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Introduction: Feminist Engagements With the Queer Archive

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Feminist Engagements with the Queer Archive

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Introduction

In this special issue of *The Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, we explore the queer archive as a site of feminist potential, where feminist methods and theoretical perspectives might power a productive dialogue about the possibilities and limitations of archiving the queer and queering the archive. An archive, broadly conceived, is a collection of historical records—“the documentary by-product of human activity retained for their long-term value” (ica.org). Archives, in their myriad forms, serve to document the activities and business dealings of individuals, families, corporations, associations, communities, and nation-states. The queer archive is an intervention into mainstream archives that would disappear or pathologize queer love, queer sex, queer individuals, and queer communities. It is a site of recovery and remembrance, a space for queer worldbuilding, and a place where dominant histories are challenged, negotiated, and affirmed.

The queer archive is a site of recovery, or the un-covering of LGBTQ lives that have been systematically ignored, denied, buried, or erased. Gina Watts (2018) writes, “Archives represent material history: the idea that a person can find their families, or those whose lives mirrored theirs, in an acid-free box, and in doing so, find themselves, be recognized by the historical record, and claim their right to take up space in the world” (104). Recovery projects, then, are often about taking up space—the physical space of the archive itself, and the social space of being deemed archivable. In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love (2007) underlines the importance of historical recognition for queers, “The longing for community across time is a crucial feature of queer historical experience, one produced by the historical isolation of individual queers as well as by the damaged quality of the historical archive” (41). Despite the damaged historical archive, rooted in normative white heteropatriarchy that pathologizes or erases queerness, blackness, otherness, A.J. Lewis (2014) warns us against getting caught up in absence and mere recovery, “By insistently positing the queer archive as an archive of absence, we risk becoming poorly attuned to its peculiar and capricious presences. Upon closer inspection, the apparently empty archive may, in fact, be much more bountiful, and much queerer than we expected” (28).

Beyond a mere site of recovery, the queer archive is a place for queer worldbuilding, or the creation of alternative and affirming spaces, histories, and cultures. The queer archive is a powerful site of collective memory and identity *construction*. Queer histories are not merely collected and represented in the archive but are created and disseminated through the archive. Jack Halberstam (2005) notes:

[T]he archive is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function, it requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making. (169-70)

Because the queer archive is a collective project of community and identity construction, it can often serve to not only challenge dominant histories that exclude LGBTQ lives, but to create new dominant histories of exclusion within LGBTQ communities. In the words of Lewis, “history constitutes and decimates its objects . . . every knowledge form consolidates itself through mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion” (29).

For this special issue we asked for a critical, feminist engagement with the queer archive: how can we use feminist methods and theory to resist the colonizing effects of the queer archive? How might we move beyond white and western-centric notions of the queer and of the archive to explore the diversity of the queer archive as a global project? How might a feminist approach to the queer archive reveal the ways in which intersecting forms of oppression operate within and through the archive? What might feminist scholars learn from the worldbuilding practices of the queer archive? How can feminist theory and methods contribute to a truly liberatory practice of archiving the queer?

Archiving the Queer and Queering the Archive

Queer lives, past and present, are constituted by voices that swell with the complex measures of our joys and our struggles against annihilating silence.

—Charles E. Morris

Ann Cvetkovich (2003), queer theorist and archivist, notes “that gay and lesbian history even exists has been a contested fact, and the struggle to record and preserve it is exacerbated by the invisibility that often surrounds intimate life, especially sexuality” (272). As a result of the invisibility of sexuality and sexual practice, as well as the deliberate silencing of all who fall outside of the stringent categories of normative gender and sexuality, queer archivists and historians often find themselves reading between the lines to uncover the queer past.

Queer archive scholars argue that central to the lives and experiences of LGBTQ individuals and communities are deeply felt emotion and trauma (Cvetkovich 2003; Campbell and Stevens 2009; Ahmed 2009). As a result, “an unusual archive . . . that resists coherence of narrative or that is fragmented and ostensibly arbitrary” is required (Cvetkovich 2003, 242).

To satisfy the demand for an “unusual archive,” queer archivists have turned to various forms of art and technology. Mél Hogan (2009) notes, “New means of communication have thus afforded otherwise invisible and marginalized lesbian communities the means with which to re-represent community, challenge dominant representations, highlight the importance of minority representation itself, and archive the results of their activity and activism” (210). These new means of communication include podcasts (Hogan 2009), documentary films (Juhasz 2006), social networking sites (Cover 2019), art installations (Cvetkovich 2013), and digital archives (Rawson 2013).

In one such example Alexandra Juhasz (2006), using experimental documentary filmmaking, created a digital archive of AIDS which consists of videotaped interviews with persons with AIDS and their loved ones. She notes that, “we can use archival media to remember, feel anew, analyze, and educate, ungluing the past from its melancholic grip, and instead living it as a gift with others in the here and now” (326). In another example, Cheryl Dunye (1996) wrote, directed, and starred in a fictional documentary film *The Watermelon Woman*, that details a nonexistent Black, lesbian actress that is all but absent in the (also fictional) institutional lesbian archive to explore the multiple oppressions that make Black, lesbian women invisible, even in the queer archive. In addition to being used in creating an “unusual archive” that can challenge dominant representations, technology is being utilized by queer archives and archivists to make more accessible those multiple histories being recorded (Harvey 2011; Hogan 2006). The digitization

of formerly only brick and mortar archives such as The Lesbian Herstory Archives and ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, and the creation of natively digital queer archives such as the Digital Transgender Archives and the Queer Digital History Project are but a few examples.

Queer theorists invested in archiving LGBTQ lives present a strong case for queering the archive. This must happen on two fronts: we must confront hegemonic culture and provide alternatives to dominant histories while simultaneously resisting the mainstreaming of queer culture which would normalize certain bodies, behaviors, and modes of being, while pathologizing others. Post-colonial critiques of the archive remind us that merely incorporating the marginalized subject into the archive or mining the existing archive for mention of the marginalized subject is not enough to counter erasure or misrepresentation (Spivak 1988; Arondekar 2005; Lewis 2014; Chakrabarty 2000). How then does one approach the queer archive? Lewis (2014) suggests that queering the archive “is about recalling and renewing the historical imperative to apply critical pressure to the type of knowledge we inherit in relation to sexuality and gender and the manner through which we inherit it” (3).

For some, this requires abandoning deeply engrained linear progress narratives and success stories that would exclude many queer lives and experiences that do not align with such narratives (Ahmed 2009; Halberstam 2003; Mills 2006). Robert Mills (2006) offers an inspired vision of the forms that queer history and queer archives can take when they move beyond linear-progress narratives:

Linear-progress narratives will be abandoned in favour of stories that take as their point of departure sexual intensities, tastes and roles, gender dissonances, dispositions and styles, queer feelings, emotions and desires. Queer-history exhibitions will adopt a style of presentation partly modeled on scrapbooks and collage; in place of the representative “object,” they will appropriate fragments, snippets of gossip, speculations, irreverent half-truths. Museum-goers will be invited to consume their histories queerly—interacting with exhibits that self-consciously resist grand narratives and categorical assertions. It will be a mode of display, collecting, and curating driven not by a desire for a petrified “history as it really was” but by the recognition that interpretations change and that our encounters with archives are saturated with desire. (262)

A model so far from traditional understandings of the archival process, Mills’s description takes on a utopic quality. His repeated use of “it will” throughout the passage marks it as a possibility that hovers in the somewhat distant future, just waiting for some brave queer soul(s) to take it up as a set of blueprints for the creation of a truly *queer* archive of the queer. As José Esteban Muñoz (2009) points out, queer is potential never fully realized. Instead, queer is something we should constantly and consistently strive towards. Documenting and, in fact, celebrating “queer uses of time and space [which] develop in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction,” then become central to this project of queering the archive (Halberstam 2003, 314).

Feminist Engagements with the Queer Archive

While contributors to this special issue engage a variety of topics across disciplines, one can readily trace the lines of convergence and connection across each essay. The contributors call for creative and inclusive approaches to research methods that might grasp the complexity and ephemerality of queer archives. Autoethnography, oral history, queer readings, interview, attention to ghostly hauntings, embodied experience, photography, and desire are all methodological tools employed by scholars contributing to this collection.

Essays in this special issue are particularly attuned to absence and traces, the ephemeral, and the ghostly. As Lewis (2014) points out, “Confronted with such barely perceptible traces, part of the appeal of listening to ghosts may be that it offers explanatory frames that, while not traditionally historical, still help us annex some of the archive’s unruly materials to the narrative and political aspirations that have characterized queer history all along” (24-25). Acknowledgement of queer absence in the archives leads to recovery projects which often critically engage traditional, institutional archives in the search for queer lives and culture. In “Archives of ‘Sexual Deviance:’ Recovering the Queer Prisoner,” Vic Overdorf investigates several federal prison archives from the 1930s to the 1950s, asking, “how can we employ feminist methodology in the recovery of queer voices from prison archives?” (7). Overdorf urges us to treat queer voices in the federal prison archives as recoverable and not lost. They argue that through interdisciplinary methodologies such as queer oral history, researchers should practice “a meticulous exhumation of the moments of agency that slipped through the cracks of institutional archives” (8).

In “History, Erasure, Activism: Archival Paradox as Institutional Practice,” Sarah Salter mines an obscure collection in Penn State’s archival collection to piece together the story of Penn State’s first student homophile organization, HOPS. Salter not only uncovers the history of HOPS, but also the history of Penn State’s repressive and discriminatory treatment of sexual minorities—treatment that resulted in legal action taken against the institution by the HOPS organization and by a student teacher in the early 1970s. Salter reveals how this institutional history has been erased and replaced by the current reputation of the institution as a leader in LGBTQ-friendly colleges and universities, highlighting the flexibility of the archival record through framing and re-framing.

In another critical recovery project, “Erotic Fever in the ArQuives: Imagining a Queer Porn Paradise in Cait McKinney and Hazel Meyer’s Exhibition, *Tape Condition: degraded*,” Genevieve Flavelle examines the counter archive created by McKinney and Meyer and argues that *Tape Condition: degraded* makes a compelling case for porn as a vital historical record of sexual cultures and art as an avenue through which absences in historical representation can be rectified. Employing a “reparative desire-based methodology” (61) and queering Derrida’s notion of archive fever, Flavelle presents a theory of erotic fever and reminds us that queer archives, too, need queering.

While Flavelle reminds us of the necessity of queering the queer archive, Pauline Junginger and Marian Dörk consider the pragmatism of employing seemingly normalizing identity categories and archival classification systems to the queer archive. Drawing from their case studies of three archives documenting lesbian, trans, and queer-feminist histories, in “Categorizing Queer Identities: An Analysis of Archival Practices Using the Concept of Boundary Objects,” Junginger and Dörk explore the ways in which queer archives strategically apply identity categories and negotiate classification systems. The authors argue that the individualized categorization systems employed by each archive become historical artifacts in and of themselves, providing context to the particular history of the organization.

In “Kate O’Brien: Queer Hauntings in the Feminist Archive,” author Naoise Murphy maintains that “even for writers hailed as feminist, queerness is placed in a position of haunting” (80). Engaging in a critical, affective reading of the Museum of Literature Ireland’s exhibition, *Kate O’Brien: Arrow to the Heart*, Murphy notes that despite the museum’s narrative of the exhibit as feminist recovery of Irish women writers’ voices, the exhibition disappears O’Brien’s queerness, inviting a critical reflection on the relationship between feminist and queer archival politics. As an Irish queer, Murphy explores her affective response to the exhibit which she experiences as a haunted site.

Essays in this special issue collection challenge the reader to expand their understanding of what constitutes an archive. Moving beyond the call to acknowledge the place of ephemera in the archive (Halberstam 2003; Muñoz 1996), and the inclusion of affect as archivable record (Cvetkovich 2003; Juhasz 2006; Campbell and Stevens 2009), Alexandria Naima Smith invites us to attend to the embodied archive.

In “Being in the Black Queer Diaspora: Embodied Archives in *A Map to the Door of No Return*,” Smith positions the Black, queer body as a site of historical knowledge and argues that “the embodied experiences of Black queer subjects form an archive for understanding operations of power within Black queer diasporas” (92). Smith draws on Dionne Brand’s memoir to theorize sensual worldmaking. Sensual worldmaking, an alternative and resistance to colonial worldmaking, describes how “Black queer subjects form an archive for understanding operations of power within Black queer diasporas.”

In “An Offering on the Altar of Queer History: Amalia Mesa-Bains and *Sor Juana’s Library*,” Maria P. Chaves Daza situates the domestic altar as an archive and a space for queer memory. Employing *domesticana*, an aesthetic practice that repurposes and makes use of everyday materials, Chicana artist Amalia Mesa-Bains “redefines women’s relationships to religion, nation and each other by revaluing the practice of putting an altar together and inserting Sor Juana as a rebellious feminist icon worthy of worship” (112). Daza recognizes the domestic altar, as a queer archive of hybrid subjectivity, and a form of resistance to colonial logics.

Several essays in this collection seek to further queer the archive by foregrounding desire and pleasure, two elements that are noticeably absent in traditional archives. For example, in “I Hate the Archives: A Queer Lesbian Autoethnography,” author Helis Sikk employs autoethnography to explore the role of desire and discomfort in the archive. She argues that forces external to the archive, such as community networks and human connection, impact one’s affective experience of the archive, and hence, the archive itself. Recognizing the role of archives as “symbolically, architecturally, and culturally disciplinary space” (128), Sikk invites those engaging with archives to pay particular attention to moments of discomfort experienced within the archive as they can serve as moments of queer potential. Sikk writes that queer feelings of discomfort allow us to “reorient” in the space and form new attachments, and notes that discomfort offers alternative ways of relating to people and objects and opens the door to experiences of pleasure (120).

Throughout this issue, contributors invite us to consider the queer archive in new and innovative ways. These feminist engagements with the queer archive ask us to grapple with the following questions: How might we, as feminist scholars, apply feminist methods and theories to trace and interrogate the flow of power within and across archival institutions and heritage sites? How might we internalize the lessons of the queer archive and apply them to other feminist projects? How can we more broadly conceive what constitutes the queer archive and its potentials? My hope is for these essays to inspire you, as they inspire me, to engage with, to queer, to decolonize, the queer archive.

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