

Out of the Closet, Into the Archives







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SUNY series in Queer Politics and Cultures

Cynthia Burack and Jyl J. Josephson, editors







Out of the Closet, **Into the Archives**

Researching Sexual Histories

Edited by Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell





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In remembrance of LGBTQ voices, both within and beyond the archive.

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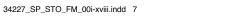
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Chapter 10

Putting Trans* History on the Shelves

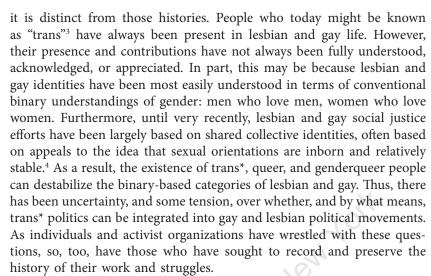
The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, Canada¹

Aaron H. Devor And Lara Wilson

Why a Trans* Archives?

Knowing one's history is essential to having a clearly formed identity. One can learn the history of one's people in many ways, not the least of which is through examining material records of the past. Archives are an indispensible way for people to learn their heritage, by providing accounts of past facts, acts, and events. As expressed in the "Universal Declaration on Archives," issued in 2010 by the International Council on Archives and adopted in 2011 by UNESCO2: "Archives record decisions, actions and memories. Archives are a unique and irreplaceable heritage passed from one generation to another. . . . They are authoritative sources of information . . . [that] play an essential role in the development of societies by safeguarding and contributing to individual and community memory. Open access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality of life."

Trans* people need to know their past, both as it intertwines with the histories of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer people, and also as



Similar definitional issues have existed since the concept of homosexual identity was first developed at the turn of the last century. Early sexologists assumed that homosexuality was epitomized by females who wanted to be men and by males who wanted to be women. For example, a 1920 article in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, which described the transformation of Ms. Lucille Hart into Dr. Alan Hart, was titled *Homosexuality and Its Treatment*. Similarly, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, about a female who yearned to be a man, almost single-handedly defined lesbianism in the popular imagination for most of the twentieth century. Understandably, when homophobia is enacted by punishing gender transgressions, many cisgendered gays and lesbians are reluctant to risk being confused with trans* people.

After a brief period of trans* activism in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century, it was only in the 1960s that trans* people again began to build their own social and political organizations. At the same time, in the last half-century there have also been many examples of trans* people being shunned by gay and lesbian political organizations, or of having their trans* histories expropriated as lesbian or gay. However, many gay and lesbian organizations have also started to embrace and endorse the fight for trans* rights.

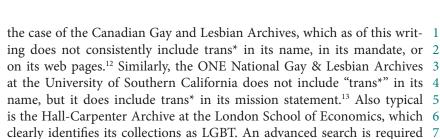
These same historical currents have been at play in the building of LGBTQ+ archival collections. Most such archives, originally conceived as lesbian and gay, have latterly begun to include trans* in their mandates and on their shelves. However, progress has been uneven. Illustrative is





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The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria

to uncover the small number of trans* items in the collection.¹⁴

The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria is distinctive in its focus, size, and scope. Our mission is to acquire materials relating to the history of pioneering activists, community leaders, and researchers who have contributed to the betterment of transgender people anywhere in the world. At approximately 320 linear feet (98 linear meters), our collection is the largest trans*-focussed archives in the world. The University of Victoria Transgender Archives is comprised of circulating monographs, rare books, periodical titles (including trans* community 20 newsletters and periodicals), educational pamphlets, audiovisual recordings, personal papers of key individual activists and researchers (including correspondence), organizational records, and ephemera (such as buttons and posters). Housed in Special Collections and University Archives, a unit of the University of Victoria Libraries, the collection includes materials from seventeen countries, with research materials going back more than one hundred years and activist records reaching back more than 27 fifty years.

The Transgender Archives came into existence through a combination of serendipity and years of groundwork by Aaron Devor. The 30
groundwork consisted of decades of transgender scholarship, education, 31
and community involvement around the world and at the University of 32
Victoria. Aaron Devor was very well known and well integrated into transgender research and activist circles, and the University of Victoria was 34
unusually welcoming and supportive of transgender initiatives. The serendipity began in 2005 over a quiet lunch between Rikki Swin and Aaron 36
Devor in a small out-of-the-way restaurant in Victoria, BC. Rikki Swin, 37
founder of the Rikki Swin Institute of Chicago (2001–2004), had recently 38
moved to Victoria and was considering bringing the institute to Victoria. 39
When Aaron suggested the University of Victoria as a possible home for 40





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Aaron H. Devor and Lara Wilson

the collections, Rikki was open to the idea. After much negotiation, in 2007, over a hundred boxes containing the entire institute became a gift to the University of Victoria Archives and Special Collections.

The next major addition came from the daughter of deceased philanthropist and activist Reed Erickson, founder of the Erickson Educational Foundation (1964–1984).¹⁷ Aaron Devor had been almost single-handedly responsible for bringing attention to Erickson's tremendous contributions to the development of transgender research and activism.¹⁸ When his daughter was ready to donate his papers, she chose the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria in appreciation for the work that Aaron had done to bring recognition to her father's work. It was only after this second major collection of over seventy banker's boxes arrived late in 2007 that we started to think of these distinct holdings as the Transgender Archives. Aaron began to solicit collections from many of the veteran activists and researchers whom he knew. All were pleased to hear that a safe and secure place had been established to preservetransgender history. Many were forthcoming with their own collections, or with promises to donate them when the time was right.

By 2011 we were ready to launch the Transgender Archives. We did so at a plenary session of the twenty-second biennial meeting of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health. Once the word was out, many more collections began to roll in, both large and small. The next major collection came to us from Professor Richard Ekins of the University of Ulster, Northern Ireland, UK. The University of Ulster collection was very large, focusing on the UK, and with significant European content. When it arrived early in 2013, it consisted of a treasure trove of fifty-eight large moving boxes containing everything from monographs to matchbooks.¹⁹ The Transgender Archives has been further enhanced by numerous other smaller and important contributions.²⁰ We continue to collect, catalog, and digitize, as funds permit.

We are now at a crucial time in the history of trans* activism and research. The people who initiated the wave of self-conscious trans* activism that began in the 1960s are reaching the ends of their lifetimes. Many individuals who had the foresight to begin personal archival collections in previous decades are reaching points in their lives when they are considering their legacies to future generations. For most, the items in their collections were lifelines during times of intense isolation, pervasive hostility, and socially supported denigration of anyone and anything trans*. Often they stored their precious collections in private spaces for decades because they had nowhere more secure to place them. Sadly, some valu-







able records have been lost, either because their owners were no longer 1 able to care for them or because no one knew to whom it would be safe 2 to donate these rare and unique materials.

Being situated in North America, the records of the Transgender 4
Archives are weighted toward activism and research in Canada and the 5
United States, with an international reach, most notably representing the 6
United Kingdom. Holdings include over 800 books, including many rare, 7
hard-to-find, and first editions; an extensive collection of informational 8
pamphlets and booklets, generally produced by advocacy organizations 9
for educational purposes; organizational records for several significant 10
trans* activist groups, as well as personal papers from some of the leaders 11
of those organizations; more than 400 journal and newsletter titles from 12
trans* communities around the world; a varied multimedia collection representing and recording trans* experience; and a wide range of ephemera. 14

For most donors, the decision to give their archives and collections to a public institution comes after much consideration about the disposition of their cherished materials. Communities and individuals choose to acquire and keep their material in various ways, allowing for different types of uses than those of university archives; it is understandable that creators of materials from grassroots initiatives may wish their materials to physically stay in the local community, with the primary goal of giving community members access to information.²¹ It can be argued that the goal of academic archives is to balance both research use and long-term preservation. Some of the advantages of donating trans* materials to an established university include stable funding and dedicated physical and human resources. Although no institution will last forever and budgets are subject to reductions, the Transgender Archives is part of a large, publicly funded, research-intensive university committed to developing and preserving this unique collection for teaching, research, trans* community use, and for the social good.

Challenges

While the very establishment of the Transgender Archives is a significant accomplishment, we need to be mindful of whether our ongoing acquisition, access, and preservation activities are meeting the needs of the communities we serve. In some ways, these concerns are common to many archives and special collections; in other ways, trans* materials pose their own special challenges.





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The value of academic archives and rare-book libraries as custodians of primary source materials is generally obvious to historians, writers, genealogists, and academic researchers. However, to people not acquainted with the academy, university archives and special collections may seem physically remote and politically disconnected from their communities. Thus, some trans* activists may consider a university library to be a lessthan-ideal site for preservation of trans* history.

Archives and special collections in North America do not see the same level of use as public libraries, museums, or community resource centers—archives' role in society is primarily as protector of documentary history, not as interpreters of it. Additionally, the general public does not commonly understand how to access archives and special collections. Specialized archival terminology may intimidate some users, who may not be comfortable asking staff for explanation of terms. Frequent backlogs in standards-based archival processing can result in delays to access; this is frustrating for donors, archives and library users, as well as the archivists and librarians who want the information to be available and of benefit to users as soon as possible. Additionally, archives are typically open during weekday business hours and are closed on weekends and evenings, limiting on-site use of materials; such limited hours are a barrier to all people who work those hours and to awareness about archives and special collections and their services. However, the information in the primary sources that archives and rare book collections hold contributes to the writing of histories, to legal research, to the production of creative works, and to many other endeavors that require people to seek out information from the past.

The Transgender Archives recognizes that outreach is a key element 28 in creating a welcoming space, a space where anyone with an interest in the materials can study them in an accepting, nonthreatening environment. By engaging with both traditional and new patrons, by providing access to primary sources, by increasing awareness about the collections that have been entrusted to our care—including promotion both within, and outside of, the academy—we hope to facilitate linkages between history and human rights, and to promote awareness and understanding of trans* people in society.

While we can take a proactive approach to building this collection by engaging with persons or organizations we know to hold original records of trans* history, these potential donors will make their own choices about when and where to give their archives and libraries. Presently, the Transgender Archives holds more primary sources about







transwomen than about transmen—such is the nature of the documents, 1 publications, and ephemeral materials donated to us so far. Some potential 2 donors are still using their materials every day; other material is only now 3 being created by activists, advocates, and researchers. If patrons become 4 frustrated when they do not find what they are seeking, or are disappointed if they do not see their own experience reflected in the material, 6 they may turn away from the archives, or they may be inspired to embark 7 upon a new direction to their research. Such interactions with researchers are helpful in guiding future development of the collection.

Various aspects of providing access to archival and rare publications collections have been identified as barriers. These become especially 11 salient for a trans* archive that wishes to be of use to those trans* people 12 who are unaccustomed to the conventions of academic scholarship. Some 13 of these issues have been noted by Rawson and Adler. A number of concerns are associated with providing personal identification information, 15 which is common practice in archival and rare books collections due to 16 concerns about the physical security of the materials, and as part of the 17 practice in many institutions of conducting a formal "research interview" 18 with patrons before access is provided:

- Access to noncirculating materials requires provision of an identity document (typically a photo ID), but some trans* people may not have photo ID that matches their current gender expression.
- Patron registration generally includes the collection of basic personal information, such as name, email address, and status as student, faculty, or community researcher. However, some trans* people may feel unsafe having a record made that they were accessing trans* materials.²³
- To protect privacy, access to materials with sensitive personal information requires users to sign a research agreement identifying which files or items they wish to view. A research agreement includes personal information so that potential follow-up can be made with the patron to verify that identifying information from the documents is not disclosed. Some trans* people may feel this requirement to be an intrusion, especially if their ID does not properly reflect their gender expression.





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- An archives' capacity to digitize holdings may not meet user demand. Many consumers of information today have a great desire for unrestricted access to information, trans* people especially so because the Internet affords the freedom of anonymity. However, it may not be possible to satisfy user desires for digitization, due to libraries' capacity or copyright, privacy, or other restrictions stipulated by law, by donors, or by the archives.
- Commonly found Library of Congress cataloging subject headings, such as "transvestism" and "transsexualism," may not reflect current norms, whereas more current terms such as "transgender," "trans*," or "genderqueer" are not commonly used. Users may find these older terms offensive.
- While a biographical sketch element of an archival description may or may not identify previous names of the records' creators, it is common for archivists to conduct research so as to provide complete biographical information (including variant names). However, some trans* donors, or trans* people who are mentioned in the records, may not wish to have their previous names disseminated.

Some of the barriers identified above may be insurmountable (e.g., security measures, privacy protection), some may be carefully modified (e.g., by limiting collection and retention of users' personal information), and still others can be more easily reconsidered (e.g., by providing diversity training for library staff, modifying subject headings, and introducing user-generated tags).²⁴ Better understandings of the potential uses, and limitations, of materials can be conveyed to patrons visiting the collections, and as a part of outreach activities.

Just as the use of academic archives and special collections may be a new experience for many seeking information on trans* history, working with trans* collections can be a new experience for archivists, librarians, and support staff. In addition to the cataloging issues noted above, those processing and cataloging need to familiarize themselves with the trans* history, activists, advocates, and organizations whose history has been saved. We are at an important moment in the preservation of trans* history, and material for preservation needs to be identified thoughtfully.

The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria is committed to preserving, and making accessible, the history and the work of pioneer-

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ing transgender activists on behalf of their communities and for the betterment of transgendered people everywhere. Key documents are slowly 2 being made available on-line as funds permit. All cataloged holdings of 3 the Transgender Archives are accessible to the public, free of charge, for 4 research, investigation, and exploration. www.transgenderarchives.uvic.ca 5

Notes

- 1. Sections of this chapter were originally published by Aaron Devor in "Preserving the Footprints of Transgender Activism: The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria," *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (2014): 200–4.
- 2. "International Council on Archives," ICA.org. International Council on Archives, accessed August 01, 2014, http://icarchives.webbler.co.uk/13343/universal-declaration-on-archives/universal-declaration-on-archives.html.
 - 3. GATE-Global Action for Trans* Equality defines Trans* as:

"Trans* people includes those people who have a gender identity which is different to the gender assigned at birth and/or those people who feel they have to, prefer to or choose to—whether by clothing, accessories, cosmetics or body modification—present themselves differently to the expectations of the gender role assigned to them at birth. This includes, among many others, transsexual and transgender people, transvestites, travesti, cross dressers, no gender, and genderqueer people.

"The term trans* should be seen as a placeholder for many identities, most of which are specific to local cultures and times in history, describing people who broaden and expand a binary understanding of gender."

"GATE. Global Action for Trans* Equality working for trans* rights internationally," accessed December 29, 2013, http://transactivists.org/trans/.

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Steven Seidman, "Introduction," in *Queer Theory/Sociology*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 1–29.

- 5. Jeffrey Weeks, Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800, 2nd ed. (London: Longman, 1981).
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- 10. Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Bodies in Motion: Lesbian and Transsexual Histories," in A Queer World: The Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, ed. Martin B. Duberman (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 134-52.
- 11. Amy L. Stone, "More than Adding T: American Lesbian and Gay Activists' Attitudes Towards Transgender Inclusion," Sexualities 12 (2009): 334-54.
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- 13. "About Us," ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives, accessed December 28, 2013, one.ucs.edu/about/.
- 14. "Collections," Hall Carpenter Archives, last modified 10 December 2013, http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/collections/featuredCollections/lgbtCollections.aspx.
- 15. A more complete account of the origins and content of the Transgender Archives can be found in Aaron H. Devor, The Transgender Archives: Foundations for the Future (Victoria, BC: University of Victoria Libraries, 2014).
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- 21. The Lesbians Making History collective can serve as an example of a grassroots collection whose creators initially decided against making their oral history recordings (including transcripts) available to academics, because the stated intent of the project was to document lesbian lives for the benefit of the lesbian community. Elise Chenier, "Hidden from Historians: Preserving Lesbian Oral History in Canada," *Archivaria* 68 (Fall 2009): 247–69.
- 22. Melissa Adler, "Transcending Library Catalogs: A Comparative Study of Controlled Terms in Library of Congress Subject Headings and User-Generated Tags in LibraryThing for Transgender Books," *Journal of Web Librarianship* 3, no. 4 (2009): 309–31. K. J. Rawson, "Accessing Transgender // Desiring Queer(er?) Archival Logics," *Archivaria* 68 (Fall 2009): 123–40.
- 23. The University of Victoria is subject to the British Columbia Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, which requires the university to protect the personal information it collects from individuals from unauthorized use and disclosure.

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Productions 1969–1997, foregrounds the centrality of sexuality to the study of southern literature as well as the region's defining role in the his-3 toriography of lesbian literature in the post-Stonewall-era United States.

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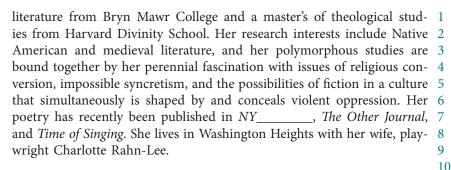
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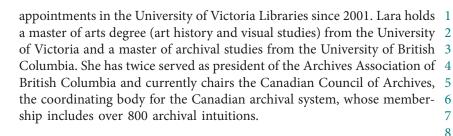
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