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2015

### Tape-by-Tape: Digital Practices and Cataloguing Rituals at the Lesbian Herstory Archives

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Digital Practices and Cataloguing Rituals  
at the Lesbian Herstory Archives  
Shawn(ta) D. Smith

## Tape-by-Tape:

## Digital Practices and Cataloguing Rituals at the Lesbian Herstory Archives

The Lesbian Herstory Archives,(LHA) is a home for the many faces, lives, and experiences that encompass lesbian herstory. Physically, it is based in an historic limestone building in Brooklyn, New York and owned by the Lesbian community. Contextually, LHA contains the images, writings, thoughts, wishes, and voices of Lesbians from around the world. Women and men visit the Archives to see lesbian scrapbooks, magazines, photo albums, T-shirts, published articles, compiled biographies, community organizations, conference-worn buttons, favorite books, diaries, love letters, calendars, art and deeply loved ephemeral material. Students and researchers of varying disciplines utilize the Archives as a necessary source in their work. Tour-seeking out of towners, neighbors wanting a quiet place to read, interns developing projects, and newly realized lesbians also become dedicated users of the Archives. Users will sometimes become volunteers. Through consistent volunteer participation from lesbian communities, and an uncompromising grassroots approach, the structure and heritage of the Lesbian Herstory Archives has developed a useable formula for archiving lesbian life.

This essay will outline the digital collections of the Lesbian Herstory Archives with an emphasis on process and workflow. The paragraphs below will describe the efforts put forth by the all-volunteer collective, and their dedication toward making materials accessible through the use of digital technology to preserve, catalog, and exhibit lesbian herstory. Interviews with Archive Coordinators, called “Archivettes”, Rachel Corbman on the Online Public Access Catalog, Saskia Scheffer on Photos, and Maxine Wolfe on Audio, will provide examples of LHA digital practices in the creation and maintenance of the Photo Collection, OPAC, and Audio Tape Digitization projects. Additional mention will include the Newsletter Digitization, Periodical Digitization, and the Subject File Digitization projects. Collaboration between LHA volunteers and outside institutions will prove successful for each of these projects. The complex relationship of money to digital initiatives will be examined. These overviews will provide insight as to how digital collections are created and considered at the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

**Origin**

In the mid-1950s, the Daughters of Bilitis was the first lesbian organization of its kind to question how lesbians could exist within heteronormative society. They attempted to create spaces outside of bar culture. Although lesbian activists, lesbian playwrights, lesbian authors, and lesbian families always existed, the initiation of lesbian spaces forged community organizing that gave lesbians a new path for answering that ephemeral question, how do we exist? The Daughters of Bilitis constructed a tangible response to the criminalization of homosexuality. While formal organizing did not stop the bar raids, the imprisonment, or deaths of lesbians across the nation, twenty years after the founding of this organization and its many chapters around the country, lesbians gained increased visibility. During the 1970s, radical lesbian

feminists, some separatist, created modern herstory by establishing small presses, music festivals, conferences, campus organizing, bookstores, barter exchanges, rallies and post free-love health consciousness-raising groups. Lesbians realized that this herstory had great cultural significance, and needed to be canonized, documented, and preserved.

In 1972 an alliance of activists, academics, and scholars affiliated with the City University of New York established the Gay Academic Union (GAU). GAU, had a mission to represent the concerns of gay and lesbian students, teachers, and workers. Following the trend in organizing during the 1970s, the women of GAU felt the need to create separate spaces to address the concerns of women. Their consciousness-raising groups were the breeding grounds for discussion points that have become the mission of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. One GAU subgroup group, for example, included Joan Nestle and Julia Stanley who each believed that herstories were often documented through a patriarchal lens. This particular group felt strongly that lesbian culture ought to be gathered and preserved by lesbians themselves. Later that year, Deborah Edel, Sahli Cavallo, and Pamela Oline joined the group and together the women developed a new concept of beginning a grassroots lesbian archive.

In 1975, Joan Nestle's apartment in the Upper West Side of Manhattan served as the first home of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. In that same year, LHA published its first free newsletter. For fifteen years, lesbians and some allies collected what was named lesbian herstory. Women from across the United States began donating the entirety of their lives, from their love letters to protest-worn sneakers. They began to archive --created accession forms, filed materials in acid-free boxes, and generated card catalogs. LHA eventually grew too large for the living room and bookcases of the Upper West Side apartment.

LHA moved to Brooklyn in June 1993. With money raised from house party fundraisers and small individual donations solicited by word of mouth, the Lesbian community purchased an entire \$300,000 four-story, turn-of-the-20th-century limestone townhouse in Park Slope, overlooking Prospect Park. On the day of the building's unveiling, a Lesbian marching band paraded along 14th Street, women sang dyke songs, and long-time Archivette Paula Grant won the raffle to cut the ribbon. Both monetary and collection-based donations continued to pour in. Herstory quickly filled the walls.

The physical space of the building holds a strong place in lesbian herstory. While it houses the materials of the collection, the her and her sinks on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor also exhibit lesbian memorabilia like denim jackets, buttons, dildos, and hand-crafted pillows, all which exemplify the dynamic artifacts that encompass what lesbians choose to donate. As not only an archive with a library and ephemeral exhibitions, but also as a community space, LHA continues to host various special events in order to encourage the use of materials. With the new building purchase, just as LHA was once inside the home of a lesbian, it is also home to a lesbian. A caretaker lives on the top floor of the archive, and forever walks around with a check-off list, carefully monitoring every transaction and delivery, always on premises to oversee the collection.

## LHA Principles

An introduction to the principles of LHA is necessary toward an understanding of LHA online. The founders alongside the lesbian community, made a life-long commitment to ensure the longevity of the materials specifically, and lesbian herstory and culture more generally. It was clear that LHA had to exist beyond a single generation. A statement of purpose and a set of principles to guide the development and preservation of the collection were created. These principles lead all existing and future projects, including the development and expansion of online access to LHA materials.

When created, the LHA statement of purpose was simple: To collect all and any materials relevant to the lives and experiences of lesbians. These materials included books, magazines, journals, news clippings (from establishment, feminist, or lesbian media), bibliographies, photos, historical information, tapes, films, diaries, oral histories, poetry and prose, biographies, autobiographies, notices of events, posters, graphics and other memorabilia.

The principles below are written verbatim, as derived from the many collectively run meetings since the initiation of LHA in 1974. Many of the principles are based less on standard archival practice and instead are focused the LHA commitment to living and nurturing lesbian herstory, to housing the past along with the present. The basic principles guiding LHA are:

- All Lesbian women must have access to the Archives; no academic, political, or sexual credentials will be required for use of the collection; race and class must be no barrier for use or inclusion.
- The Archives shall be housed within the community, not on an academic campus that is by definition closed to many women.
- The Archives shall be involved in the political struggles of all Lesbians.
- Archival skills shall be taught, one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives.
- The community should share in the work of the Archives.
- Funding shall be sought from within the communities the Archives serves, rather than from outside sources.
- The Archives will always have a caretaker living in it so that it will always be someone's home rather than an institution.
- The Archives will never be sold nor will its contents be divided.

(“History,” 2013)

All online access possibilities, as with additional LHA projects, consider the guiding principles first, before other modes of operation, including but not limited to archival principles or principles of queer theory. A collection housed onsite means that there is limited access for all lesbians to experience the materials. Addressing barriers of access to all lesbians make an online presence consistent with herstorical LHA practice. Ensuring that the LHA collection is sustained

as a community-owned archive, while continuing to extend its access to additional communities is a new consideration for LHA online.

### **Community-Owned Archiving**

There are multiple ways that lesbians-as-community represent the process of archiving. In order to organize the constant flow of new material, LHA utilizes the guiding principle that the community should share in the work of the Archives. Materials that are donated then archived are solely those that are representative of lesbian life. This means that a book in the LHA library may not be by a lesbian author, inasmuch as it means a lesbian donated it. The buttons are not made by lesbians, but worn by them. Although some formatted materials are lesbian-created, the majority of the collection is relational to the narratives that accompany the object.

Who is constituted as a lesbian, however, is somewhat fluid and changes with time. Lesbians define themselves, and that remains at the heart of the Archives. The multiple lesbian communities that are represented at LHA are inclusive of those who self-identify as lesbians, or have at one point in their lives chosen to donate as a lesbian. In addition, these same communities are sought to maintain the collection, supply labor and keep the collection growing and thriving. Lesbians are (primarily) the ones who donate the materials and the ones who archive the materials. An example of how this works is in our Subject Files, one of many collections. Subject files are classified as "Lesbians and ..." The ... in that equation may be Lesbians and Sports, Lesbians and Catholicism, Lesbians and Folklore, Lesbians and Bookstores, Lesbians and the 1950s, Lesbians and Fashion, the list goes on. With over fifteen hundred subject files, these files represent the diversity in the lesbian community, strategically catalogued by how the community views itself. Because lesbian communities are various, however, LHA acknowledges that donations and hard work have been provided by those who do not (or no longer) identify as lesbians, but stand as committed allies, with a collective aim to maintain the LHA guiding principles.

### **Lesbians –As-Community and Access**

The women who donate their lives to the Lesbian Herstory Archives are a part of an active, living culture. When considering that lesbian communities are relational to the entire world, access to the collection, then, must be accessible to all. Still, restrictions do exist. While some donors wish to be cited and wholly discoverable, others request anonymity; some may even choose to be closed to certain groups. LHA calls these collections that are acquired and named for their donors as 'Special Collections'. All Special Collections have access clauses upon the request of the donor, such as "Do not open until I die or the year 2012, whichever comes later," or "To be viewed by lesbians only," as another example. LHA respects the wishes of donors by making an effort to consider their needs before adhering to any open access policy.

This question of access and permissions is one that affects all Archival collections. Yet in the case where a collection of interest does not have noted restrictions, hands-on access is granted.

Where most institutional archives have access policies that restrict users based on institutional affiliation, or accreditations, the Archives asks only that one displays interest in lesbian research. There is no way to predict anyone's personal identity at the door or via correspondence. Nor are people asked to "come out" before viewing materials. As long as one is a lesbian, is a part of the lesbian communities, or at best, expresses interest in lesbian research, he or she is welcome to access the LHA collection.

### **Gathering Materials**

The first line of the statement of purpose is, "The Lesbian Herstory Archives exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities so that future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives" ("History," 2013). To "gather" records of lesbian lives led to an open accession policy where the only criterion for receiving materials was that the donor ought to be lesbian, ought to have lesbian material to donate, or represent lesbianism in some form as it relates to evolving and herstoric definitions of lesbian communities. This collection of lesbian memorabilia from anyone who was a lesbian, including those who were not seen as famous, meant that any limitation of a concept of lesbian herstory was wholly subjective. Women sent emblems of their first kiss, documentations of their lives as partners with women, secrets that lived only in dark corners of their homes, testimonials of pride, and collective organizing tools like logos and catch-phrases that summoned lesbians across their town or the nation. This open gathering of materials was exciting, without boundaries, yet sealed with deep intention and consideration, as the call was to signify, a previously non-existent, definition of lesbian herstory.

Gathering of materials continues. Integral to the LHA mission, donations are still accepted. In multiple coordinator meetings, where Archivettes assemble quarterly to discuss LHA business, gathering materials has been placed on the agenda. The Archivettes currently question whether LHA should continue to accept materials. Should LHA announce itself as a collection of materials donated from 1974 to some chosen end date? Should a cap be placed on materials already owned by LHA? Although these conversations continue, LHA has not instituted an end to accepting donations. The only restriction on acquisitions has been for certain object types such as newsprint or large-scale visual art collections, whose format was difficult to preserve. Refusal of material is based on one of three factors: content, space limitations, and LHA capacity to preserve.

Gathering and preservation are key components to LHA's mission. This commitment to gathering and preservation is significant to the practice of housing digital collections. As time passes and the collection grows, more formats for archiving lesbian herstory appear. Now materials arrive as "born digital": photographs as jpegs on CDs, videos on DVD, or oral histories in MP3 and WAV files, to name a few common variations. In general, born digital materials are often grouped with materials digitally reformatted for preservation purposes. For example, films on DVD will be added to the VHS collection. As listed in the first line of the LHA statement of purpose, preservation is the focal point for digital practice: "...the Lesbian Herstory Archives exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities..." ("History," 2013) After

gathering and preserving, the final step is providing access. Digitization and the use of online exhibition platforms, databases, content management systems, and social networking sites are explored at LHA for access to the physical building space, as well as materials in the collection.

### **LHA Today**

Currently the Lesbian Herstory Archives contains over 420 Special Collections containing the papers of individuals and organizations. Researchers and visitors often come with knowledge of the Special Collections, but they also use over 11,000 books, 800 periodical titles (including journals and newspapers), 3000 oral history cassettes, 1,000 video tapes and DVDs, 12,000 photographs, 1,100 Tee Shirts, a large collection of graphics and music, as well as 1,500 organizational files, 2,000 unpublished papers (including creative writing, speeches, letters, short stories, and poetry), 1,500 subject files (“lesbians and...”), 500 geographic files (“lesbians in...”), plus a large collection of ephemera coined as “lesbiana” (buttons, board games, banners, datebooks, and other material types). As a result of the multitude of materials that exist at LHA, the dynamic position the collection holds in the oral tradition of lesbian herstory, each artifact representing an anecdotal lesbian experience, the creation on metadata and presence of digital collections aids in the real task of providing access to materials onsite and throughout the world.

### **The Photo Collection**

On the 1<sup>st</sup> floor of LHA past the front parlor, is the main workroom. A rectangular, resizable, wooden table, flanked by six high-backed chairs, stands in the center of the workroom. On one side sits the main computer. To the right of the table stands a large filing cabinet that houses the photo collection, organized in acid free folders. A walk-in closet beside the photo cabinet rests personal photo albums, large collections of photographers’ original art, and film from past slide shows rest in their containers. Most researchers view the photos in this room, spreading them out on the large work table.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives is now starting to digitize its photo collection. It reflects the growth of the Archives since 1974. From the Photo section of the LHA website Digital collections page, “much of the materials came to [LHA] from women who simply wanted their images saved and their lives remembered” (“Digital Collections”, 2013). This is true for much of the materials of the Archives’ collection. Aside from the single purchased acquisition of the Red Dot Collection, acquired from the New York Chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis, all other of LHA collections are donated, including the photographs. LHA holds snapshots, professional photography, photo albums, found images and everything in between. The Photo Collection sits separate as a formatted collection. Photos from Special Collections are added to the photo collection for ease of access and storage with a cross reference to the provenance.

Whether for the purpose of having a visual memento of their visit to LHA, or to provide herstorical proof of lesbian existence in an academic paper, users of the photo collection must gain permission to make a reproduction. Unlike newspaper clippings and writings, however,

LHA staff cannot make immediate reproductions of photographs. In special circumstances, LHA Archivettes will allow the visitor to make a black and white photocopy, but not a professional reproduction usable for publication. Inquiries to publish images from LHA photo collections, or for quality reproductions, are forwarded to Saskia Scheffer, an Archivette who has taken personal responsibility for processing photos.

Saskia Scheffer also happens to be Head of Digital Conversion and Photographic Services Unit at The New York Public Library. She has been the designated Archivette or Coordinator for this collection for over five years. Due to the increased interest in photos expressed by artists, genealogists, students, and anyone else interested in an image to reproduce and publish digitally, Saskia created a new email address specifically for photo inquiries. The email address [imageslha@gmail.com](mailto:imageslha@gmail.com) is another example for how correspondence as well as material formats have turned to a digital realm (LHA has only had a public email address since April 2011; before then all inquiries were moderated by phone, snail mail, and fax). Saskia agreed to discuss the herstory of the Photo collection and the digitization of photographs for this essay.

### **Saskia Scheffer with Shawn(ta) Smith on the Photo Collection**

*Saskia, what made you decide to work with the photos at LHA?*

I have been involved here for a long time. I am a photographer, and my job was in photography, so it happened almost automatically that I started to work with the photo collection. The plan to start digitizing a select part and offer access on-line came later, when another job gave me some insight on what would be possible. However, that other job, at the NYPL, had the support of major resources and a custom built infrastructure, things that are not available at the Archives yet.

*LHA has hundreds if not thousands of photographs, could you briefly describe the digital photo collection at LHA.*

So far we have about 400 images available on line. They are in the form of jpg's, meaning that you get a thumbnail image which you can enlarge up to a certain size for better viewing. They have some metadata with them, bibliographic info, to indicate what they are and where they came from. The underlying software is ContentDM and the site is hosted by Metropolitan New York Library Council (Metro). We have a link to that collection via our homepage:

<http://cdm16124.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p274401coll1>

*What was the process for choosing CONTENTdm?*

Years ago, a grant was provided by the Spark Plug foundation, and at first, we didn't know what to do with the funds. The collective agreed on applying it to online access of our photos. We picked CONTENTdm because it was recommended by people we trust,

and it was offered through OCLC, an organization that is respected in the field. The interface has the combination of viewer ease and access to metadata. Generally, coordinators wanted to work with a company that could help troubleshoot issues when they came up. There was a bit of a learning curve, and financially it is best to be associated with an organization that can do the hosting, since that part of it is very expensive to do independently.

It took a long time to put the images up. It was a steep learning curve. I'd average that it takes about 1/2 hour per image to do. This includes the time to collect the background information on the image including donor information, collection it belongs to, what it is, what the rights are, the tags or key words, the actual scanning and then to upload them onto the server.

*I know we had a recent intern, Corinne Klee, but what was the workflow like for the beginning of this project?*

I learned a lot since taking on this project. The first two volunteers to help, Ellen Eisenman and Cecelia Martin, started the scanning and did quite a few images. I started a metadata system and if I were to do it over, I would do the metadata first and then scan. That way you can keep much better track of what you have, and the use of tags and keywords will let you associate images with other images. Our photo collection had no real finding aid, which soon became a problem. Some of that first scanning work is online, some of it is still waiting for inclusion. Issues such as copyright were not resolved, information was lacking. We were not aware of this when we started. And the collection needed physical care as well. The next intern, Jabu Pereira, started that work, meticulously going through the folders, putting the photos in sleeves, creating a level of protective organization. And most recently Corinne Klee, another intern completed the photo sleeve process after which she worked on the actual finding aid, describing images and bringing all available information into a spreadsheet.

Many images have very limited information. In the early years of the archives we collected, put photos in folders, and had no system to include the 'who' and 'what' of every picture. Gathering what is there takes enormous focus and a concentrated amount of time. But by doing so the collection will be protected and accessible in a different way for browsing, with less risk for damage. This entire process of digitization is about preservation as well. If everything is online, you can bypass the browsing of the many original photos. We can also send people images without them having to come into the Archives. Viewing images can be made much easier this way.

*What is the process for choosing which photos are digitized, once the collection is organized and tagged?*

The 400 already digitized were based on a couple of things such as requests for certain images. Fulfilling such requests gave us an idea of what was interesting to the

community. And we try to select informative images, or material that is not readily available elsewhere. Also photos that gave us sufficient information, enough that we could give it keywords or tags and make them discoverable were prioritized. Our photos come from all kinds of sources. From Polaroids to the 4 x 5 Brownie snapshots to the 8 x 10 professional prints, and everything in between.

*Tell me how you prepare the images.*

Some of the older material have faded a bit and may require some work to make the images easier to read. Once a photo is chosen for scanning, we produce a .TIFF file as the archival file. Then it gets linked to the metadata. We do this by providing unique image IDs for the images, and making that image ID part of the metadata. We may do a little photo editing, you know, make it a little lighter, add a little contrast, things like that, to recognize features in people's faces. This we save as a copy of the original file, and use it as a .JPG for web delivery. That happens in the ContentDM process.

*I'm aware that we have in the past collected money for photo reproductions. Tell me about how the photo collection has acted as a source of small-scale fundraising.*

We can make images available for publication and charge a permission or publication fee. This provides us with a little fundraising possibility. But if you realize what it all costs to do this, I would say that we are not even at the point of the effort paying for itself. Maybe that will come in the near future, as we keep adding images to the on-line collection. The fee is an interesting aspect of the work. In the community, people are often expecting that things are done for free. Researchers will pay the regular fee to large institutions but frown at LHA for charging. There is a big concept that this is a free service. The demand for images is high. The possibility of generating some money is important as it might actually pay for itself, and enable us to keep offering this service.

(S Scheffer, personal communication, August 21, 2012)

### **The Online Public Access Catalog (OPAC)**

LHA strives to provide as much information about the processing rituals as possible or necessary. Each collection has its own cataloguing system, is housed in its own database, and is described by multiple people over time, but generally overseen by a single Archivette. A unique cataloguing system is used, answering the questions necessary for each material type.

The first cataloguing software used by LHA was *Q&A*, a software that was commonly used in the mid-nineties. All of the cataloguing was done in-house by Archivettes. The goal for cataloguing was to process the collections by donor name, allowing the discoverability of item-level searches to be based on the donor, not the object itself. After *Q&A*, *InMagic*, was chosen as the internally used computer database and is still the current database used on onsite

computers. Catalog entries come out of the in-house InMagic database, which stores all material records.

LHA is in the process of moving its in-house database, InMagic/DBTextWorks, to an online web-platform, WebPublisherPro, software that is distributed by DBTextWorks, the same company that creates InMagic. LHA chose WebPublisherPro software, the online version of DBTextWorks, to create an Online Public Access Catalog similar to the reasons for choosing CONTENTdm for photos. The choice to use this proprietary software came from the need to maintain consistent technical support for a fluctuating user-base.

Open source software, cost efficient in some ways, was a risky option when primary concerns were troubleshooting potential database issues. As a volunteer collective, with a workgroup of community members with no assumed expertise, the ability to work with a company who could troubleshoot issues was a major factor in software selection. This critical need made available open source software unlikely candidates. WebPublisherPro was chosen, and in the end, provided a controlled environment, for the transfer of metadata from our multiple collections.

A comparative example is the entry for Books, already migrated and formatted for the general OPAC compared to that of T-Shirts in the standalone database. Noticeably, the structure of the information, if merged, would require a renaming of field names, a reformatting of standard entries such as title case and date. All 11,000+ books are catalogued with the same structure, just as all 1000 t-shirts have similar cataloguing structure. Issues of migrating data, however, are at the center of the OPAC development process.

Books Collection item entry chosen at random:

Collection Name:	<b>Books</b>
Title:	No Turning Back: Lesbian and Gay Liberation For The '80s
Author:	Goodman, Gerre, et al.
Place:	Philadelphia
Publisher:	New Society Publishers
Pubdate:	1983
Format:	Book
Holdings:	HER

Other field names could include, Subtitle, ISBN #, Storage Identifying #, Box Number, and if there is a special note in the field “summary” which will denote any type of inscriptions or any other relevant portion of the book’s format.

Compare the Books item entry with T-Shirt item entry chosen at random:

Box No	4
Date Entered	9/1/1998
Overall Design	TG
Location of Text	FB
Location of Design	FB
Type	SS

Color	GRAY SHIRT; BLACK PRINT
Text	<b>OUTLAW OUTRAGE OUTRIGHT OUTSPOKEN OUTRAGEOUS OUTSTANDING, THE RALLY ; ( ON BACK):HOT 97 FM JAMS!</b>
Graphic	INVERTED TRIANGLE, 1/2 GREY; 1/2 BLACK WITH WORDS OVER IT/HOT 97 LOGO
Event	<b>LESBIAN AND GAY PRIDE RALLY</b>
Organization	HERITAGE OF PRIDE
City	NEW YORK
State	NY
Major Category	LG
Primary Subject	PRD EVTS
Secondary Subject	BUS/ADV
Also See	SUBJECT FILES FOR PRIDE EVENTS; ORG. FILES FOR HERITAGE OF PRIDE
Date Modified	2/25/2012
ID	28

The development of the OPAC is still in process as the collective devises ways to merge fields of varying collections from each individual InMagic database to the single OPAC database. For the past year and a half, Archivettes, and interns, have successfully migrated fields of the following collections: Books, T-Shirts, Graphics, and Film/Video. The Periodicals collection is scheduled to be next, likely in or around July 2013. A beta version exists online, but these collections are not yet open to the public for searching. Even post-migration, the data is inconsistent and must be cleaned prior to public use. For the last year and half, Archivettes and interns have been working on cleaning up the data before the database is opened to the public. In addition to cleaning up the databases, many catalog entries will have accompanying .JPEG files to view, namely over 1,000 t-shirts which amount to 6 gigabites of t-shirt images, all of which must be reformatted in order to be viewable on the web.

Since the T-Shirt collection will have accompanying images, each with unique identifiers and field names, there is discussion about possibly providing this to users as a stand-alone collection with its own searchable database. This will be decided once the image conversion is complete and links to the images have been uploaded to the T-Shirt database. If it is agreed upon, the T-Shirts OPAC will be ready for the public sooner than the all-in-one OPAC of additional collections.

Rachel Corbman, a Coordinator overseeing LHA Special Collections, offers a further contextualization of LHA collection development and cataloguing practices. Through WordPress, Rachel created a list of processed Special Collections, organized by accession number, or chronological order, and again by collection name for public access, separate from the OPAC's reveal. The following interview is a glimpse of Rachel's understanding of the coordination of LHA collection development policies, as well as an attempt to answer the questions that put LHA to task among the larger archival community. Rachel is a student in NYU's archival management program. She also holds a MA in the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality track of Graduate Center of the City of New York Masters and Liberal Studies MALS Program.

### Rachel Corbman with Shawn(ta) Smith on Cataloguing Rituals

*Rachel, firstly, how did you get involved with LHA?*

I had heard about LHA by virtue of the fact that my research is centered on the history of American feminism. Because the archive was so connected in my head with a particular brand of 1970s feminism, I am not entirely sure that I even knew if the archive was still around. I was asked to stay on as an Archivette after completing my internship. And a few months after that, my former supervisor Maxine Wolfe asked me to take responsibility for the archive's special collections so that she could concentrate on the spoken word audio collection.

*Can you describe what Special Collections are, and some strengths and weakness that you've found as you've been going through them?*

Special Collections are the personal papers that are donated by people and organizations or groups. If someone wants to donate their lives to the Archives, we call this a Special Collection, for example. We have more than 400 Special Collections, in all about half of which have been completely processed. Donors range from well-known lesbians – such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde—to Vanessa the anonymous lesbian prostitute. The sizes of the collections also vary widely, ranging from collections that fit into one small archival box to collections that are comprised of more than 50 large archival boxes. For better or for worse, there is a geographic bias towards New York and a temporal bias towards post-1970s. This isn't really by design so much as it reflects the fact that LHA does not appraise or actively solicit collections. Particular strengths include 1970s feminist activism, AIDS activism, the history of Women's Studies, women's music, activism for lesbian custody of children, and Daughters of Bilitis, the first lesbian organization in the United States founded in San Francisco in 1955. Let's talk weaknesses now. We don't have much material in the Special Collections that predates the 1950s. An exception to this rule is the Katherine Susan Anthony collection, which consists of the research that the donor did on Anthony. Anthony was a writer who was born in 1877 who openly lived with her partner in the Village for more than 30 years. For obvious reasons, we also don't tend to have the papers of famous closeted or semi-closeted lesbians such as Patricia Highsmith, Lorraine Hansberry, or Susan Sontag.

*Wait! Lorraine Hansberry was a lesbian?!*

Well, we can't "prove" that she identified as such, because she wasn't around to donate herself to the collection. But we do have the May 1957 issue of *The Ladder*, the first nationally distributed lesbian magazine where an editorial signed L.H.N., is available for viewing.

*Can you discuss how the collections are organized? I'd like you to unveil, rather*

*carefully, the ways in which LHA applies archival standards to its collections, namely, the Special Collections.*

One of the things that intrigue me about Lesbian Herstory Archive's Special Collections is its gradual movement towards archival conventions. Special Collections date back to 1979 with the Adrienne Rich collection having the distinction of being the first collection accessioned, albeit much of the material was collected earlier. Judging by the records included with older collections, we always organized material into folders that were housed in archival boxes. However, the early collections do not have traditional looking finding aids. They either have nothing or they have inventories that list everything in each box on an item level. It looks as though Joan Nestle was the one to create these inventories. The first example of a finding aid that I am aware of was created in 1984, probably by Polly Thistlewaite, who is currently the Chief Librarian at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. In Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feeling*, the writer makes what I think is a very apt point that we can spot the involvement of librarians such as Polly, Lucinda Zoe, Amy Beth, and Desiree Vester in the ways in which LHA catalogues its collections. Needless to say, you, I, and others can be added to this list.

*Yes, LHA does have lots of librarians who work there now, but librarians did not necessarily create the standards that we use?*

The archive's current approach to organizing its Special Collections was engineered by Maxine Wolfe –who I believe you are interviewing next about audio?

*Yes, that is correct.*

Maxine designed a finding aid that both closely resembles standards, but also diverges from them in a number of ways. Standards were first set in place in the 1977. Prior to this, there were two generally agreed upon philosophies for how one organizes archival collections. First, provenance, which stipulates that papers produced by a particular entity should be kept together in one collection. Second, respect des fonds, which means that the papers should be organized in a way that corresponds to the original order that they were kept. According to Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William Rosenberg, other than these two principles, "most archival institutions had their own idiosyncratic methods for description and access, based on the uniqueness of the collections, their history, and their resources." It is interesting to consider LHA's evolving approach to its Special Collections in light of this since, first of all, the Special Collections only came into being in 1979, two short years after the advent of universal standards. At present, the finding aids that LHA produces are a less labor-intensive version of traditional finding aids. The majority of the fields in our finding aids are the same or a slight variation on the ones found on finding aids produced in compliance with archival standards. Perhaps the biggest difference is that, though we have an infrequently used subject field, the subjects of our special collections do not need to be found in the Library of Congress' official list

of appropriate subject headings, which are in a specific order that we don't necessarily comply with at LHA. The second major similarity is that we do folder rather than box or item level description of the collection, though we don't break the folders into series as is standard for more traditionally processed collections.

*Thank you for that detailed description of how our archiving is similar and different than the larger field. Is there anything else you'd like to add, specifically on how we are both a community-based archive, and accessible to the archival community?*

Well, if we consider the ever-increasing academic legitimacy of Lesbian and Gay Studies and Feminist and Queer Theory, the Lesbian Herstory Archives is constantly inundated with offers to collaborate with larger and well funded institutions. A few recent examples include: our work with Thomson/Gale to microfilm our newsletters, newsprint, subject files, and organizational files; as well as Lesbian Herstory Archives' contributions to EBSCO's LGBT Lives database; and, finally, the relationships that LHA has developed with library or archival programs in local universities, including Pratt and NYU's MIAP program, which are working to digitize our spoken word and video collections, respectively. With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that LHA has opted to closely align itself with archival standards, perhaps especially in the case of the special collections. Divergences, when they emerge are likely either the result of LHA being woefully underfunded or, on the contrary, a willful and conscious decision to break with tradition.

*Thank you Rachel, I'm going to include an overview about the things you've just mentioned, specifically in relation to the Online Public Access Catalog.*

You're welcome. Don't forget to mention that, although, not complete with finding aids, descriptions of the Special Collections are now browsable online:  
<http://herstoryspecialcollections.wordpress.com/>.

*Thanks Rachel, I will!*

(R. Corbman, personal communication, March 11, 2013)

Discoverability is the goal for the OPAC and will come in many forms. Just as the T-Shirts catalog may be separate, the WordPress edition of the Special Collections, created and unveiled during the writing of this article, will have duplication with the eventual OPAC. The goal behind creating an Online Public Access Catalog was to provide online access to materials thereby revolutionizing the way the public utilizes and discovers LHA collections. The pilot year of this multi-year project was initiated by the \$15,000 awarded from the Rockefeller Brother's Fund which allowed for the development of an internship training program for additional year replication, data clean-up for the three largest collections, purchase of Online Public Access Catalog software and design, and implementation of an OPAC.

Below is an edited excerpt of the annual report sent to the foundation, compiled by the OPAC committee after a year of planning, then implementation. The committee was led by Archivette and Caretaker, Desiree Yael Vester. Committee interns were: Barbara Bieck, Bit Blair, Amalia E. Bultler, Jackie Coffey, and Marianne Williams. The paragraphs below describe how grant funds were used and the results of the project.

### **January – May 2011 – Strategic Cataloguing Plan, OPAC Software, and Interns**

During the first months of the grant year, the work of the volunteer collective was focused on developing a plan to ensure adequate transfer of the catalog into an online format. This process included an assessment of current holdings particular catalog records, a decision to purchase OPAC software that could represent this multi-formatted collection, and a plan for the distribution of labor to implement these next steps. A decision was made to employ interns for the summer and fall, who although were unpaid, could for course credit format and upload the collection onto an online forum.

**Strategic Cataloguing Plan** –Creating an OPAC meant cataloguing format by format, so to ensure a catalog that was inclusive of the entire collection. In addition, adjustments to the current catalog meant the creation of an OPAC Working Group whose mission it was to assist with database cleanup, OPAC design (creation, implementation, testing), indexing, cataloging, website maintenance, roll out promotion, and catalog demonstration.

**Decision to Choose OPAC Software** –The Strategic Cataloguing Plan required the creation of a catalog that was compatible with an integrated library system software that fit into three criteria: an advance search capability, ability to merge the pre-existing intranet Inmagic software, and technical support service once the transfer was complete. A formal call was not created; instead, research was implemented to consider which companies fit into this rubric. Two presentations were provided to the collective. In the end, DBTextWorks was chosen as the integrated library system with the most compatibility.

**Employment of Interns and Internship Training Program** –As an all volunteer collective, the implementation of an internship program where archivists-in-training could work with professional lesbian activists, archivists, and librarians was in direct allegiance with the mission of LHA, and acted as the basis for the OPAC project. A call was set out to employ unpaid interns for two semesters. An internship requirement was completion of at least one introductory cataloguing course.

Membership in associations such as Metropolitan Library Council as well as the Society of American Archivists, made it possible to place a call for interns with library science programs. Interns experienced collections processing, cataloging, indexing, participation in the OPAC Working Group, and the preparation of printed and online collection guides.

### **June - November 2011 –Collection Areas, Catalog Implementation and Testing**

Library Science interns were employed to survey, process, and catalogue collections. Examples of procedures for formatting these collections are: organizing hard-copy materials, scanning and digitization, indexing, data transfer and database cleanup in LHA catalog, and preparing materials for shipment to off-site storage as needed. Collections that received the most in-depth processing are the video collection, periodicals collection, books and the Red Dot collection, Gale group subject files, and the T-Shirt collection, listed in detail below.

**The Video Collection:** Due to the support of the RBF funds each video received notation for its title, director, producer, writer, cast, copyright year, and length. By the end of the grant year, the video collection in its entirety is successfully cataloged. The collection now includes the donation of some L Word promotional material, the Lesbian Herstory Archives/Daughters Of Bilitis Project tapes, Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization videos, and the *In The Life* tapes. There are 13 boxes of videos and 1000 entries in the spreadsheet, which originally had approximately 120 videos listed. Duplicates were stored off site at Iron Mountain, the LHA archival suppository. Audiotapes, betas, CDs, and other material were included with the processing of videos.

**The Periodicals Collection:** Newsletters were originally indexed in a cardex, a hand-written card catalog. Using the Cardex as a guide, each record was transferred to the DBTextWorks intranet software for an eventual upload into the OPAC by intern, Amailia E. Butler. Pre-existing records were edited for uniformity and where additional information was added. Incorporated was all volume and/or issue numbers, regions (self-defined with map for reference), subjects (primary from World Cat/OCLC/Library of Congress), address, publisher, and comments.

**Books and the Red Dot Collection:** The Lesbian Herstory Archives maintains two catalogs for books: General Books and the Red Dot Collection equaling 9,191 records. The Red Dot Collection is the collection of books secured from the New York chapter of the first lesbian organization in the country –the Daughters of Bilitis. 798 records have been surveyed and updated, covering the entirety of the red dot collection, among others. Books include self-published poetry, novels, course readers, unpublished screenplays, and other resources unique to the collection. Many of these single-issue items are only available at the LHA. As a result, original cataloguing was also a part of this processing.

**Gale Group Subject Files:** In 2004, Gale®, part of Cengage Learning, a world leader in e-research and educational publishing for libraries, digitized the subject files and newsletters of LHA as part of their Gay Rights Movement Series. Subject files are the first stop for most researchers, some of which date back to 1970s and are primary source documents or include correspondence and publicity materials from other gay and lesbian archives from several countries. There are 17 CDs of scans from the Archives' files, with approximately 190,000 digitized files in total. Although Gale digitized these files, they were never before searchable in an online catalog. Due to the RBF grant, entries were created into the database for online searching.

**T-Shirt collection:** The Lesbian Herstory Archives has a collection of over 900 t-shirts, sent by

friends and donors who acquired them at protests, college student groups, music festivals, concerts, bookstores, and coffee shops; a few of them are handmade. Xerox copies of all T-Shirt designs have been scanned to a hard drive in two formats -.tiff (for preservation) and .jpg (for easier manipulation).

**Administrative Access to the Catalog:** Crew Noble was chosen as the web designers and hosts for the OPAC. The **One Archives** (OPAC) and **June Mazer** (OPAC), two very influential LGBT archives also use Crew Noble. To eliminate the need to update between the LHA hard-drive and Crew Noble, there is an edit function, which will ultimately switch the primary editing location. This will allow the ability to edit the DBTextworks online databases via a web browser. The goal is to eventually shift the collections completely to Crew Noble server and have all editing occur online. Scans have been added of t-shirts with links to those t-shirts in the Image URL field. Users can click the link to get a larger version of the scanned image.

### **Audio Digitization and Online Exhibitions**

On November 17, 2012, for twelve hours from noon to midnight, LHA hosted a Marathon reading of the works of Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. The event marked the year of Adrienne Rich's passing and the 20th anniversary of Audre Lorde's passing, two transitions that led these two iconic women to becoming community ancestors. One pivotal resource that helped to steer the reading was the use of audio. Event co-coordinators Archivette, Flavia Rando, community member Alexis Clements and I, Shawn(ta) Smith, along with a committee of community members chose to digitally record the readings amplified inside of the Archives' limestone. These recordings are currently [audible](#) on the LHA website as an archive of the event. In addition, a listening station of previously digitized audio was accessible on a touch screen tablet with clips of Lorde and Rich in conversation, as well as individual clips of each poet reading and speaking to large audiences. Elizabeth Lorde Rollins, Audre Lorde's daughter, called the archives, and then sent a letter, both thanking us for the receipt of her mother's voice in digital form. This audio access was possible because weeks before the event, Lorde's collection of audio was completely digitized. This digitization effort was a collaborative effort between LHA Coordinator Maxine Wolfe, Pratt School of Information and Library Sciences (Pratt SILS) Professor Anthony Cocciolo, and students from his digitization course. Since 2008, this partnership has led to the online exhibition [Herstories: A Digital Collection](#), hosted at the Pratt Institute on Omeka software. It contains some digitizations from the 3,000 oral history cassettes in the Archives' collection.

During her twenty eight years as an Archivette, Maxine Wolfe has maintained multiple collections, organized the digitization of the periodical and subject files, and organized and facilitated monthly Special Collection workdays to process collections of personal and organizational papers and create finding aids. Maxine orchestrated and supervised the digitization of Spoken Word cassettes. She also staffs on a regular basis. In the following interview, Maxine describes the LHA audio collection, as well as the audio digitization project

that has made the voices of Lorde, Rich, and many other lesbians from our audio collection accessible.

### **Maxine Wolfe with Shawn(ta) Smith on Audio**

*Maxine, can you give us an overview of the audio as it exists at LHA?*

The Lesbian Herstory Archives already holds about 3000 cassette tapes that range from oral histories, to panels at conferences, to conversations between two women, correspondence between women, readings by poets and writers, and poets performances. There are also excerpts of radio shows including the entire WBAI Womens and Lesbian programs between the 70s and 80s. However, all are on cassette, which have a short life, although very few have expired. This is a monumental job for cataloguing. 1300 are currently catalogued.

*What was the process for putting them into a digital format?*

Firstly, I must say that digital reformatting is not the beginning and end of how these materials should be preserved. We still don't know the life of digital materials. Before, everyone was in a rush to transfer information to discs, now from discs to flash drives. Eventually, flash drives will be an unusable format, so these are things to keep in mind when digitization is for the purposes of preservation.

*And online access, what was the impetus for not only digitizing the audio, but also making them accessible online?*

It is important for people to get the information and to hear it, that's why putting the materials online is so important. It's not just digitizing the tapes, but putting them into context with metadata. Just hearing what people say, but not having access to any information about them is limiting.

*With over 3000 audiotapes, this is a daunting project. What was the process like to work with Anthony and Pratt, specifically, or for getting others involved in the project generally?*

Anthony Cocciolo, a professor at Pratt Institute in library science, put out a notice requesting oral histories for a project for his new digitization courses. Amy Wolfe, my daughter, happened to be a librarian at Pratt at the time, and so, was still on the Pratt listserv. Naturally, she told her mother that this opportunity existed, and I knew it was not one to pass up. I called Anthony without much hesitation and said that LHA had 3000 oral histories, all of which needed digital preservation.

*Were there any initial concerns when creating the partnership?*

During our conversation, Anthony revealed that the digitization was a part of a class project. My concern wasn't for class participation in general. However, as a lesbian archive, we have very sensitive stories. I made it very clear that we are a lesbian archive and do not want to deal with homophobic people. He assured me that his students would be sensitive to the collection. Usually, I would have been more skeptical, I mean, how could he know the responses of his students. He replied: Don't worry, I am a gay man, and will take responsibility for this.

*What luck! So, on some level, it remains inside of the community.*

To work with an outside organization, these are the questions that we need to have. We as an organization, and lesbians herstorically, have dealt with abuse our whole lives, and won't put up with it just to digitize a tape. We won't compromise. And we didn't have to. The entire collection has been catalogued by lesbians, and in some instances like this one, allies have been huge supporters.

*And it proved to be a fruitful venture. Tell me about the process for digitization.*

Each semester began with the students coming to the Archives to receive a tour, so that they could get a sense of where these interviews came from. After that, the students did all of the work. 2010 was the first year that it was completed, and the collection used was all of the Mabel Hampton interviews. They digitized all of the tapes, scanned the photographs, gave a small synopsis, an introduction about who Mabel was and did the research, all using the materials of the collection. 37 interviews were done in the first semester, then a website was created.

*What made you choose the Mabel Hampton collection as the first?*

When creating an online exhibition, we have to consider the rights of the materials. We have the rights to all of the Mabel Hampton interviews since they were conducted with Joan Nestle and Mabel was a part of the Coordinating committee. This collection made sense to begin the first round. Second, we wanted to consider demand. In 2011 most of what we had on Audre Lorde most were tapes of readings at benefits, a conversation between her and Adrienne Rich and recordings of her speeches. We have close contact with her family and her estate is readily accessible, so we decided this complete collection would be useful for the course. With the Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold collection, we asked Madeline Davis if she would be interested in us working on her materials and she said yes! 137 Boots of Leather tapes will be completed this year. Next summer, Anthony and his class will do the Daughters of Bilitis interviews.

*What are the next steps?*

Once this project began, we decided to digitize ourselves on site at the Archives. We used Audacity audio editing software, which is the same that Anthony used with his students,

which is great because it is free and user-friendly. I worked with Colette Montoya-Humphrey to create a SPW [spoken word] project and audacity protocol manual. Anthony does not use any noise reduction but we discovered that in archivist circles, the discussion is to whether you should use noise reduction or not, to alter the audio, or keep the original sound. We decided on site that we would preserve the voices by reducing the noise when necessary. Still, with the large, archival .wav files, we chose not to noise reduce. Noise reduction is useful to ensure that we can hear what people are saying. When we make .mp3s for people to use at the archives, then we apply some editing. The materials currently live on a hard drive at the Archives. Once digitized, on the hard drive, CDs are created from the wav into mp3s. The metadata is being compiled simultaneously.

Of the 3000 interviews, it's difficult to mention them all. We are going tape by tape, and specifically those with releases and permissions. For example, other interviews we have are lesbians and fashion, the Radical Rose recordings which recorded everything that happened in Minneapolis which all have releases. So while the class is busy digitizing and putting things online, we are continuing to catalog all of our tapes, and digitize the regular collection.

*Can you tell me about the other collections at LHA, and how digitization is taking form?*

Generally we've catalogued our 10000 books. Our Periodicals have been digitized and are available with EBSCO's LGBT Life full text database, which people can view onsite, or at local libraries. The New York Public Library and some CUNY campuses have access, for example. We've learned from the process of working with a company that negotiating a contract where you get a copy and they don't own it is the most important part of the process. Our Newsletters (2006) & Subject Files (2004) are processed by Thompson Gale as the 2004 Gay Rights Movement Series. They scanned them and then transferred them onto microfilm. As a result of our contract with them, we receive royalties of about \$6k per year.

One more thing, if you look to the Ebsco database, all of the articles are not full-text because of the ability to get copyright, so they've abstracted an index of the database. We do have, however the digital copies of each periodical, full-text, onsite. Unfortunately, we don't have the server to place them online. In January 2013, Thompson Gale begins a similar process with the Newsprint newspapers with a similar type of contract, specifically for titles that were not already being archived elsewhere, like *The Advocate* for example. We do still need a server or some way to host all of our digital holdings. And then, someone has to index the periodicals. I believe Ebsco can do it.

(M. Wolfe, personal communication, December 16, 2012)

**Tape-by-Tape –Online at LHA**

As Maxine hinted, the multi-step process for digitizing and placing items online occurs item-by-item, or tape-by-tape. The process for preserving these rich materials hasn't changed very much in almost 40 years of lesbian archiving. The women volunteer time and utilize community resources to allow for continued preservation and access.

Online presence is a conversation that must include both preservation and access due to the influx of newly acquired materials, and expanded programming. In addition, there is interest in 484 14<sup>th</sup> Street as a community space beyond the Archive, where readings, book launches, courses like the Lesbian Studies Institute, or art gallery exhibitions, to name a few become integral to LHA programming. The collection still persists, and the group of Archivettes—while small--remain consistent. Online communication as a form of access also achieves the goal of increasing the number of women who can work on these projects They will be the future Archivettes –Coordinators, staffers, interns, and volunteers -- who will all play a role in the many facets of LHA –our archiving and our programming.

With the newly created email address [lesbianherstoryarchives@gmail.com](mailto:lesbianherstoryarchives@gmail.com), and the ongoing efforts of the LHA very part-time webmistress [Heather Stewart](#), the online presence of the Lesbian Herstory Archives is thriving. As new demands for social networking opportunities increase, LHA has published a Facebook page, launched digital exhibitions, used Crowdrise for fundraising campaigns, and send out periodic e-newsletters. Requests for access to these rich materials from anywhere in the world is in great demand. At LHA, and likely in the world of community LGBT archiving, we will meet the online demands one step at a time, tape-by-tape.

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