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Being a Lesbian Librarian, Collection Development in Lesbian Librarianship, and Archives as Lesbian Spaces

Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz
CUNY Graduate Center

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Pratt SILS Gender LIS Panel curated by Dinah Handel on March 27th, 2015¹

Co-presenters: Sian Evans; #artandfeminism Wikipedia Editathon & Jen LaBarbera; Filling in the Margins: The use of Queer Theory, Feminist Standpoint Theory, and Critical Race Theory to build inclusive archival collections

Below is a condensed and edited Transcript of Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz remarks

Being a Lesbian Librarian, Collection Development in Lesbian Librarianship, and Archives as Lesbian Spaces.

Transcript begins here:

Thank you so much for having me on this panel.

So, what I'd like to share is something of a Narrative Essay. This form, I place somewhere within Narrative Theory and Oral history. The former is "concerned with the analysis of narrative discourse and narrativity in order to explain the many forms and structures of storytelling and their implications."² The latter, if approached in a framework of queer history, I'd like to quote Nan Alamilla Boyd in her 2008 essay: "Who is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History." Boyd says,

The use of oral history methods stems back to the [tiny subfield of U.S. gay, lesbian, and queer] social history moorings, where historians of the dispossessed found themselves lacking print sources and turned to live historical actors for information about the recent past... Feminist researchers try to empower (rather than exploit) historical narrators by trusting their voices, positioning narrators as historical experts, and interpreting narrators' voices alongside the narrators'

¹ An earlier version of this talk was archived by Dinah Handel on the Pratt SILS blog including an audio file of the entire panel and co-presenter slides and can be viewed here: <http://silssa.prattsi.org/2015/04/> .

² Suresh Raval, "Recent Books on Narrative Theory: An Essay-Review," MFS Modern Fiction Studies 3, no. 3 (1987): 559–570.

interpretations of their own memories.³ Many gay, lesbian, and queer historians have followed suit.³

I will follow suit as well, by offering here a brief narrative, a storytelling. And since we are being recorded, an oral history – I as queer subject.

And so I begin here:

I'm long winded. When my mother would urge me to get to the point, she'd say, "Shawnie, spit it out: Get to The HOW, The WHAT, and the WHERE. So that's what I'll do here:

- The **How**: Being a Lesbian Librarian
- The **What**: My experience in Collection Development in Lesbian Librarianship
- and The **Where**: Archives as Lesbian Spaces

The How: Being a Lesbian Librarian

Reference

My first positions as a librarian were reference positions at the Brooklyn Public Library in the young adult section of the main branch, at Bronx Community College, and at Pratt Institute Libraries, Brooklyn campus. Eight years post-graduation, I still feel relatively new, and still conduct reference at the Graduate Center in chat, one-on-one, phone, and of course at the reference desk. And what does Being a Lesbian Librarian matter at the reference desk? – Well, I'm going to read an excerpt from a book chapter I wrote six years ago, titled, "Patricia's Child, Patrick's Penis, and the Heterosexual Sex of Reference: A Lesbian Librarian's Log of Perverse Patronage." This was published in a collection titled, *Out Behind the Desk: Workplace Issues for LGBTQ Librarians*, which was number one in the series Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies, the series, edited by Emily Drabinski.

³ Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Who Is the Subject?: Queer Theory Meets Oral History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (2008): 177–189, doi:10.1353/sex.0.0009.

[read excerpt of "Patricia's Child, Patrick's Penis"]

My Introduction to Library Science professor, discussed the role of gender in the library profession. When Professor Lawton lectured, he made reference to prevalent disparities such as 85% of the profession being women, and a contrasting 85% of the management as men. In varying ways, he instilled one prevailing statement: "What they don't (can't) teach you in library school is that "identity matters." As a result, who you are in the world will be who you are at the reference desk. The reference desk does not erase your gender or your race or your sexual orientation. Granted a glimpse of what they won't tell us in Library School in my introductory course, was indeed the fuel for my documentation of negative experiences to follow. I never bothered to crosscheck this comparison of gender disparity, but instead, grew intrigued by the application of an analysis of gender in the library science field. Suddenly, I wondered if I chose the profession because it was indeed a woman's space. In that class, I decided that this distortion was yet another attribute to the profession

I had become a librarian in order to have majority women colleagues. Entry into management was something I would consider later.

As with most weekdays, my reference shift closed the library. Patrick came in that following week during the late hour. I was renewed and confident until he rubbed his body close to where my hand was resting. On the opposite side of the desk he peered forward. His movements were exaggerated. I was cautious because this was our first encounter following my coming out to him. In a low voice that I have still been unable to retract from my memory, he said, "My

dick is so hard, would you like to rub it?" I stood up. I looked Patrick in the eye, and I said, without hesitation, "NO!" This was followed by clear instructions, as I had rehearsed days before. "No. I do not. You make me uncomfortable. You make me feel as if I cannot come to work. Because of you, I feel as if I am in an unsafe work environment. Do not approach this desk with that mess. If I have to say it again, I will call security, and have you expelled from this library. Do you understand?"

Patrick's eyes began to water. He removed his hat. And walked away. The following day, Patrick came in and apologized. Exclaiming that he had no idea of my discomfort, he assured me that I would not have to worry about him any longer. I smiled, thanked him for his honesty, and returned to my work.

How 'Good' Lesbian Librarians get Fucked

I'd like to say that Patrick was my last encounter of sexual harassment while being out at the desk. But instead, I've had plenty more; Patrick was the first of many. Since this encounter, however, I have given considerable thought to my own behaviors and more broadly, the social architecture of the reference desk. – Why is it that so often patrons engage in various forms of sexual communication at the desk? Furthermore, not all of our sexual communication at the desk is harassing. I often wonder how things would have been different if "Patrick" was "Patricia."

If an attractive woman came to the desk to talk about life and relationships, would I have treated her differently, or if I were a straight woman, how would I have received Patrick upon his initial approach so to not allow it to become perverted?

A few things were at play here.

I published this chapter with Library Juice Press in 2010/11 and then, still identified as a lesbian separatist. To my definition, keeping myself separate from men, I realized my error in interacting with Patrick was that I did not interact with him as a feminist would. Instead of equal treatment, he was a person envisioned through my eyes of separatism: a tool, a less-than, an alien species of male-bodied human, a birth defect. As I saw it then, since his being born male, was out of his control, it was my job to tolerate his behavior as a cultural citizen. It was in the sexual harassment workshop, facilitated by men of color who were once accused of harassment that I understood my placation as misinformation. Even then, saying “NO” to Patrick felt akin to ordering a dog to sit, a training moment, and less of a feminist peer-driven conversation of information exchange. A feminist approach at the reference desk sees equality in gender. That gender is not a prerequisite for bad behavior. And moreso that all genders should be equally reprimanded for bad behavior. The chapter goes on to outline a similar experience with “Patricia” who flirts to a level of inappropriate behavior at the public library and instead of feeling offended, my feeling absolutely flattered.

I end the chapter with a call to action, for the Reference User Services Association (RUSA) rules to include a conversation on gender when outlining rules of reference service.

I’ll stop there and move to the next point of librarianship – the WHAT.

The WHAT – My Experiences with Collection Management

My lesbianism isn’t just a sexual orientation, it is actually a [constructed] political identity. My undergraduate degree was in an interdisciplinary program called the CUNY Baccalaureate Program where my degree in Queer Women’s Studies led me to work with leading institutions in NYC, namely, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the

Graduate Center, CUNY. I also had hands-on experiential work with non-profits throughout NYC. Much of this was also due to my access to on-the-ground activism prior to college, as a co-founder of Sister Outsider, a non-profit for and by self-supporting young women in Brooklyn, and cofounding member of FIERCE, an LGBTQI youth activist organization that is still standing. The goal being to denote that although my experiences with these many groups were because my passion for queerness was embedded in a deep-personal longing and love for community, one does not have to be attracted to women to be a “lesbian librarian.”

Harboring the knowledge of lesbian feminism, lesbian separatism, and lesbian herstory in general is more impacting than simply having a girlfriend and wearing androgynous clothes. Ultimately, all lesbians, by sexual orientation alone, may not be equipped to be librarians with a lesbian subject specialty, or “lesbian librarians.”

And if you are not a lesbian, you can still have lesbian subject specialty, so let’s all be lesbian librarians together!

Academic libraries often request that librarians become liaisons to departments on campus. As an LGBT Studies liaison (an interdisciplinary subject without an actual department), I end up meeting with students and professors of varying fields. In Proquest, if you conduct a dissertation search using search terms “queer” OR “lesbian” OR LGBT, you find that there are thousands. A search in a database for theses and dissertations will often result in thousands of dissertations with lesbian, queer, LGBT in the title. The number doubles if you do an Abstract search.

And the subject list spans across all fields.

This means assisting students and faculty in LGBT focused research requires a knowledge of LGBT subject herstories, the development of the field, and their implications across genres. Being a lesbian librarian is being a kind of subject specific generalist.

So that means if a student is studying, American writers, then I could refer this student to the usual suspects, and I'm sure we can all name them: Joyce Carol Oats, Sylvia Plath, Harriet Beecher Stowe, but it takes a directed eye, one that incorporates queer theoretical frameworks, to reconsider the canon and offer a list of white women writers: Sarah Orne Jewett, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, then you add race and sexual orientation to the mix, and, say if we consider black lesbian writers, you can break it down to what I term as always:

the usuals - Barbara Smith, Audre Lorde, Cheryl Clarke

their contemporaries – Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Farah Tanis, Cheryl Dunye,

the archival – Grimke, Hansberry, Salsa Soul Sisters, Georgia Brooks,

and I could go on with Black Lesbians, because they are my subject specialty, but I digress.

One benefit that I have in bridging the gaps in scholarship by shifting the canon is due to a funding opportunity at the Graduate Center. The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies has a donor who has requested that CLAGS administer funds for a queer library collection. For over a decade, the library receives annual residual funds from an endowment for the sole purpose of purchasing LGBT-related materials. The budget for this fund far exceeds, in some cases ten times over, the book-buying budgets for other departments. If you walk through the GC stacks, you may notice an overburdening collection of narrativity from queer perspectives. Fortunately, the field is publishing at a rate that will support this endeavor. I'll end with the final point of Archives as Lesbian Spaces — the WHERE.

The WHERE: Archives as Lesbian – Librarian Spaces

In May 2008, as I was approaching graduation from library school, I was also a participant at the 2nd annual GLBT ALMS Conference, which is an international conference for LGBT Archives, Libraries, Museums and Special Libraries. There was another in 2012 in Amsterdam, and as excitement brewed, I found myself in conversation with the Stonewall

Museum in 2013 where they were considering the upcoming conference there, as they stated, “on the beach.” Maybe it will still happen there?⁴

I mention this to define LGBT scholarship as one that is being developed with a large focus on oral histories and archival research.

[Go to GLBT ALMS at CLAGS Website from the Wayback Machine]

Bringing my particular narrative back to Nan Alamilla Boyd, who writes on Oral History, much of the new scholarship in queer studies is from primary sourced materials. Archives are the not-so secret-secret cornerstone to the field of LGBT or Queer studies. For this talk I went to the GLBT ALMS website that took place at the Graduate Center. My talk was on “Archiving and the Politics of Identity” for which I created a video of lesbians who chose to document their lives at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. The two day conference included zines, practical applications, and international launch parties; there were even two separate panels on LGBT Taxonomies.

That was seven years ago. I remember my co-presenter being a PhD student, discussing her archival research on indigenous women in Nicaragua.

When I look her up now, [**Google Search** Emily Hobson] it was lovely to see she is now an Assistant Professor, completing her first book on the Gay and Lesbian Left. To no surprise, she states, “This book draws on oral histories and archival research and examines gay and lesbian radicalism....”

Queer/LGBT history exists, because the materials are being published. I see the librarian’s role as a critical role to making these works accessible, specifically to scholars unsure of where to anchor their arguments in the stages of thesis and dissertation writing on LGBT Subjects. Our current scholars are future authors. First, we have to know the ins and outs of this

⁴ Interestingly, although I could not have known it then, the next ALMS conference ends up being in June 2016 in London and I am one of its keynote speakers. Learn more about the ALMS conference and my talk “One Librarian, Many Communities: Access and Practice On Documenting Black Lesbians of New York City,” here: lgbtqalms.co.uk/2016/03/23/keynote-shawnta-smith-cruz/

history, by doing some investigation of your own. I recommend the Lesbian Studies Course at the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

[Read course description of Lesbian Studies Course]

In this course, open to all, we will consider Lesbian identities at the intersection of culture, race/ethnicity and class in both historical and contemporary context. We will study strategies of survival and self-expression and consider issues such as Lesbian and Queer genders, Lesbian Liberation Movements, Lesbian/Feminist/ Queer theorizing and representation in popular culture. We will examine literature, personal testimonies, historical documents, auto/biography, and the visual arts. Participants will be able to draw on collections such as the Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich papers housed at the Archives, as well as visual resources including personal photo albums spanning the twentieth century, images from the First Lesbian Art Show, and an unsurpassed collection of films and videos.

Taught by Flavia Rando, one of my trusted advisors, my undergraduate instructor, and now, very good friend with who I have co-published two articles both on the challenges and adventures of lesbian archiving.

Thank You!

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