New York Public's practice, exhibit curator Mimi Bowling told me, in that it was the first time the Library recognized lenders in such a "prominent" fashion in any curated exhibit. But the panel's location well to the left of the entrance was hardly conspicuous. The financial contributors' names were, on the other hand, quite prominently displayed at the exhibit's entrance. "This exhibit is not about community building," was the reported response of the Library's administration, adhering to their "policy" not to acknowledge or promote other collections over their own. Instead, the exhibit was falsely framed to appear as though it was berthed from the stacks, goodwill, and native savvy of the New York Public Library.

"Becoming Visible" obviously broke with traditions of exclusion and deep closeting in significant ways, but the New York Public Library as an institution still embodies a Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Don't Pursue policy regarding lesbian and gay lives, allowing mostly the bold, the lucky, the hungry, or the particularly persistent ones to expose a history buried in the stacks. If mainstream libraries and archives had ever truly honored lesbian and gay history, there would have been no reason to have established alternative archival institutions.

Gay and lesbian history is tangible today because lesbians and gays had the will and determination to constitute and reclaim histories by writing books and building presses, and by establishing community-based archives and history projects. These are the places where we have recorded stories of lesbian and gay lives and honored their richness. It is an appropriation of our community's work and a misrepresentation of our collective history that the Library obscures the contributions of the community-based institutions it depended on to assemble this exhibit. It is as if the Library fears that to tell these truths might disqualify it from the credibility it now craves, the status it always expects, the gay funding it now seeks.

We must be tempered in our gratitude to mainstream institutions recognizing lesbian and gay lives at long last, because they persist in keeping our histories camouflaged and permuted. Our historical survival is due to self-documenting efforts and to the work of radical historians who have uncloaked our pasts. Had it not been for these, there would have been no material for the New York Public Library to display upon this occasion of the first "major" exhibit of lesbian and gay history. We are people who have rescued the dignity of our lives from intended obscurity and disgrace, keeping our collective memories safe and uncloseted in alternative institutions.

With mainstream archives focusing on the collections of well-known gays and lesbians, it will be the community-based archives that continue to collect and embrace the unrecognized heroism of

lives lived on the sexual margins. Community-based archives embody an alternative vision, living with a people, declaring who we are, pushing the boundaries of acceptance, putting history to work for us. It is essential that in our enthusiasm to achieve mainstream recognition that we not neglect or impoverish community-controlled history projects because this would be a bargain struck with the sacrifice of self-definition. We must continue to invest in our own communities, taking charge of our histories to ensure that lesbian and gay lives are knowable in richness and honesty, not packaged to ease another's understanding. Lesbian and gay history, unsecreted, carries with it tremendous power to enrich and to liberate. Entrusting our history entirely to mainstream institutions is to hand ourselves over to be held in the interest of another's destiny.

BIO

Polly Thistlethwaite has been a volunteer with the Lesbian Herstory Archives since 1986. She is also a reference librarian at Hunter College. She wishes to thank Amy Beth, Rachel Lurie, and Maxine Wolfe for their contributions to this article.

ABOUT THE LESBIAN HERSTORY ARCHIVES

The Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, popularly known as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, opened in 1974 in the pantry of Joan Nestle's New York City apartment. Joan and co-founder Deborah Edel along with the other collective members formed the organization in response to the failure of mainstream archives to collect and value lesbian culture. It is a principle of the Archives never to turn the collection over to a mainstream institution.

The LHA is home the world's largest collection of lesbian material. Thousands of lesbians have donated personal collections of letters, diaries, and photographs to LHA; others have contributed clippings for LHA's subject files, donated unpublished writings and school papers, or offered lesbian artifacts such as t-shirts, buttons, art objects, taped television shows, and oral histories.

LHA is an all volunteer, community-based, lesbian operated grassroots archive inviting every lesbian to help build the collection. We believe that every woman who has had the courage to touch another woman deserves to be remembered and that the self-documented lives of famous, infamous, and not-so-famous lesbians will enrich understandings for generations to come. All lesbians are invited to visit and to contribute.

In June 1993, after several years of a massive grassroots fund raising effort, the Lesbian Herstory Archives re-opened in a new home in Brooklyn's Park Slope. The archive is open to visitors and researchers by appointment. Volunteers work most Thursday evenings and other scheduled weekend days.

To make a donation, arrange a visit, or find out more, contact:

The Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation (or LHEF, Inc.)
P.O. Box 1258
New York, NY 10116
phone: 718/768-DYKE (3953)

Caption for Building Photo

The Lesbian Herstory Archives' limestone townhouse in Brooklyn's Park Slope is the only building in New York City ever to be owned by a lesbian organization. There is currently less than \$70,000 left on the commercial mortgage the organization hopes to pay off this year.

Caption for Schomberg Center Found Image

Image in the Lesbian Herstory Archives Found Image Collection, originally from the Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

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