



**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

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Out of the Closet, Into the Archives

Researching Sexual Histories

Edited by

Amy L. Stone

and

Jaime Cantrell

SUNY
PRESS

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

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Chapter 10

Putting Trans* History on the Shelves

*The Transgender Archives at the
University of Victoria, Canada*¹

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 indispensable 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



1 it is distinct from those histories. People who today might be known
2 as “trans”³ have always been present in lesbian and gay life. However,
3 their presence and contributions have not always been fully understood,
4 acknowledged, or appreciated. In part, this may be because lesbian and
5 gay identities have been most easily understood in terms of conventional
6 binary understandings of gender: men who love men, women who love
7 women. Furthermore, until very recently, lesbian and gay social justice
8 efforts have been largely based on shared collective identities, often based
9 on appeals to the idea that sexual orientations are inborn and relatively
10 stable.⁴ As a result, the existence of trans*, queer, and genderqueer people
11 can destabilize the binary-based categories of lesbian and gay. Thus, there
12 has been uncertainty, and some tension, over whether, and by what means,
13 trans* politics can be integrated into gay and lesbian political movements.
14 As individuals and activist organizations have wrestled with these ques-
15 tions, so, too, have those who have sought to record and preserve the
16 history of their work and struggles.

17 Similar definitional issues have existed since the concept of homo-
18 sexual identity was first developed at the turn of the last century.⁵ Early
19 sexologists assumed that homosexuality was epitomized by females who
20 wanted to be men and by males who wanted to be women.⁶ For exam-
21 ple, a 1920 article in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, which
22 described the transformation of Ms. Lucille Hart into Dr. Alan Hart,
23 was titled *Homosexuality and Its Treatment*.⁷ Similarly, Radclyffe Hall’s
24 *The Well of Loneliness*, about a female who yearned to be a man, almost
25 single-handedly defined lesbianism in the popular imagination for most
26 of the twentieth century.⁸ Understandably, when homophobia is enacted
27 by punishing gender transgressions, many cisgendered gays and lesbians
28 are reluctant to risk being confused with trans* people.

29 After a brief period of trans* activism in Germany at the end of the
30 nineteenth century, it was only in the 1960s that trans* people again began
31 to build their own social and political organizations.⁹ At the same time, in
32 the last half-century there have also been many examples of trans* people
33 being shunned by gay and lesbian political organizations, or of having
34 their trans* histories expropriated as lesbian or gay.¹⁰ However, many gay
35 and lesbian organizations have also started to embrace and endorse the
36 fight for trans* rights.¹¹

37 These same historical currents have been at play in the building of
38 LGBTQ+ archival collections. Most such archives, originally conceived as
39 lesbian and gay, have latterly begun to include trans* in their mandates
40 and on their shelves. However, progress has been uneven. Illustrative is
41

the case of the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Archives, which as of this writing does not consistently include trans* in its name, in its mandate, or on its web pages.¹² Similarly, the ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California does not include “trans*” in its name, but it does include trans* in its mission statement.¹³ Also typical is the Hall-Carpenter Archive at the London School of Economics, which clearly identifies its collections as LGBT. An advanced search is required to uncover the small number of trans* items in the collection.¹⁴

The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria

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 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 fifty years.

The Transgender Archives came into existence through a combination of serendipity and years of groundwork by Aaron Devor.¹⁵ The groundwork consisted of decades of transgender scholarship, education, and community involvement around the world and at the University of Victoria. Aaron Devor was very well known and well integrated into transgender research and activist circles, and the University of Victoria was unusually welcoming and supportive of transgender initiatives. The serendipity began in 2005 over a quiet lunch between Rikki Swin and Aaron Devor in a small out-of-the-way restaurant in Victoria, BC. Rikki Swin, founder of the Rikki Swin Institute of Chicago (2001–2004),¹⁶ had recently moved to Victoria and was considering bringing the institute to Victoria. When Aaron suggested the University of Victoria as a possible home for

1 the collections, Rikki was open to the idea. After much negotiation, in
2 2007, over a hundred boxes containing the entire institute became a gift
3 to the University of Victoria Archives and Special Collections.

4 The next major addition came from the daughter of deceased philan-
5 thropist and activist Reed Erickson, founder of the Erickson Educational
6 Foundation (1964–1984).¹⁷ Aaron Devor had been almost single-handedly
7 responsible for bringing attention to Erickson's tremendous contribu-
8 tions to the development of transgender research and activism.¹⁸ When
9 his daughter was ready to donate his papers, she chose the Transgender
10 Archives at the University of Victoria in appreciation for the work that
11 Aaron had done to bring recognition to her father's work. It was only after
12 this second major collection of over seventy banker's boxes arrived late in
13 2007 that we started to think of these distinct holdings as the Transgender
14 Archives. Aaron began to solicit collections from many of the veteran
15 activists and researchers whom he knew. All were pleased to hear that a
16 safe and secure place had been established to preservetransgender history.
17 Many were forthcoming with their own collections, or with promises to
18 donate them when the time was right.

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

31 We are now at a crucial time in the history of trans* activism and
32 research. The people who initiated the wave of self-conscious trans* activ-
33 ism that began in the 1960s are reaching the ends of their lifetimes. Many
34 individuals who had the foresight to begin personal archival collections
35 in previous decades are reaching points in their lives when they are con-
36 sidering their legacies to future generations. For most, the items in their
37 collections were lifelines during times of intense isolation, pervasive hos-
38 tility, and socially supported denigration of anyone and anything trans*.
39 Often they stored their precious collections in private spaces for decades
40 because they had nowhere more secure to place them. Sadly, some valu-
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able records have been lost, either because their owners were no longer
able to care for them or because no one knew to whom it would be safe
to donate these rare and unique materials.

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

For most donors, the decision to give their archives and collections
to a public institution comes after much consideration about the dispo-
sition 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* com-
munity use, and for the social good.

Challenges

While the very establishment of the Transgender Archives is a signifi-
cant 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.

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

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

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

36 While we can take a proactive approach to building this collec-
37 tion by engaging with persons or organizations we know to hold origi-
38 nal records of trans* history, these potential donors will make their
39 own choices about when and where to give their archives and libraries.
40 Presently, the Transgender Archives holds more primary sources about
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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 disap- 5
pointed 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 8
are helpful in guiding future development of the collection. 9

Various aspects of providing access to archival and rare publica- 10
tions 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.²² A number of con- 14
cerns 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: 19

- Access to noncirculating materials requires provision of an 21
identity document (typically a photo ID), but some trans* 22
people may not have photo ID that matches their current 23
gender expression. 24
- Patron registration generally includes the collection of basic 25
personal information, such as name, email address, and sta- 26
tus as student, faculty, or community researcher. However, 27
some trans* people may feel unsafe having a record made 28
that they were accessing trans* materials.²³ 29
- To protect privacy, access to materials with sensitive per- 30
sonal information requires users to sign a research agree- 31
ment identifying which files or items they wish to view. A 32
research agreement includes personal information so that 33
potential follow-up can be made with the patron to verify 34
that identifying information from the documents is not dis- 35
closed. Some trans* people may feel this requirement to be 36
an intrusion, especially if their ID does not properly reflect 37
their gender expression. 38
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- 1 • An archives' capacity to digitize holdings may not meet user
2 demand. Many consumers of information today have a great
3 desire for unrestricted access to information, trans* people
4 especially so because the Internet affords the freedom of
5 anonymity. However, it may not be possible to satisfy user
6 desires for digitization, due to libraries' capacity or copy-
7 right, privacy, or other restrictions stipulated by law, by
8 donors, or by the archives.
- 9 • Commonly found Library of Congress cataloging subject
10 headings, such as "transvestism" and "transsexualism," may
11 not reflect current norms, whereas more current terms such
12 as "transgender," "trans*," or "genderqueer" are not com-
13 monly used. Users may find these older terms offensive.
- 14 • While a biographical sketch element of an archival descrip-
15 tion may or may not identify previous names of the records'
16 creators, it is common for archivists to conduct research
17 so as to provide complete biographical information (includ-
18 ing variant names). However, some trans* donors, or trans*
19 people who are mentioned in the records, may not wish to
20 have their previous names disseminated.

21
22
23 Some of the barriers identified above may be insurmountable (e.g., secu-
24 rity measures, privacy protection), some may be carefully modified (e.g.,
25 by limiting collection and retention of users' personal information), and
26 still others can be more easily reconsidered (e.g., by providing diversity
27 training for library staff, modifying subject headings, and introducing
28 user-generated tags).²⁴ Better understandings of the potential uses, and
29 limitations, of materials can be conveyed to patrons visiting the collec-
30 tions, and as a part of outreach activities.

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

39 The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria is committed
40 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 being made available on-line as funds permit. All cataloged holdings of the Transgender Archives are accessible to the public, free of charge, for research, investigation, and exploration. www.transgenderarchives.uvic.ca

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.webblier.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.”

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1 *Productions 1969–1997*, foregrounds the centrality of sexuality to the
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