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Gays and Lesbians in Library History

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GAYS AND LESBIANS IN LIBRARY HISTORY

Lesbian and gay people bear extraordinary witness to the power of the printed word. It is through the printed word, consumed privately and anonymously, that gays and lesbians often discover an identity and find a community. Coming-out stories are thick with accounts of self-discovery through novels, dictionaries, magazines... and libraries. The mass-mediated word, requisite for democracy and empire-building both, has allowed stigmatized lesbian and gay communities to unite across regional, class, ethnic, and generational boundaries. The rise of the gay and lesbian press has shaped and reflected the rise of lesbian and gay liberation politics. The history of lesbians and gays in libraries reflects not only pervasive heterosexist oppression and a legacy of gay and lesbian resistance, but also the exceptional role the printed word plays in gay and lesbian lives.

Homosexual relationships are in evidence from the beginning of historical record in every part of the world, but the naming, nature, and understanding of a homosexual, queer, gay, or lesbian identity rests in specific historic and cultural contexts. The term "homosexual" first appeared in Western medical journals and penal codes in the 1860s, marking the beginnings of a modern pathologized homosexual identity. In 1897, the Scientific Humanitarian Committee was founded in Germany by Magnus Hirschfeld to advocate for the social acceptance of

homosexuality. The Committee published a bibliographic yearbook and established the Berlin Institute of Sexual Science which, by the time it was burned in public ceremony by Nazis in 1933, held over 20,000 books along with large picture and manuscript collections.

The increasing availability of homosexual material at the turn of the century did not guarantee its widespread appearance in Western libraries. Articulating the philosophy of book collection in 1908, Arthur E. Bostwick, New York Public Library's Circulation Librarian, and President of the American Library Association, told his staff that "it is unnecessary to say that we do not purchase any books that appear to us to be either immoral or so indecent that they are unfit to be circulated among the general public." In the 1920s and 1930s there were several well-documented efforts by British and American governments to prevent publication, import, and distribution of literature with erotic and explicit homosexual content, including Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, and James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

In the post-WWII years, the American Library Association developed a political stance against censorship, championing the democratic ideal of the free flow of information. With the establishment of the Intellectual Freedom Committee in 1940 and the Freedom to Read Foundation in 1969, the ALA became well-identified with the forces opposing First Amendment freedoms and

the evils of fascism, dictatorship, and mind-control. This stance was applied most often and enjoyed most popularity when defending the liberty of non-sexual political speech.

During the 1950s, homophile organizations and publishers of physique magazines defied United States postal codes when they mailed any type of political publication or gay pin-up. In 1958 the Supreme Court reversed a lower court decision which held that the homosexual rights publication *ONE* was pornographic, therefore unmailable, simply because it was homosexual. In 1962, the Supreme Court *Manual Enterprises v. Day* case established that bodybuilding magazines catering to a gay audience were not prima facie "obscene" and nonmailable under the Comstock Act. As gay and lesbian activists felled laws restricting distribution of homosexual publications, they set groundwork for the rise of the gay and lesbian press and liberation movement. Freedom of sexual expression, though more vigorously defended by the ALA during the 1970s and 1980s, remains into the 1990s less sacred in the minds of most librarians.

Gay and lesbian books and periodicals have been less frequently selected, more closely scrutinized, more often deemed "inappropriate" or "unnecessary," and more often casualties of funding shortages than titles in other subject areas. The reasons have been legion: a perceived lack of patron demand, the absence of supporting curricula, the shortage of gay-lesbian

titles in standard bibliographies such as *Books for College Libraries*, institutional and personal eroto- and homophobia, and a real or imagined dread of reprisal. These factors have contributed to the over-conscious effort to justify selections stemming from and addressing an often unknown, yet always stigmatized community of gay and lesbian library users. Few libraries developed clearly defined roles or budgets for gay and lesbian collection development, making the scrutiny of gay and lesbian acquisitions more intense and subjective.

Once selected, libraries often placed gay and lesbian books and periodicals in restricted access areas. Gay and lesbian books, even those containing no explicit sex, were relegated to locked stack "cages" or reserve areas where users had to request and read books under supervision instead of in the privacy afforded by an open stack. At the British Museum, for example, books dealing with homosexuality were held in the Private Case, un-entered in the main catalog until 1960.

Such restrictions were applied amidst rationalizations of preventing theft or vandalism, but were rarely extended to art books, computer manuals, military catalogs and other heavily abused titles. Restrictions on gay and lesbian material inhibited the discovery of knowledge by denying readers privacy and anonymity. Even though the *ALA Policy Manual* instructed that "restricting access to certain titles and classes of library

materials for protection and/or controlled use is a form of censorship," the practice continued. Library classification schemes, too, encumbered access to gay and lesbian material. Gays and lesbians were not alone in confronting classification deficiencies, but endured a unique brand of historical invisibility and degradation clearly reflected in the history of Library of Congress subject headings.

By the 1920s, "homosexuality," "gay," and "lesbian" had appeared in the United States popular press. "Homosexuality" did not become an authorized subject heading until 1946, however, and "lesbianism" was not recognized by the Library of Congress until 1954. LC continued the "see also" reference from these terms to "sexual perversion" until 1972. It was not until 1976 that LC denoted "lesbians" and "homosexuals, male" as classes of persons. "Gay," in widespread use since the 1920s, was only sanctioned as a subject heading in 1987.

Problems with gay and lesbian subject headings remained in 1990. "Gays," for example is used as an umbrella term instead of "Lesbians and Gays." In addition, LC subject headings do not exist for crucial aspects of lesbian and gay lives, such as "Gay men- Coming out," "Butch-Fern," "Gay holocaust," "African-American lesbians," and "Lesbian separatism." Subject headings used by periodical indexes were plagued with similar problems, varying wildly in approaches to gay and lesbian classification.

Even with the availability of rudimentary subject headings for gay and lesbian material, archivists failed to assign appropriate subject headings to personal collections of gays and lesbians. It was general practice to catalog a personal collection without any gay or lesbian subject heading unless a person was a well-known gay or lesbian political figure. This was the case even given the presence of explicit diaries and correspondence. Such contemplated omission might be attributed to oversight or to lack of certainty about a subject's sexual identity; it might also be attributed to homophobia, or to fears of offending donors, family members, and funding sources. In 1990, only 35 of over 270,000 records on RLIN's archival database contained some form of "lesbian" as a descriptor. This tradition of archival omission and exclusion has been at the root of gay and lesbian invisibility in historical record.

The Task Force on Gay Liberation (TFGL) of the American Library Association was the first openly gay and lesbian group established as part of a professional organization. Israel Fishman and Janet Cooper began the TFGL with others in 1970 with Fishman acting as head. In 1971 Barbara Gittings assumed leadership of the group, a role she continued until 1986. With Gittings' leadership, the TFGL initiated a series of gay and lesbian bibliographies, protested discrimination against gay and lesbian library employees, produced gay/lesbian conference

programming, and established the Gay Book Award which became an 'official' ALA award in 1986. One of the boldest activities of the early TFGL was the "Hug-A-Homosexual" kissing booth at the 1971 Dallas ALA conference. With photographers, TV crews, and gawking colleagues present, the stunt successfully generated the visibility sought by the fledgling TFGL. Sadly, many published accounts of political activism in librarianship during the 1970s and 1980s failed to feature or even mention the activities of the ALA's Task Force on Gay Liberation.

In 1990, the Gay and Lesbian Task Force (successor to TFGL) continues to sponsor conference programming, political activism, and social events. GLTF members marched as a contingent in New York (1986), San Francisco (1987), and Chicago (1990) Gay/Lesbian Pride celebrations, since ALA annual conferences often coincided with June-July commemorations of the 1969 Stonewall Riots. In 1990, the GLTF began to pressure mainstream indexing companies such as Wilson, Information Access, and Gale to include lesbian and gay press titles in their periodical indexes, in order to expand gay and lesbian press indexing beyond *The Alternative Press Index*. The GLTF network served well through the 1970s and into the 1990s as a forum for support and strategy for confronting heterosexism in the library world.

In response to the shortage of gay and lesbian material in print and in libraries, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed the tremendous

growth of gay and lesbian publishing, collecting, and bookselling. An increasing popularity during the 1980s of gay and lesbian academic studies sparked the beginnings of gay and lesbian collections in most college, university, and public libraries. Mainstream publishers began to list more gay authors in the late 1980s, and the mainstream press reviewed their titles more frequently.

Still, a large portion of gay and most all lesbian publishing was accomplished through small, independent presses. These titles were reviewed and publicized often exclusively in the gay/lesbian and feminist press. Grassroots presses emerging in the 1970s and 1980s included the lesbian/feminist Kitchen Table, Aunte Lute, Firebrand, Seal, Cleis, Crossing, and Naiad, and the gay/lesbian Alyson, Banned Books, Serpent's Tail, Knights Press, Gay Sunshine, Grey Fox, City Lights, and Gay Men's Press. Similarly, many lesbian musicians were recorded by community-based companies like Redwood and Olivia. But librarians and book jobbers failed to recognize that gay and lesbian authors and artists frequently have preferred to publish with community presses for political reasons. Consequently, many core gay and lesbian library titles were listed with so-called 'fringe' publishers. Too often biases against small publishers prevented libraries from building adequate gay and lesbian collections.

In addition to the growth of grassroots publishing, the 1970s and

1980s witnessed the beginnings of many community-based gay and lesbian archives. Archives and lesbian/gay history projects were formed in the United States, Canada, Mexico, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain, Germany, Ireland, England, The Netherlands, Norway, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Belgium, Switzerland, and France in response to growing international awareness about gay and lesbian historical invisibility promoted by mainstream institutions. Most gay and lesbian archives were financed almost entirely by gay and lesbian communities; many resided in curators' private homes. Their budgets were modest, and conditions for access and preservation challenging. They were a frequent target of vandalism. Some of the better known North American collections include the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City, the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California in San Francisco, the International Gay & Lesbian Archives and the June L. Mazer Lesbian Collection in Los Angeles, and the Canadian Gay Archives in Toronto.

During the 1960s, collections of The Kinsey Institute for Sex Research were made available to qualified researchers. Housed on the Indiana University campus in Bloomington, it developed into the largest collection devoted to human sexuality. During the 1980s, mainstream academic institutions began to curate important Gay and Lesbian collections of community supported grassroots archives. The New York Public Library acquired the International Gay Information Center collection in 1988 after it folded as a

community archive. In that same year, Cornell University established its Collection on Human Sexuality which includes the culture of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals as a focus. Some feared these mainstream archival efforts would jeopardize or compromise the grassroots projects; others suggest the mainstream would compliment, if not appropriate, the work done by community groups. During the late 1980s, women's, leftist, and other specialized archives began seeking collections of gay and lesbian leaders and organizations with greater frequency. Still, in the 1990s, important archival material about gay and lesbian lives remained largely unrecognized, unacclaimed, and unsolicited.

In recent times, lesbian and gay patrons have been threatened with exposure and criminal punishment for frequenting mainstream libraries. For example, in what *Gay Community News* later called "the most blatant assault upon the rights of the gay community by the Boston Police Department during the last two decades," 105 men were arrested for "cruising" (sexual solicitation) inside the Boston Public Library during two weeks in March of 1978. Faced by demonstrators and civil suits charging police with entrapment, the Boston Municipal Court found only one defendant guilty of prostitution, and later overturned this conviction on appeal. "It got to the point," a librarian said about a midwestern public library's mid-1970s men's room scrutiny, "that if you were pee-shy, you couldn't!"

"Problem patron" literature has provided a most tangible example of homophobia and heterosexism in modern librarianship. Edward Delph, in *The Library Disaster Preparedness Handbook* published by the ALA in 1986, recommended that librarians "use the occasion of detecting persons in overt homosexual activity to spread the word about the library's hostility to this abuse of the facility. This is done through a humiliating interrogation and browbeating in a formal setting, like a security office. The interrogation is traumatic, purposefully, but tempered with kindness... The process is intended to get the word out to the homosexual community that the library is determined to deny them the use and abuse of the building for assignations and casual homosexual liaisons."

This literature often classed gay men and transvestites with "child molesters," "flashers," and other "sex offenders" as prima facie "undesirables" the library would best be rid of in the interest of public good. Though gay cruising certainly became a feature of the library scene, heterosexual cruising still predominated in libraries as in the rest of public places. Library literature never disparaged consenting heterosexuals who brazenly cruised each other in the reference room or who sneaked off for a tryst in a study carrel. Also, while heterosexual courtship was celebrated in the library press and wherever librarians are found in the popular media, gays and lesbians were stigmatized, ignored, down-played and even prosecuted in the

library world.

over the decades, few other professions agonized over an "image problem" as steadily as librarians. To be sure, the public has misunderstood the services librarians perform. As members of a "women's profession," the image of librarians has been marred by sexism and encumbered by popular stereotypes suggesting librarians are unattractive, unmarried, and mean. The "old maid," "spinster" librarian image was intended to deride particularly middle and upper class lesbians who populated the profession as it emerged in the United States as one of the few employment options open to unmarried women. Male librarians, on the other hand, were stereotyped with attributes of femininity and passivity insinuating the "effete fag." Librarians' overwrought professional sensitivity to stereotype emanated not only from concerns about sexism, but also from a largely unacknowledged, phobic aversion to being labeled "queer."

The history of gays and lesbians in librarianship, like the histories of gays and lesbians everywhere, has been a hidden one. Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt's *Gay and Lesbian Library Service*, published in 1990, was the first book to focus exclusively on this topic. Aside from Barbara Gittings' *Gays in Library Land* (1990) no chapter or book-length work, has been published on the history of gays and lesbians in librarianship as of this writing. Primary sources on this aspect of library history have been

virtually non-existent. Because of pervasive stigma and discrimination, most gay and lesbian librarians in the United States remained in the closet in 1990. In many countries, gays and lesbians have been incarcerated, even executed, if their identities are discovered. Until gays and lesbians cease to be ignored and condemned, gay and lesbian library history will remain largely unknown.

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