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# I Hate the Archives: A Queer Lesbian Meditation

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**Abstract:** Questioning the neutrality of archives is nothing new as feminist scholars have been doing it since the 1970s. More recently, queer theorists have pushed the subjectivity of the archive even further by emphasizing the importance of desire and pleasure as its central tenants. The archive in these discussions is sometimes a metaphor for a variety of experiences and at other times a brick-and-mortar physical space. Yet, there has been a lack of focus on the relationships between these two approaches. Similarly, there has not been enough discussion on how to challenge the exclusivity of the archive in our everyday praxis as queer researchers and feminist teachers. To address these elisions, this reflexive essay uses the feeling of discomfort to interrogate the power dynamics evident in LGBTQ+ collections across different archival institutions. I argue that an open discussion of paratextual factors such as class and the unofficial networks surrounding archives that are formed by scholars, archivists, and community members are crucial in challenging the exclusionary nature of the archive in our research and in the classroom.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ studies, affect, archives, queer theory

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I hate the archives. The mandatory white gloves, I absolutely despise. The thought of the fluorescent-lit airtight chilly space makes me dream of picking up smoking again. In fact, in graduate school, when my assistantship was in special collections, I did. I should note that I grew up in Estonia while it was still occupied by Soviet Russia, which makes me more likely fond of cigarettes and inherently suspicious of all knowledge that exists in institutions of any kind, whether they are vouched by the government or not.<sup>1</sup> Mostly, though, as a first-generation college student and immigrant, I do not like the archives as a classed space that excludes knowledge that does not fit the middle-class value system. British sociologist Beverley Skeggs (1997) has noted that working-class does not have “access to the legal, aesthetic or moral authority which gives legitimacy to social positions” (76). Lack of power and authority to challenge the bias of the archive is perpetuated by the reliance of the written record as evidence, which traditionally has excluded working-class experiences from the mainstream public sphere. Hence, archives as a metaphor, especially in queer theory, has been a path for me to reconcile this gap that exists between the brick-and-mortar archives and myself as someone who is not the target audience of such spaces. The notion of plurality when it comes to archives is liberating: something we can each build out of our experiences and materials we cherish; that goes through changes as more experiences accumulate; and the survival of which is not dependent on money. Above all, queer theory has taught me that each of such archives matter in their own way as they challenge the hierarchy of knowledge that takes up physical space in brick-and-mortar archives.

When I had my first conscious encounter with institutional archives in graduate school, I could not yet fully express in apt words the queer feelings I had in regards to this to me seemingly odd space and its contents. I say conscious encounter because I am not sure how to explain the level of unawareness I had before going to graduate school when it comes to the notion of “archives.” I see this kind of ontological unfamiliarity often in my classroom among students with less privileged backgrounds. I did not know that

such a space existed and I had no idea what stands behind the mysterious umbrella term “materials.” This unfamiliarity, oddness, resulted in all kinds of feelings that were expressed in casual rants over drinks with my graduate school friends, many of whom thought this aversion towards the archives to be strange and at times entertaining. Ranting is self-preservation, protection, and coping. Over the years, I have learned to both question and trust my feelings.

### **Discomfort as an Affect in the Archives**

Sara Ahmed’s (2004, 2006, 2017) body of work has become a place of solace to me when I struggle with the often urgent need to find words. “I accept that feminism begins with sensation: with a sense of things,” she writes in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017, 21). Ahmed notes that we should hold on to reactions and *sensations* even when we do not yet have words to fully express our “sensible reaction to the injustices in the world” (21). She continues:

Feminism often begins with intensity: you are aroused by what you come up against. You register something in the sharpness of an impression. Something can be sharp without it being clear what the point is. Over time, with experience, you sense that something is wrong or you have a feeling of being wronged. You sense an injustice. You might not have used that word for it; you might not have the words for it; you might not be able to put your finger on it. Feminism can begin with a body, a body in touch with a world, a body that is not at ease in a world; a body that fidgets and moves around. Things don’t seem right. (23)

Things did not seem right to me at the archives. I found ways to fidget and move my body around by taking breaks to go and smoke or chat with other graduate students on their assignments. To try to stay still, I would chew excessive amounts of gum, which visually is a way nastier habit than smoking, but it helped to contain the fidgeting within the bounds of my body and get some work done. Fidgeting, moving, chewing to deal with the ambiguous, yet, all all-encompassing feeling of discomfort. Discomfort due to the physical elements of the space (such as the low temperature, the hard chairs) and the psychological (supervisors’ gaze, digital surveillance, the contents of the archive).

Discomfort is a key emotion in feminist praxis both in everyday life and in the classroom. “Get comfortable being uncomfortable,” we say to our students in gender studies classes. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed (2004) writes, “[t]o feel uncomfortable is precisely to be affected by that which persists in the shaping of bodies and lives. Discomfort is hence not about assimilation or resistance, but about inhabiting norms differently” (155). Ahmed (2004/2014) sees discomfort as “generative,” not as a negative (155). I too often express my discomfort through the praxis of “rolling eyes = feminist pedagogy” (Ahmed 2017, 38) in everyday encounters with heteropatriarchy. Discomfort that makes us fidget, keeps us reorienting (Ahmed 2006), moving around, and finding alternative ways of taking up space. Wen Liu (2020), invoking Ahmed, agrees that the feeling of “discomfort is not simply a sign of negativity or injury but, rather, a new form of sociality and opening” (7). Where there is discomfort, there is intellectual and emotional growth and expansion. There is pleasure too in discomfort as it allows for new ways of connecting with people and objects that are different from the socially scripted ones.

Negative affects in general can be used towards positive ends.<sup>2</sup> Anger has been a crucial affect in feminist writing and struggle towards social justice. Discomfort is a marginal feeling compared to the more prominent ones such as rage or fear. Cultural theorist Sianne Ngai (2005) traces marginalized feelings in *Ugly Feelings*:

Moods like irritation and anxiety, for instance, are defined by a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the “suddenness” on which Aristotle’s aesthetics of fear depends. And unlike rage, which cannot be sustained indefinitely, less dramatic feelings like envy and paranoia have a remarkable capacity for duration. (7)

Irritation shares similarities with discomfort as the latter can be also endured for considerable amount of time. Ngai reads irritation as it is experienced by the lead character, Helga in Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel *Quicksand*; and she explains that it is both presented as “an emotional response to a bodily sensation (“smell”), but then becomes elaborated, as an emotional response, by a simile comparing it to the sensation of bodily pain” (184-85). Discomfort similarly is felt as a bodily sensation (e.g., response to the temperature in the archives) and as an emotional reaction to being surveilled or not fitting in. Another unique characteristic of marginal emotions is that they tend to “produce an unpleasurable feeling about the feeling” (ibid., 10). Ngai uses the examples of envy: “I feel ashamed about feeling envious” (ibid.). The feeling of discomfort causes me to feel embarrassed or experience anxiety over not fitting in, not fitting the shape of the “patron” at the archives.

Both, discomfort and irritation, have a connotation with the medical that is connected to the skin, or surface level. Irritation as discomfort have the tendency to “slip out of the realm of emotional experience altogether, into the realm of physical or epidermal sensations” (ibid., 184). Merriam-Webster dictionary also defines discomfort as both, a “mental or physical uneasiness,” and can refer to a slight pain in medical contexts as in, “The patient is still experiencing some discomfort.”

Carolyn Steedman (2002) points out in her book *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* that there is a long history of scholars not just talking about the emotional toll, but also noting the ill effects of archival work on their physical health. Steedman challenges the common reading of Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever (Mal d’Archive)* as an urgency to collect and preserve by focusing on the very real and ill (*mal*) health effects that working in the archives can have on the researcher’s body. She explains that archives have been the cause of illness as scholars breathed in dust that resulted in anthrax infections (2002, 28). Something that was called “brain fever” in the eighteenth century was diagnosed as anthrax meningitis two hundred years later (ibid.). Anthrax spore that exists in animal hair and skin carried over to the bodies of the workers who handled the animals whose matter was used to make leather that bound the documents. She connects these early experiences of malaise resulting from spending too much time with leather bound books and inhaling toxins for hours in cold spaces to her own experiences in the archives such as sleeping in cheap hotels and the financial stress of this kind of work.

Although there is large body of feminist writing that has brought the positionality of researcher into the archives (Steedman 2002; Cifor 2015; Stone & Cantrell 2015; Tortorici 2020), there has not been a discussion of discomfort as an affect in such context. Yet, as this meditation shows, discomfort is a fertile premise to begin exploring queer feminist archival praxis and thinking archivally about experiences and identities. To explore the generative possibilities of queer discomfort under these conditions, I will trace my own affective (Cvetkovich 2003, 2012; Stoler 2008), erotic (Lorde 1978; Freeman 2007), silly (Halberstam 2011), and always both ephemeral (Muñoz 2009) and feral (Chen 2012) relationship to the archive as a metaphor and as a brick-and-mortar space (Burton 2008; McKinney 2020; Sheffield 2020). I utilize the archive as a metaphor to make sense of the archive as a physical space we enter as seekers of knowledge. Sometimes these the two notions of the archive collide, bleed into each other, and are not easily separable. I challenge the performativity and performance that are part of the character of the researcher in the space of the archive, and argue for the centrality of *feelings* not just in the queer ephemera, but also in the traditional archive, in our relationships as scholars with the archivists, and in our teachings about the

archive the classroom. This paper is mostly chronological and begins with my earliest encounters with archives and ends with most recent experiences in teaching the archives in higher education setting.

### **Affective and Archival Turns**

The affective and archival turns that occurred in the early to mid 1990s called for a rethinking of methodologies, the limits of theoretical frameworks (especially in the light of the expansion of neoliberalist ideology in the 1980s), and demanded an intensified reflection on the implications of the second wave feminist slogan, “personal is political.”<sup>3</sup> The writings that are part of these “turns” helped me understand that my discomfort is not my personal issue. Collectively, feminist interventions into the archival space and archive as a metaphor whether coming from historians, literature scholars, anthropologists or archivists have challenged the objectivity of the archive and argued for a discussion of positionality of everyone involved. The concept of feminist objectivity as a form of situated knowledge (Haraway 1988, 581) is part of this movement emerging from the 1980s and 1990s that questioned empiricism and the very structure of how we as researchers make sense of our worlds (Harding 1987; Bhavani 1993; Jaggar 1989; Scott 1991).

The archival and affective turn take many directions across disciplinary boundaries. My discussion of queer discomfort rests at the intersection of queer theory, affect theory, feminist archival studies, and archival activism. This large body of scholarship has explicitly made a connection between the queer feelings that are seen as private and mundane and the archive, both as a geographically situated space and as a theoretical tool or metaphor (Cvetkovich 2003, 2012, 2016; Berlant 2011; Muñoz, 2009; Love 2009; Halberstam 2005, 2011; Freeman, 2007, 2010). In addition to queer and feminist literature scholars and historians, archivists have also questioned the archive from their perspective (Schwartz & Cook 2002; Kumbier 2014; Williams 2016; Dever 2017; Cifor & Wood 2017). Part of my queer feminist praxis is to acknowledge my relationships to all—the theory, the vibrant matter (Bennett 2009) in the archives, and the people who create conditions for me to orient towards it.

Pulling together all these threads, I see my methodology as feral. I borrow this approach from Mel Chen (2012) who in their book about animacies, describes what they call “a somewhat ‘feral’ approach” to their “shifting archive” (18).<sup>4</sup> According to Chen, a feral approach allowed the material at hand to “feralize” by “giving up any idealization about their domestication, refusing to answer whether they constitute proper or complete coverage” (ibid.). My feral approach means that I refuse to fully separate the archive as a physical space and metaphor. The latter is a useful challenge to the hierarchy of the first. I cherish the freedom permitted by the concept of being feral, like the wild fox I notice paying no attention to the boundaries between the woods and yard at the property from where I write this piece in Scarborough, Maine during a snowy pandemic December of 2020. Allowing myself to be academically feral connects to my pagan Estonian roots of bonfires and tree spirits while helping to challenge Western middle-class conventions of knowledge organization and performance of professionalism.

### **Performance and Performativity in the Archives**

Archivists, Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook (2002) connect Butler’s theory of performativity to the discussion of normativity and institutionalization in the archives. They are concerned with how certain kind of behaviors by the archivists and people in charge of archives have become “second nature” that does not get questioned. I similarly have always wondered about the “second nature” of behaving in the archives as a researcher.

Depending on the archive, you ring the buzzer to get in, take off your coat or anything too heavy, but try to leave on layer as not to be frozen in the chilly temperatures most archives maintain. One of the first things you notice about the archives is how cold they are, which is a great source of discomfort.<sup>5</sup> Mostly, in very ableist fashion, no water or food are allowed. You can only take notes with a paper and pencil. Sometimes you can bring your laptop. The whispers, lowered voices, researchers taking the little steps almost on their tippy toes as they approach the table of the archivist to ask a question or order another box, the over-the-top politeness, the cardigans, the overly apologetic way of asking for another box or to scan something. And lastly, the white gloves—*why white?*—are used, as DeVun and McClure (2014) point out, to mitigate *touch*, which is “a transgressive act” in an archive (126). All of this makes my skin crawl with discomfort. Yet, following these guidelines should come to us as “second nature” as soon as we enter the archival space if we have been properly oriented (Ahmed 2006).

I cherish reading raw and self-reflective moments of scholars in the archives that address some elements of this kind of performativity. These moments of pause and reflection are clearly part of the “queer archive of feelings” (Cvetkovich 2003), but the performativity of research does not make it “second nature” for the researcher to share such stories. A few of my favorite moments are Angela Willey’s (2016) very expression of surprise towards the ways in which the materials of feminist science pioneers were organized at the Lesbian Herstory Archives; Greg Youmans’ (2015) meditation on plants as archival objects found in Elsa Gidlow’s garden; and seeing Susan Stryker in *Screaming Queens* (2005) methodically looking through old newspapers at the GLBT Historical Society archives under fluorescent lighting.

Nowhere did performativity of research cause me more discomfort when I was assigned to work at the special collections as part of my graduate assistantship at William & Mary. My job mostly entailed transcribing and annotating old *Cashbox* magazine content into an Excel file.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes when I was lucky I would also get to “guard” the front desk and set up people to enter the reading room. I was grateful to have a job since a space such as this was not at all what I thought I would ever be part of. When I first came to the United States, I thought that as part of my assistantship, I would help with menial labor tasks. I imagined I would clean the office or take out the trash. It never occurred to me that I could be paid for thinking or teaching or looking up stuff and writing about it. The space of the archive reminded me and still does that, as a first-generation college student, I do not belong here. Although I was acutely aware of my privilege of having a job at all, I hated how mindless it was. Knowing that eventually the library would get a grant to digitalize the magazine, made it seem even more a waste of time and resources.

At the time, Michel Foucault’s writing proved helpful in not completely lose my mind in this disciplinary space. Foucault famously uses the metaphor of the panopticon as a model for surveillance in contemporary society. According to Foucault (1977), the panopticon:

is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoner, but also to treat patients, to instruct schoolchildren, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work. It is a type of location of bodies in space, of distribution of individuals in relation to one another, of hierarchical organization, of disposition of centres and channels of power, of definition of the instruments and modes of intervention of power, which can be implemented in hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons. Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used. (205)

This “particular form of behavior” that “must be imposed” in the archives is done most effectively with the human eye: who has the right to look and how and who has the obligation to let themselves be looked at. Looking is intersectional, it is racialized (Kelly 1998; bell hooks 1992; Harris-Perry 2011; Mirzoeff 2011),

classed (Skeggs 1997; Bourdieu 1987; Bennett 2013; Eriksson 2015; Negt & Kluge 2016), and gendered (Mulvey 1975; Berger 1973; Sturken & Cartwright 2001).

The intended patron of the archives is someone in the likes of whom Donna Haraway (1997) has famously deemed the “modest witness.” She explains that modesty is:

one of the founding virtues of what we call modernity. This is the virtue that guarantees that the modest witness is the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object world, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish the facts. He bears witness: he is objective; he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity is his objectivity. His narratives have a magical power—they lose all trace of their history as stories, as products of partisan projects, as contestable representations, or as constructed documents in their potent capacity to define the facts. The narratives become clear mirrors, fully magical mirrors, without once appealing to the transcendental or the magical. (24)

The gender of the modest witness is less important as it stands in for patriarchy. Able-bodied cis white men are clearly not powerful enough to uphold the system on their own; they need help from all of us: gays, queers, trans people, cis women, other white people, people of color, disabled folks, and the poor, and people with multiple overlapping identity pressure points.

Not fitting the image of the modest witness in the archives, feels like being Brendan Fraser in the film *Encino Man* (1992), minus the obliviousness. The discomfort I experienced as the “caveman” made me a terrible employee. Queer discomfort can be productive, similar to how Ahmed sees it as creating new ways of interacting with the world, but it did not make me *productive* as a worker. In my own small ways, I rebelled against or, in Ahmed’s words, re-oriented away from the institution any chance I got. I picked up smoking to justify breaks that allowed me to step outside the cold archives. I did as little work as I possibly could. I chatted with my co-workers in a space where it was not allowed. As I greeted people entering the archive, I needed to ask for their ID, they needed to fill out a form. The entire power dynamic was a source of deep discomfort. Hence, I would always tell people, at least the ones who seemed a little scared of the space, that they should not let the high ceilings and fancy railings and the security measures intimidate them. I do not know if this helped anyone at all, but I wanted to make clear that I am not one of “them” who collect, enforce, and surveil.

### **A Queer Lesbian Researcher in the Gay Archives**

I still remember the burst of joy I felt (and could not express) when I found a lonely image of dykes on bikes as I was working my way through a box of newspapers at Cornell University’s Human Sexuality Collection. I had been looking at chiseled white masculine nude bodies for days now and texting snapshots of some of them to my male gay best friend. Taking photos after photos on my phone is part of “photographic documentation”—a ritual that takes place in the archives (Smith 2018, 204). I wanted these photos of photos of nudes to meet the eye of someone who would react closest to what I imagined was the original intention the published image and of what I imagined the archivist had it mind when the goal was to “preserve and produce not just knowledge but feeling” (Cvetkovich 2003, 241). After all, Cvetkovich (2016) has stated in a later lecture, “value resides in our attachments to things, not in the things themselves.” My attachments to things are dependent on my positionality as a cis queer woman who is attracted to other women and finds pleasure in looking at a butch lesbian dressed in leather on a motorcycle, not gay men that are much more prevalent in LGBTQ+ archives.

Elizabeth Freeman (2007) has argued that queer scholars have not yet arrived at a “historiographic method that would admit the flesh, that would avow that history is written on and felt with the body, and that would let eroticism into the notion of historical thought itself” (164). I see that the body of the queer scholar brings the eroticism into historical thought with their connection to the documents they view as well as the networks they form with archivists and collectors around the archive. Eroticism emerges when the queer eye meets the queer document meets the queer archivist.

Seeing an image of dykes on bikes in the middle of a sea of people with penises made me feel hopeful. What if there are more? Looking for “crumbs” is something that queer people are used to doing as Susie Bright painfully (and now perhaps famously) reflects in *The Celluloid Closet*:

It’s amazing how if you’re a gay audience and you’re accustomed to crumbs, how you will watch an entire movie just to see somebody wear an outfit that you think means that they are homosexual. The whole movie can be a dud, but you’re just sitting there waiting for Joan Crawford to put on her black cowboy shirt again. (Epstein and Friedman, 1995)

“Crumbs” are the kind of Berlantian (2011) “cruel optimism” that stop us from asking what we truly want and need. Here José Esteban Muñoz’s (2009) “feeling utopian” is fleeting indeed as the deep lines of trauma are rarely absent from these archival encounters (96). Looking at an old photograph has an anterior quality to it as theorized by Roland Barthes (1981) who famously noted in *Camera Lucida*, “I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake [...] Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe” (96). Death is on the horizon together with queer utopia, especially when I look at an image of joyous gay men before the 1980s when the AIDS epidemic hit. “Slow death” (Berlant 2011) is also lurking to wear down the handsome dyke on the bike and as I count all the ways in which this existence still does not fit into this world, implicated even by how much the photograph stands out in the archives.

Writing on occlusion of queer people in mainstream history, Freeman notes that “since sexual identity emerged as a concept, gays and lesbians have been figured as having no past: no childhood, no origin or precedent in nature, no family traditions or legends, and, crucially, no history as a distinct people” (2007, 182). This lack of a common history sparked a sense of urgency and desire for archival work and history among queer theorists and historians. Yet, needless to say, what is found at more traditional archives, is still predominately “gay” history and limited to white cis male bodies as an “unmarked category” in the context of LGBTQ+ culture. Haraway (2004) sees the “unmarked category” as something that “in the guise of the specific” marks what is considered “human” within “modern white patriarchal discourse” and excludes who and what are not (55). The unmarked body is “ghostly” and irresponsible, claiming “the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (Haraway 1988, 581). Being unmarked means being part of the majority, the norm, and seemingly “neutral.”

Having LGBTQ+ related objects and publications exist at the archives, on the level of mainstream culture, is a move towards diversifying the archive and challenging normativity. Yet the fact that we only have certain issues and coverage of certain events when it comes to specific events perpetuates the already restrictive and normative molds shaped by the mainstream. Including a publication such as *The Advocate* in the LGBTQ+ collection means diversifying the archive in an important, but nevertheless predictable kind of way. It is similar to having a white cis gay man on primetime television, like Anderson Cooper, to count as a representation of the entire community. Mainstream archives that include LGBTQ+ experiences are the reflection and catalyst of a culture in which it emerged. Even what comes up in one of the first boxes, Box 1, for example, or the end of the series, which is more likely to be more diverse, such as Box 79, can

speak to a bias already in place since scholars have limited by time and funds to spend looking at historical documents. What physical archives contain and which of these documents are available online are also reflective of this power dynamic. Archives are part of both mainstream heteronormative and homonormative media, which perpetuates a public imaginary and understanding of a past that repeatedly recycles the same “unmarked” images of LGBTQ+ life.

Conversely, more grassroots archives include “marked” bodies: lesbian, Black, leather, trans. Importantly, these archives are more radical about challenging what “counts as national history and how that history is told” (Cvetkovich 2003, 251). Writing about the creative approaches to archiving at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), Ann Cvetkovich explains that a “lesbian and gay history” that “demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism—all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of traditional archive” (241). Cvetkovich sees value especially in the ephemera that is usually not part of public research archives. Items such as meeting minutes, buttons, posters, flyers, are a vital part of archives such as the LHA. LHA famously has a policy to accept everything as a submission that a lesbian sees as pertinent to their experience (ibid., 243). Such an approach assumes that “affects—associated with nostalgia, personal memory, fantasy and trauma—make a document significant” (ibid., 243-44). The archives have affective power, which above all, resides in this unruly collection of items.

Including submissions from “ordinary people” does not mean that the same people can readily have access to the material. The spread of grassroots LGBTQ+ archives is predominately bicoastally biased. Archives such as ONE Lesbian and Gay Archives in Los Angeles and Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York have limited travel grants. Access to a marked archive of feelings is tied to being lucky enough to live in the same area with the archives or to have generous institutional support for travel due to expensive hotel accommodations and transportation.

Although I have been part of academic institutions that support research, I have not had the funds to go to these more grassroots archives. Time in the archives is a privilege as it is tied to money. I am always rushing to get through as many materials as I possibly can. This means using my phone to take pictures and barely moving at all from opening to closing time. I usually do not go out for lunch. I usually shove a handful of almonds and a banana during one of my bathroom breaks. Discomfort here is experienced as a physical sensation due to sleep deprivation, being dehydrated and hungry, and sitting in the same position in chilly temperatures.

Not everyone has such a spartan approach to archival work. I would roll my eyes at my historian friend who would sit next to me at the Sallie Bingham Center archives and just read the materials as they were sitting there. *Who has the time for that? Take a picture and read it at home!* Then they went to lunch with a friend and I would not see them for two hours. *Two hours!* Extra day in the archives away from home means extra expense. More and more materials are available online; however, browsing an online gallery is not the “archive of feelings” that Cvetkovich talks about, where one would experience touch, smell, and sound while in physical proximity to the ephemera. The body of the researcher is the primary source that activates feeling as it touches against and looks at buttons, photographs, t-shirts or matchbooks from gay bars.

### **Queer Networks as an Antidote to Discomfort**

Beyond the bond between the researcher and the document, I have formed some of the deepest connections with queer people in and around the archive. As I am writing this at 6:00am on the last day of 2020, I keep receiving texts from a collector and donor in the Tampa Bay area. He is a gay man in his 60s with whom I

have formed a friendship. He sends me tales of cruising around the world and, at times, images of gay male erotica that would make Tom of Finland blush. I met him when I gave a talk on the Gay Surfer collection at the University of South Florida in the fall of 2019. He came to my talk since he was the one who donated this unique and jaw-droppingly extensive collection to the university. We have been texting and emailing on a weekly basis ever since.

No one is more surprised than me that some of the kindest and most intellectually invigorating relationships have formed around the chilly space of the archive. Evoking Stacie Williams (2016) who points out that archival labor “is often times unequal, rooted historically in sexism, racism, ableism, and classism” (Williams 2016), Maryanne Dever (2017) asks that we “reflect on our dependence upon the ‘invisible’, taken-for-granted and often precarious labour” (1). I have depended on that labor and found immense support in the unofficial queer feminist networks that operate behind the scenes of the archives. These unofficial networks include scholars, archivists, and community members who identify as queer and/or feminists and are crucial in contributing to the conditions that establish an archive of feeling.

At Cornell, I was guided through the archives by an older lesbian archivist who was longtime friends with my graduate school advisor, a butch LGBTQ+ historian herself. This intergenerational friendship with the lesbian archivist has lived on in Instagram and Facebook. I do not have the same kinds of relationships with the cis hetero men I have met at the archives. In 2017-2018, I had a postdoctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Museum of American History. My mentor there, an older butch lesbian, was my guide through the LGBTQ+ collection at the Archives Center and in the city. Another connection I made through archival research was with a queer femme archivist in charge of the LGBTQ+ collection at the Library of Congress. They saw my talk and asked me on a “date” in the archives where we drank coffee, looked through materials, and read queer comics. They later invited me to give a talk on queer comics at the LOC. I see these connections vital not just to a queer archive of feelings, but to queer world-making of which collecting and remembering are essential parts. These are the moments in archival work that break down discomfort.

Connections like these are erotic to me the way Audre Lorde talks about eroticism in her famous 1978 essay, “Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power.” For Lorde, the erotic is “the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge” and opposite to the pornographic, which “emphasizes sensation without feeling” (88-89). Eroticism is a way of engaging with the world that would allow us to extend social belonging beyond the sexual—to all possible material and non-material interactions. I value the relationships I have formed with the archivists more than the materials I found inside the walls of the archive. I still see the importance of finding eroticism in historical thinking as Freeman (2007) suggests, but I find it even more important to lean in the erotic connections I have with people around the archive, which are not often discussed as part of research. This is my archive of feelings: the feral, the silly, the utopian, the gossipy, the ephemeral, yet also, as genuine as it can get when it comes to human connection. Being intentional about these networks and holding space for each other in the archives is part what I see as queer archive activism. I examine this concept and its application to my gender studies classroom in the next section.

### **Queer Archive Activism in the Feminist Classroom**

The term “queer archive activism” was first used by scholar, filmmaker, and AIDS activist, Alexandra Juhasz (2006) to discuss her experimental videotape *Video Remains*. For Juhasz, “queer archive activism” is a process through which archival materials can be repurposed and put to use. Similarly, Cvetkovich (2011) sees queer archive activism as a way of archiving that is not just about “safeguarding objects, but also as a resource that ‘comes out’ into the world to perform public interventions” (32). Archivist and scholar, Alana Kumbier (2014) emphasizes the importance of community engagement in what she calls “archiving from

the ground up” through which “we have the opportunity to explicitly identify – and share – the power to represent, to define, to describe, and to organize materials in the archive as part of our practice” (151). Other scholars have also seen mutuality as key to archival justice (Joseph 2002; Christen and Anderson 2019).

Big structural changes that redistribute where colleges and institutions spend their money are needed to create such shifts in archival work. As most of us, I am not in a position to be part of such conversations. Non-tenure track faculty make up about three-quarters of the faculty appointments in higher education (Flaherty 2018). When public discourse (or popular media) describes necessary changes in curriculum or the university systems that uphold racism or homophobia, contingent faculty, myself included, have almost no say in how to create meaningful change. I have no power to change the course offerings at my institution or make budgetary decisions that would support progressive actions.

Yet, where I do have power is within my classroom: to teach my students to notice and critique the structural racism that is part of the institution and its archives. As a queer feminist, I see this critique as major part of my job and service at the institution that employs me, even if doing so undermines some of their current policies and practices. I have been a contingent faculty member in four very different institutions since getting my PhD in August 2016. I’ve held two positions in small private liberal arts colleges in the Midwest, a small public R2 in Virginia, and at the time of writing this paper at a large R1 in southern Florida.

I see the archive and the library as symbolically, architecturally, and culturally disciplinary space that need to be interrogated in the feminist classroom. The exclusionary nature of archives can be challenged through feral pedagogy (Campbell 2019) that uses hands-on assignments and allows even contingent faculty to challenge the bias of institutionalized archive in their classrooms. I bring students to the university archives because the archives are a white middle-class exclusionary construction that reflect the institutions’ alignments and put many historically underrepresented students at a disadvantage. There is so much mythology around the archives and students are often scared of engaging with the materials, especially first-generation college students. Some of my students have been afraid to touch the photos, thinking they would somehow break. The university archive is a source of deep discomfort for many students.

Over the years, I have designed several assignments that have challenged the institutional cis-hetero-white bias. When I was teaching my first semester after graduation at William & Mary, as part of our Queer Comics class, I asked students to create their own comics. The question was: *What kind of experiences you do not see when you look outside yourself? Create a window through comics to fill this absence.* The works were absolutely stunning. We put together an exhibit, which took up the space on the first floor of the library, an area that was most popular among studying students and adjacent to special collections. The topics that students focused on included: asexuality, queer interracial relationships, bisexuality, and abuse in queer relationships. The exhibit was so convincing that the Special Collections included the works as part of their LGBTQ+ collection on site. In this case, the students changed the archive and made it their own—the comics represent a moment in time in the LGBTQ+ community at William & Mary from the student perspective contributing to the inclusivity of the library.

For my LGBTQ+ Cultures class in winter 2020 at the University of South Florida, I combined traditional archives (old media) with DIY digital archiving. We started with the library’s Special Collections. Each student chose a photograph from the library’s LGBTQ+ Collection and conducted research to see what else they could find out about the people in the image (Who are they? When and where was this taken?). Then students learned how to use StoryMaps and created their own digital archive that included photographs and stories from the Special Collections and their personal images and stories related to LGBTQ+ sites in Florida. StoryMaps allowed students to put their own unique stories next to the stories

they found in the archives and undo the exclusionary space of the archive by making the materials they engaged with their own.

These sets of assignments challenge the hierarchy between experiences that are archived and the experiences that are not. Just because something is in the archives does not mean that it is more important. It can mean, however, that it was middle-class, white, cis, or/and male. Here the archive as a metaphor bridges the gap between the individual who does not fit the institution and the archive as a space on campus. Recognizing that we each can have our own archive and that we can contribute parts of this archive to the brick-and-mortar archive challenges the elitism of the latter.

### **Conclusion: A Case for Feelings Beyond the Queer Archive**

It is counterproductive to set up a binary between the “marked” queer archive of feelings and the “unmarked” white cis hetero mainstream archive of no feelings. This binary is difficult to define, but above all, sets us up to see the first as irrational and the latter as rational. It also lessens the possibility of being open to queer encounters in the “traditional” archive. To challenge this restrictive notion of the archive, I have found Ann Laura Stoler’s work most helpful, although it has close to nothing to do with us queers.

In *Along the Archival Grain*, Stoler (2008) provides critique of the archives as an ideological state apparatus by bringing to the reader the messy realities of nineteenth century Dutch colonists in the West Indies. Stoler shows that an orderly image of the colonial society is wrong and “archives are not simply accounts of actions or records of what people thought happened. They are records of uncertainty and doubt in how people imagined they could and might make the rubrics of rule correspond to a changing imperial world” (4). In other words, archives are a hot mess, that bring us the “confused assessments, parenthetic doubts about what might count as evidence, the records of eyewitnesses with dubious credentials, dismissed rumors laced with pertinent truths, contradictory testimonies called upon and quickly discarded” (ibid., 23). By focusing her historian’s lens on “the affective knowledge that was at the core of political rationality,” Stoler (2008, 98) undoes the one-dimensional picture of the European colonialism in Asia that inflects traditional history writing. To me, Stoler also does much more.

Stoler considers the “feel of documents” as central to the archival experience, which queers what is seen as a “traditional” archive, although she does not explicitly say so (2008, 1). Her idea of an unruly archive is not unlike Muñoz’s insistence of a metaphorical queer archive that is gossipy, ephemeral (1996, 10), and incommensurable (2009, 65); or Jack Halberstam’s (2005) archive of “subterranean scenes, fly-by-night clubs, and fleeting trends” (161). It is not just the queer archive that I want to see full of feelings, I want to see feelings part of the “cis hetero” archive as well.

In *Trouble with Normal*, Michael Warner (1999) talks about sexual shame as a way to stigmatize queer sex and experiences. He suggests that we see all sexual practices (gay, queer, and hetero) as perverse in order to erase stigma. The same could be said about the queer archive. Thinking about the queer archive as an “archive of feelings” that is “both material and immaterial” (Cvetkovich 2003, 244) makes it stand out in contrast to the traditional archive. Yet, feelings are not reserved for us queers. If we see feelings as central to all archives, we can begin to thinking about what that means in terms of time, space, and funds spent in the process of collecting, preserving, and reading.

Today institutional archives have become laxer in terms of what kind of items are deemed valuable enough to inhabit their spaces. The differences between collections and tensions between institutional public research archives and more grassroots ones have become less poignant. The United States is at a crucial moment in time when it comes to institutions that hold memory and culture. The protests of 2020 made it clear that the art and archival institutions as such cannot remain unchanged in their old ways. Even

though, large scale public history projects by the Department of the Interior and National Park Service have been catching up with the “social history” since the 1960s when several social movements transformed American culture, including the way we understand history, this is not enough. Today, it is not enough to talk about representation or inclusion, it is about undoing the institutions that hold space for these representations. It is a task that is too big for most of us to take on individually, or even as pockets of queer resistance. However, as I have laid out here in this essay, it is possible to start chipping away the harm that continues to be done by most institutional archives that remain unchanged. We can do this by openly sharing and documenting all our sensations in the archives, pointing out the wrongs and rights whenever possible, and teaching our students to do the same.

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## Notes

1. It is important to note that not all archives are funded by the government. Some of the most well known LGBTQ+ ones are grassroots endeavors. However, the ones that are more easily accessible (located in bigger cities and have fellowships for travel) tend to be.

2. For more on negative affects see Silvan Tomkins (1963).

3. For more on this discussion, see True Tirza Latimer (2013); Anjali Arondekar et al. (2015); and Kate Eichhorn (2014).

4. This approach has semblances to Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concept of “textual poaching” and Levi-Strauss’s (1966) “social bricolage” as modes of cultural consumption and meaning making.

5. A useful crowdsourced guide to temperatures at archives across the world–“How Cold Is That Library?”–can be found here: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Jeb1W-VZuuCSWpRdotBragqoer57V7DAJg\\_D3ajwrmo/htmlview#gid=0](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Jeb1W-VZuuCSWpRdotBragqoer57V7DAJg_D3ajwrmo/htmlview#gid=0)

6. *Cashbox* magazine was a trade magazine for the music industry the print edition of which ran from 1942-1996. The digitalized project physically located at William & Mary can be found here: <https://digitalarchive.wm.edu/handle/10288/16817>

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