

Accessing Transgender // Desiring Queer(er?) Archival Logics



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RÉSUMÉ Bien que l'accès efficace et adéquat demeure un but commun pour la plupart des institutions d'archives, il n'est que rarement atteint complètement. Cet article se penche sur des obstacles spécifiques qui empêchent l'accès aux utilisateurs transgenres et aux documents transgenres dans les archives. L'article affirme que l'environnement et l'usage de la langue influencent les façons dont les utilisateurs approchent les archives et les documents qui y sont conservés. Plutôt que de promouvoir un accès adéquat, l'article suggère que la satisfaction reportée ou refusée peut aussi produire des expériences enrichissantes pour les chercheurs aux archives.

ABSTRACT While efficient and satisfactory access may be a common goal for most archives, it is rarely achieved in full. In this article, the author considers specific access barriers for both transgender patrons and transgender materials within archives. In particular, the author argues that environment and language shape the ways in which patrons encounter archives and the materials contained therein. Rather than seeking satisfactory access, the author suggests that deferred or denied satisfaction might also produce productive encounters for archival researchers.

Introduction

Section C1 of the *Code of Ethics* of the Association of Canadian Archivists provides the following guidance on accessibility and use: "Archivists arrange and describe all records in their custody in order to facilitate the fullest possible access to, and use of, their records."¹ Section VI of the *Code of Ethics* of the Society of American Archivists has a parallel suggestion: "Archivists strive to promote open and equitable access to their services and the records

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1 The Association of Canadian Archivists, *Code of Ethics*, <http://www.archivists.ca/content/code-ethics> (accessed on 25 August 2009).

in their care without discrimination or preferential treatment, and in accordance with legal requirements, cultural sensitivities, and institutional policies.”² But what, *really*, does it mean to have access to records? Would archivists know if they were facilitating the fullest possible access to their records? How might equitable access without discrimination or preferential treatment be achieved?

In my quick translation of these codes of ethics statements into assessment questions, I am already forecasting the impossibility of fulfilling such guidelines. In a way, recognition of the impossibility of these goals is already built into the language; “fullest possible” and “archivists strive” both imply that only degrees of compliance are expected or even possible. Despite the inevitability that archival records will always be more accessible to some users than others and will never be *fully* accessible, there has been a veritable explosion in the archival profession to develop standards, trainings, and workshops, all with the intent to improve accessibility.³

What this article will explore, then, are ways that access becomes complicated in archiving a particular category of materials – in this case those related to transgender people – and making materials available to particular researchers, specifically transgender researchers. Transgender materials and patrons, I argue, warrant particular and critical attention regarding access and accessibility. Toward this end, I will examine two factors that significantly influence access to transgender materials and access for transgender researchers: the archival environment, imagined broadly, and the language practices in and around archives. Following this analysis, I will take a more theoretical turn and explore what it might mean to *queer* traditional archival logics in the context of archiving transgender materials.⁴ Though traditional archival logics typically strive for near-universal access and researcher satisfaction (a point I will return to), I will make the queer move to ask: How might frustration be productive? Might archives usefully embrace a different model of (dis)satisfaction?

Before I delve into this argument, let me offer a brief definitional sidebar for readers unfamiliar with the word “transgender.” “Transgender” is a young term. Many scholars trace its origins to the late 1980s and Virginia Prince, a person who felt that she neither fit the category of transsexual (someone who permanently changes their sex through medical intervention) or transvestite

- 2 The Society of American Archivists, *Code of Ethics*, http://archivists.org/governance/handbook/app_ethics.asp (accessed on 25 August 2009).
- 3 I am grateful to Michele Combs for bringing this point to my attention. As an outsider to the archival profession, I am not clear why this trend is happening now, but I do wonder if it is somehow related to the development of new archival technologies.
- 4 When I refer to an archival logic I mean the philosophy about how an archive should be organized and experienced.

(someone who episodically wears the clothing of the “opposite” sex).⁵ Prince coined the term “transgenderist” as a noun to describe people who are neither transsexual nor transvestite, but instead are people who “permanently changed social gender through the public presentation of self, without recourse to genital transformation.”⁶ In the early 1990s, Leslie Feinberg reshaped the term from a noun to an adjective in the influential pamphlet *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* and expanded the definition to include any number of people who faced gender oppression.⁷ This was the birth of the contemporary usage of “transgender” as an umbrella term.

Susan Stryker offers a current and concise definition of “transgender” in her recent book *Transgender History*, which encapsulates the umbrella sense that Feinberg pioneered: “I use [transgender] in this book to refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender.”⁸ She continues: “it is *the movement across a socially imposed boundary away from an unchosen starting place* – rather than any particular destination or mode of transition – that best characterizes the concept of ‘transgender.’”⁹ This definition demonstrates the expansiveness of “transgender”; it does not only apply to those who are transsexual (“people who feel a strong desire to change their sexual morphology in order to live entirely as permanent, full-time members of the gender other than the one they were assigned to at birth”¹⁰). Instead, “transgender” includes anyone who crosses the gender boundaries they were assigned at birth. Some identities that are commonly clustered under the transgender umbrella include (but are certainly not limited to): transsexual, transvestite, cross-dresser, transman/transwoman, genderqueer, androgyne, female-to-male (FTM), and male-to-female (MTF).

For several important reasons, my focus in this article and in my larger work is on transgender materials and transgender users. First, transgender as a word and concept is only a few decades old.¹¹ This recent emergence of the term has significant implications for archival organizational systems, which tend to be slow to adapt to linguistic and categorical change. Second, the

5 For more on the origins of transgender, see Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, eds. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York, 2006), pp. 1–17.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

7 The pamphlet was expanded and later published. See Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (New York, 1992).

8 Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, 2008), p. 1.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 1. (Emphasis in original.)

10 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

11 I am not referring to the practice of trans-ing gender, which, I would agree with many historians, has always been a part of human culture in some form.

word “transgender” privileges particular people and experiences, especially along the axis of race and class (again, a point I will return to). For archives that use the word “transgender” as a key term to describe gender non-normativity, this means that they also re-inscribe the system of power and oppression inherent in the term. Finally, a significant amount of transgender people can be anti-history, which can be at odds with the archives’ task of preserving transgender materials in contexts that uniformly uplift history.¹²

This article comes from my larger research project in which I am closely engaging with three American archive repositories that have significant holdings of transgender materials. Taken together, the three archives I examine represent a cross-section of different contexts in which researchers might seek transgender materials: a university-based institutional archives, a professional historical society, and a grassroots residential archives. The first is the National Transgender Library and Archive, which is a university collection of transgender-related materials maintained at the University of Michigan Library and kept, in part, in the special collections division.¹³ The second is the GLBT Historical Society, a San Francisco-based, professional archives that employs a blend of professional and non-standard archival practices.¹⁴ Finally, the third collection I examine is the Sexual Minorities Archives in Northampton, Massachusetts, which is a grassroots archives maintained in the private residence of the archivist. Though I won’t be able to detail fully the vast distinctions in archival practices among these three archives in this article, it is important to note that throughout this article I draw on my in-depth research at each of these sites, including my interviews with archivists, staff, volunteers, and researchers who have worked in, or with, these archives. It is through this lens of a spectrum of archival institutions and practices that I approach access and accessibility.

Environmental Accessibility and Genuine Transgender Inclusion

According to the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, the word “accessible” is defined as “can readily be reached, entered, or used.” The three parts of this definition imply a broad range of access that includes the physical, the social, and the intellectual. Because archives are often physical places (though this is also becoming more complicated in the age of digital archiving), it is of

12 For some transgender people history has the power to betray; it can stubbornly reveal details about the past that are incongruent with the identity that that person lives in the present.

13 For a brief overview of this collection, see <http://www.lib.umich.edu/node/19958> (accessed on 8 October 2009).

14 To learn more about the GLBT Historical Society, see <http://www.glbthistory.org> (accessed on 8 October 2009).

course important to consider whether archival records are physically accessible to researchers. Can they be reached?¹⁵

There are, as archivists well know, many other dimensions of access that go far beyond whether a record can be physically reached. One that is quite influential for transgender researchers is what I would describe as “environmental accessibility.” Environmental accessibility is determined by “the feel” of a space and the way a person is treated in that space. In order to better understand how these environmental factors work, we might usefully understand archival spaces in terms of their “geosemiotics,” which Scollon and Scollon define as “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world.”¹⁶ The utility of geosemiotics as a theoretical lens is its required *placement* of discourse as located in the material world. This is particularly important for archives as places, because the signs and discourses that dominate an archives both communicate social meaning and have material consequences for transgender researchers.

A recent handbook jointly published by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute and the National Center for Transgender Equality, provides an excellent overview of the ways an organization can consciously make its space transgender inclusive. Though this handbook is specifically designed for LGBT organizations, the same principles are certainly transportable to archives that collect transgender materials and ostensibly serve transgender users. The authors touch upon a variety of environmental cues that indicate to transgender people whether they are welcome, several of which apply to archives: the physical environment, bathrooms, the verbal environment, the questions one asks people, and communications materials.¹⁷

I will begin with the physical environment, for which my own experiences as a transgender researcher might be instructive. Two of the archives I am studying in depth, the Sexual Minorities Archives and the GLBT Historical Society, have single-user or gender neutral bathrooms that I can use comfortably. This in turn makes me feel able to spend long research sessions in both archives, and it also indicates, for me, a genuine commitment on the part of each archives to welcome transgender users.

On the other hand, the gender-segregated bathrooms at the National Transgender Library and Archive at the University of Michigan, were a difficult barrier to my research, in part because they were highly policed. I was

15 Though I do not have space to do justice to it here, disability studies scholarship could provide a productive and more nuanced dimension to this consideration of accessibility.

16 Ron Scollon and Suzie Wong Scollon, *Discourses in Place: Language in the Material World* (New York, 2003), p. 2.

17 Lisa Mottet and Justin Tanis, *Opening the Door to the Inclusion of Transgender People* (Washington, DC and New York, 2008), p. 21.

forced to argue for my right to use the bathroom on the special collections floor (and as an out-of-town researcher, the only one I knew to find), which obviously made me feel unwelcome in that space. In turn, these bathroom interactions increased my anxiety while doing research, and may have even changed the amount of time I was willing (or physically able) to research in the archives.

I have had this similar experience at countless highly institutionalized archives, particularly library special collections. At such times, I often recall Malea Powell's articulate discussion of the experience of being an Indian in colonial archives: "As I sat there and thought about empire, I started to get very cold – felt myself grow puny and insignificant in the face of imperialism and shivered at the impossibility of it all – me, an Indian, a mixed-blood, here in this odd colonial space."¹⁸ Powell's quick movement between her thinking and her feeling demonstrates how inextricable the intellectual and bodily experiences of an archives can be.¹⁹ For transgender patrons, this formula could also work in the opposite direction; by feeling excluded from using bathrooms, a person might then interpret the intellectual tone of an archives to be similarly unwelcoming. Even when the practices and policies of an archives collection are technically transgender inclusive, any archives that does not have bathrooms where anyone can use the facilities safely and without hassle, is making an implied statement that transgender patrons are not physically and intellectually welcome in that space.²⁰

Another aspect of the geosemiotics of an archival environment is the predominant verbal discourse and the images that are displayed. Throughout my research, I only spoke with one archivist who explicitly reflected on the influence of the environment on an archival user. This archivist explained: "I've tried to be conscious about the images that go on the walls to show individuals of colour when I can." Not only was he doing this to uphold the anti-racist mission of that archives, but also to make people of colour feel included into the space, especially since this particular archives is in a predominantly white area. Similarly, displaying images of transgender people around an archives and in rotating exhibits conveys a clear message to transgender users that they are a genuine part of this collection and are welcomed into this

18 Malea Powell, "Dreaming Charles Eastman: Cultural Memory, Autobiography, and Geography of Indigenous Rhetorical Histories," in *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, eds. Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan (Carbondale, 2008), p. 120.

19 For more scholarship on the impacts of archival experiences, see Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, 2005).

20 For more information on how to make bathrooms more transgender inclusive, please refer to Mottet and Tanis, *Opening the Door to the Inclusion of Transgender People*, which provides excellent direction on how to turn even gender-segregated bathrooms into safer spaces for transgender people.

space. This functions inversely as well; if transgender visitors to an archives do not see transgender people represented or acknowledged, the implication will be that they are not welcome.

In conjunction with the accessibility of the images displayed, the verbal environment in an archives can also have strong impacts on users. Again, my own experiences might be instructive here. At only one of the archives that I visited were my preferred pronouns respected in my interactions with staff and volunteers. For non-transgender people, this may seem like a small detail. But imagine entering a space where someone incorrectly assumed that you were something that you were not – be that a particular race, age, nationality, sexuality, religion, or anything that is an important part of your identity. If an identity is incorrectly and repeatedly ascribed to a person, more than likely that person will feel uncomfortable, misunderstood, and misread. While many archivists and volunteers often spend a great deal of time trying to be aware of politically correct language in archival description, the verbal environment of an archives also hinges on the spoken language that users encounter; as Mottet and Tanis argue, “[i]f gender identities and pronouns have not been established at the beginning, it is also important not to assume a person’s gender.”²¹ The habit of assuming people’s gender is so ingrained that I imagine this to be a challenging bit of advice. Still, given that the verbal environment of an archives can be so influential in welcoming or excluding transgender patrons, it seems worth the effort to attempt to create an inclusive verbal environment.

Pronouns are not the only aspect of the verbal environment of an archives that shape a researcher’s experience. The verbal environment also includes things that are more fleeting, such as conversations that happen in reading rooms, and between staff and researchers. If even the slightest amount of transphobic language is present, it has the potential to have a negative impact on a transgender researcher. I am not suggesting that transgender users are more sensitive than others; however, gender assumptions and norms permeate our culture to such an extent that they often become invisible. Again, though it may seem an impossible task to stay attuned to the gendered assumptions in the verbal environment of an archives, I believe it is an important component to help maintain a space that is actively inclusive of transgender people.

When an archives wants to welcome transgender researchers, the environmental accessibility and geosemiotics of the archives should be important considerations for an archives to evaluate seriously and regularly. The environmental factors that I have discussed do not merely allow or disallow particular individuals from accessing archival materials – they have more power than that. Environmental accessibility can shape the way entire groups

21 Ibid., p. 24.

of people encounter an archives, or are excluded from using it altogether.

Archives Speaking // Speaking Archives

Despite the broad trend to standardize archival descriptive systems, the language that is used for archival description is still highly adaptable and political. As a result, the language that an archives “speaks” has wide-ranging consequences for archival practices, as transgender archiving elucidates. Although a brief, though overly tidy etymology of the term “transgender” has already been provided, the word is not so innocuous and uncomplicated as that description might suggest. As David Valentine explains, “‘transgender’ has emerged – both as a movement and as an identity category – primarily from within a framework established by a racialized and class-inflected gay and lesbian – and latterly, queer – activism and scholarship.”²² This move to historicize “transgender” critically positions the term as emerging out of the *dominant* modes of gay, lesbian, and queer activism and scholarship, which were (and to a large extent continue to be) generated from a White and middle-to-upper class perspective.

The consequences of this bias can be quite serious for those individuals who might be described by the term, but who would not use it to describe themselves. Valentine writes: “my concern here finally is that the young, the poor, the people of color who are understood as being transgender are increasingly having to un-know what they know about themselves and learn a new vocabulary of identity.”²³ If we transport this argument – that transgender is a term that is embraced by some and forced onto others (in ways that are particularly classed, raced, and aged) – to archives, it becomes clear that archives have the potential to reproduce the complex system of power and oppression inherent in the term.

I have provided a brief list above of the common categories that are often included under the transgender umbrella (e.g., transsexual, transvestite, cross-dresser, etc.), but this reclassification isn’t unproblematic. As Stryker explains:

The terms listed here are also the ones most often used by cultural elites, or within mass media, or within powerful professions such as science and medicine and academia. They are often derived from the experiences of white transgender people. But there are hundreds, if not thousands, of other specialized words related to the subject matter of this book that could just as easily be listed in this section on terms and definitions ... The seemingly inexhaustible global catalog of specialized terms for gender variety shows how impossible it really is to group such a wide range of

22 David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham, 2007), p. 60.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

phenomena together under the single term “transgender” without keeping that word’s definition very flexible and without paying close attention to who is using it to refer to whom, and for what reasons.²⁴

How flexible can “transgender” be in archival practice? And how can archivists pay close attention to the ways that it is being used? It seems that there are two potential pitfalls with the use of “transgender” in archives. First, it can be used too specifically to only refer to those materials that self-referentially use the term. Or second, it could be used too liberally and could start describing people who would explicitly counter-identify with the term.

Let us take a fictional example: the personal papers of a very butch, female-born person of colour who often passed as male and used the identity label “bulldagger.” To begin, unless this person made it explicitly clear what his/her/hir pronoun preference was, it cannot be assumed.²⁵ By using “transgender” to describe these papers, either in the finding aid or in any other access tool, an archives would be ignoring Stryker’s caution and disrespectfully and oppressively re-naming an identity (from a more privileged perspective) that already has a name. This has consequences, too, for other “bulldaggers” who might research in that collection looking for “bulldagger” materials. Would they be forced, following Valentine’s argument, to learn a new “vocabulary of identity,” to speak a new archival language, in order to successfully navigate the materials collected there?

On the flip side of this too liberal use of “transgender,” is the possibility that it could be used too narrowly or conservatively. If this fictional person’s papers were never labelled “transgender,” they would probably become isolated from the long lineage of other people who *trans*-gender. Another consequence would be that these papers would likely be invisible to a researcher looking for “transgender” materials, which would also contribute to the perception that “transgender” is mostly a White identity. Of course, this is highly dependent on the type of organizational technologies that an archives employs; I would argue that even with the most seemingly neutral and standardized archival descriptions, these factors would be inevitably present.

My point is not that “transgender” should never be used in archival settings – certainly that would not be a desirable option. But archivists should take seriously Valentine’s observation: “I am concerned that the unquestioned use of ‘transgender’ in activist, academic, and other contexts, while progressive in intent, actually reproduces, in novel and intensified forms, class and racial hierarchies.”²⁶ An awareness of this complexity might prompt archivists to ask

24 Stryker, *Transgender History*, p. 23.

25 “Hir” is a gender-neutral pronoun that grammatically replaces “his” or “her.” A second gender-neutral pronoun is “ze,” which replaces “she” or “he.”

26 Valentine, *Imagining Transgender*, p. 19.

the following questions: Is “transgender” being used to describe materials that do not contain that language? If so, what are the potential consequences? Are there other terms related to transgender identities that might better describe particular materials and better facilitate access to those materials? Is there a way to circumnavigate the archival privileging of particular terms? Again, the purpose is not to attempt to eliminate political language from archival practices – that would be an impossible task. Instead, the complexity of words like “transgender” provides an opportunity for a more careful attention to the ways that archives speak.

Some grassroots archives deal with this issue by embracing the inevitability of politically charged language and using it explicitly. For example, at the Sexual Minorities Archives (where the organizational system is designed from scratch for that collection), one of the book classifications is “Bullshit.” This category, nestled between “Bisexual Lives” and “Crimes Against Girls,” contains any literature that negatively characterizes sexual minorities, typically from a medical perspective. Though the archivist is committed to collecting these materials, he wants to use the classification “Bullshit” to carefully position those materials as counter to the politics of the collection as a whole.

One way to understanding this archival logic is as a shift in focus from potential archival users to designers of archival organizational systems. As Grant Campbell has articulated in regards to gay and lesbian community-based classification systems, “the makers of subject access tools are used to asking themselves the first question: ‘who are my users?’ They will now have to tackle two additional, equally challenging questions: ‘Who am I in relation to my users, and how does my position manifest itself in the tool itself?’”²⁷ For some grassroots archivists, the best way to address those questions is to be extremely subjective and intentionally biased. Obviously, this approach also has its own limitations, including the risk of over-reading and the possibility that the classification categories will not make sense for all users. And of course, this logic is not easily transportable across a spectrum of archival settings. Still, it is instructive to see an example of an archives speaking in a way that is overtly and unapologetically political.

An interesting juxtaposition to the expressly political discourse of the Sexual Minorities Archives is the University of Michigan’s library catalogue, which is used to navigate the National Transgender Library and Archive. One particular detailed record, Leslie Feinberg’s popular book *Transgender Warriors* provides a useful and typical example of how transgender material is integrated into a preexisting cataloguing system.²⁸ While I am not able to

27 Grant Campbell “Queer Theory and the Creation of Contextual Subject Access Tools for Gay and Lesbian Communities,” *Knowledge Organization*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2000), p. 129.

28 Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to RuPaul*

provide a visual of this record, I trust that most readers are familiar with the basic components of a detailed record in an electronic catalogue.

As a rhetorician, when I encounter detailed records I am first drawn to the Library of Congress subject headings, which for Feinberg's book included "Transsexualism – History," "Transvestism – History," and "Gender identity – History." What these categories miss, of course, is the first word in the title of the book – "transgender." Though "Transgender people – History" is in the Library of Congress Authorities, it has not been associated with this record, for whatever reason, which is not really important here. From the three subject headings it has been assigned, it is clear that this text is about history and it seems to relate to a broad range of gender-related topics: transsexualism, transvestism, and gender identity. But within the discourse of the Library of Congress Authorities, this book is not identifiable as "transgender," despite its explicit self-definition as such. It is important to remember, too, that Feinberg is credited with popularizing "transgender" as an umbrella term, which makes the omission of that term quite glaring and somewhat ironic. While this observation could be filed away with the countless critiques of the Library of Congress subject headings – which I will not rehearse here – it is more important to note the shifting of language that happens between the text itself and the record that claims to represent it.

One element of this record that works with (or perhaps against) the discourse of the Library of Congress subject headings is the social tagging software that the library has enabled to be applied to every library Web page. In a small, grey box near the bottom of the Web page is a space that displays the tags, or labels, that users of this catalogue have added to the record. This tagging system, called MTagger, allows tags to be added to any Web page within or outside of the library catalogue by any user who wishes to add a label. In this particular tag box, a user added the label "transgender history." Like the designated space for the Library of Congress subject headings, these small grey boxes designate a particular space for user-generated labels that function similarly to subject headings. That is to say, if one clicks on "transgender history," for example, one is directed to a new page with every record that any user has tagged with the same phrase. The benefit of this type of tagging software is that it is built in real-time, based on a researcher's logic for navigating the catalogue and can, therefore, be quite democratic and timely. Tagging can also produce a different discourse, a different mode of archival speech, than the highly predetermined model of standardized descriptive categories.

Given these complex language practices, we can flip the question "What language do archives speak?," and also ask, "What language do research-

(Boston, 1996).

ers speak?” In my interviews, several researchers explained the limitations of their own language, particularly in attempting to find older, historical materials relating to transgender. While “transgender” as a term is only a few decades old, many researchers have found evidence of people *trans-ing* gender throughout history. But how does one find such materials prior to the late twentieth century? One researcher explained hir process to me:

I'd have to get incredibly creative to find stuff that was relevant to what I was doing. Because ... obviously transgender and transsexual aren't used [in the nineteenth century]. I tried cross dresser, there was nothing. There would be nothing that I could find. Any descriptor I could come up with for what I did I wouldn't find anything. So I had to go about finding things in really kind of like roundabout ways.

K: Like what?

I mean partly, too, it was like how I was thinking about transgender, I guess. Or like how I was thinking about, you know, the kind of work that I want to do. So, I had kind of decided that I would look up Chinese immigration and I came up on stuff on like normative gender, but you know, all of it is just filed under immigration or Chinese culture, that kind of stuff. But it was very much the kind of stuff that I wanted to get to. I don't know, like ... what remains of police files and police photographs and stuff like that. And I would find cases of people who were arrested under cross dressing law but they were just in there as local criminals and stuff like that ... I mean I found tons and tons of stuff, but none of it was you know, catalogued in an easily recognizable way.²⁹

In order for this researcher to find materials, it was necessary to move beyond a conventional way of thinking about transgender. Once this researcher was able to shift from transgender to cross dressing, then to local crime files, ze was able to find the desirable materials. While this researcher's experience is a success story, it required hir to learn to speak the language of the archives, which for historical materials, means unlearning “transgender” as a category.

In sum, archives that collect transgender materials are in a difficult position with respect to language: they need to utilize broad terminology to pull together threads within a collection and yet they need to have a fair amount of specificity. These archives need to work constantly to process incoming materials, making it virtually impossible to return to previous descriptive data to update it when popular terminology shifts. While archivists may try to have the language of their archives best fit the language that researchers would be using, this is not an apolitical venture. It is a delicate and somewhat impossible task to try to enable archives and researchers to speak the same language. Still, a pressing concern for archivists should be trying to answer

29 Personal interview conducted with an unnamed researcher on 21 August 2008.

the question: Who *does not* speak the language of your archives?

“Please Fondle the Toys!”: Queer(er?) Archival Logics

In mid-2003, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) produced an influential white paper in which it stated: “With the diverse types of access tools listed above, it is important that special collections librarians consider which tool will provide the most satisfactory patron access for a particular collection. This essential analysis mandates a balance between the ideal access record for “every patron” – and economic realities.”³⁰ This quotation typifies the dominant archival logic: archives should provide researchers with satisfactory access. By emphasizing “every patron” in scare quotes, the authors seem to be aware that such a concept is not meant to be literal or comprehensive, but rather a projected rhetorical ideal. As I have shown above, the concept of “every patron” can be usefully complicated by the experiences of transgender users and the politics of transgender-related language practices. What strikes me as more interesting in this quotation, however, is the notion of “the most satisfactory patron access,” which lacks scare quotes. What might it mean for archives to try to enable “satisfactory” access to materials?

Let me take a step back and establish that the precursor to any type of satisfaction is *desire*, irrespective of whether or not a person can articulate or name that desire. For typical archival research situations, a researcher’s desire may be to find materials as efficiently and successfully as possible, which would lead to a particular kind of affirmative satisfaction. Typified by the above quote from the ARL white paper, the archival logic that seems to predominate the archival profession is tailored to this model of researcher satisfaction, which is based on the desire to have efficient and successful research experiences. Notably, satisfaction in this context is a measurement of the research process, not the researcher him/her/hirself. In other words, satisfaction is externalized, located outside of the body of the researcher, and is instead contingent on the practical aspects of researching.

While this model of satisfaction may be the most common in archival settings, my study of collections of transgender materials has revealed an alternative logic that is built on quite different principles. Though I risk severe oversimplification, Figure 1 offers a visual spectrum and stratifies three different types of archives that collect transgender materials.

30 Barbara M. Jones, compiler, *Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers: Creating Access to Unprocessed Special Collections Materials in North America’s Research Libraries*, A White Paper for the Association of Research Libraries Task Force on Special Collections (6 June 2003), p. 8, <http://www.arl.org/rtl/speccoll/spcolltf/status0706.shtml> (accessed on 28 March 2009).

Type of Archive	Archival Logic	Organizational System	Proximity to Material
Institutional (e.g., university special collections)	Focus on efficient access	On-line based; follows professional guidelines for finding aids, content standards, Library of Congress headings, etc.	Far: typically closed stacks, sometimes off-site
Professional (e.g., historical society)	Mixed focus on both efficiency and discovery	On-line and in-house databases; partial adherence to professional guidelines when possible and desirable	Mixed: some closed stacks, some browsing
Grassroots (e.g., residential collection)	Focus on discovery	In-house, paper based lists; no adherence to professional standards; some creation of new standards	Near: direct access to all materials

Figure 1: Chart demonstrating the spectrum of LGBT archival settings and their varying archival logics, organizational systems, and proximity to materials

Despite the chart's flattening of complex archival practices, I hope to demonstrate that not all archives share the same logics based on providing traditional satisfaction (i.e., efficiency and predictability) for researchers. Readers of *Archivaria* are most likely more familiar with institutional and professional archives; I will, therefore, focus my attention on a grassroots archives in order to demonstrate the alternative logics that can support and strengthen a collection.

The Sexual Minorities Archives, a grassroots archives in Western Massachusetts, is built on an alternative archival logic that reframes researcher satisfactions and desires. The very minimalist organizational system of the archives only uses a classification-level overview (i.e., periodical titles, book classifications, etc.); there are no comprehensive lists of collected materials and no searchable databases, either in-house or on-line. There is no adherence to professional standards (in fact, they are eschewed). Instead, the organizational tools are entirely self-created; consequently, a researcher is *forced* to browse through the collection in order to discover materials.

Some archivists may pass quick judgment on how inefficient this must be; it is, however, important to note that the repository's archivist is no less serious about researcher satisfaction than the professional archivists who make use of complex technologies. The archival logics that govern this collection are, quite simply, different. Below is how the archivist compares his collection to a university archives:

I always think of this collection as the most interactive setting. You don't need to come to me and know what you want and ask me to get it for you with gloves on ... It's more a process of discovery in that you come in here and browse and you can actually not know what you [want]. Let the collection tell you what you are looking for and find it in the process of discovery.³¹

Of course, when a researcher cedes power to the collection in such an extreme way, it requires a considerable amount of time, and quite likely, frustration. But is frustration always bad? Can it sometimes result in a deferred satisfaction? Or perhaps a queering of satisfaction and access altogether?

Recent scholarship on queer temporality will be instructive here to help frame the logic of the Sexual Minorities Archives as not merely a failed efficiency model, but perhaps an example of a queerer logic. In the introduction to the special issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* on queer temporality, Elizabeth Freeman argues: "We are still in the process of creating ... 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. This we might call a queer desire for history itself to desire."³² I want to suggest that the archival logic of the Sexual Minorities Archives recognizes that archives can desire. This logic is a queer imagining of a new historiographic method of archival research, one that carefully accounts for a researcher's body moving through the space of the archives. It is a historiographic method that is based on the ways that researchers *feel* archives and *desire* history, and the ways that archives and history feel and desire right back.

If a traditional archival logic responds to a researcher's desire to find archival materials in a satisfactory way, queer logics can flip that idea by embracing a different kind of satisfaction that recognizes that collections can have desires and want to be touched, too. The possibility that the Sexual Minorities Archives collection can "tell you what you are looking for" is a queer revision of traditional historiographic method that grants desire only to the researcher.

31 Personal interview conducted with Bet Power on 25 April 2008.

32 Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol. 13, nos. 2–3 (2007), p. 165.

This model of discovery is also highly dependent on proximity, the ability to browse, and the tactile experience of touching the past. Grant me another moment of self-indulgence to relate two of my own experiences in archives. My own love of archives began in Cornell University's Kroch Library. During my writing seminar in the fall of 1999, my instructor brought us to see Shakespeare's fourth folio. I was ushered in with awe as I slipped on ill-fitting white gloves. For the briefest moment, I passed a gloved finger along the edge of that folio, not even daring to flip a page. I don't recall reading anything on that page, yet I remember that experience with such utter emotional clarity that whenever I sit with the memory, the same emotions of excitement well up inside of me. Sure, I appreciate Shakespeare as much as any respectable scholar with two literature degrees, but to offer him sole credit for my long-standing love of archives is somewhat misplaced. It was the *context* as much as the content that elicited my strong emotions in that archival encounter. I became attached to touching the past, in part, because it seemed like a sacred ritual.

Fast forward to the GLBT Historical Society during my first visit in August of 2008. As part of the museum-like display in the Historical Society's suite commemorating the Folsom Street Fair,³³ a series of sado-masochistic (S&M) materials hung as if on a clothesline (see Figure 2). A small sign behind read "Please Fondle the Toys!" No gloves. No protective archivists. So I did touch these toys, and much more liberally than Shakespeare's fourth folio, I must admit. The exhibit encouraged my touch; it even invited a semi-erotic touch ("fondling"). Being able to so freely touch certain artifacts in the archives, without the protection of gloves, may be an archivist's preservation nightmare – increased likelihood of theft, skin oils damaging the materials, careless handling, etc. But it also elicited within me a very different kind of emotion and pleasure, which was no less powerful than the wonder I had over Shakespeare. I left both archives feeling *satisfied*, but somehow different.

33 The Folsom Street Fair, which began in 1984, caps San Francisco's "Leather Pride Week." It is California's third largest spectator event and the world's largest leather event. It is today a non-profit charity. For more information, see the FSF Web site at <http://www.folsomstreetfair.org> (accessed on 5 October 2009).



Figure 2: Display of S&M materials at the GLBTHS's Folsom Street Fair exhibit. Photo by the author.

The difference between my touch of Shakespeare's folio and my touch of the S&M toys had less to do with my perceived value of those artifacts and more to do with how I was imagining being touched back. Heather Love aptly explains this queer touching of the past: "Contemporary critics approach these figures from the past with a sense of the inevitability of their progress toward us ... Our existence in the present depends on being able to imagine these figures reaching out to us."³⁴ Whether or not these figures and materials are actually reaching out to contemporary researchers is irrelevant. It is the imagining of this reach that creates a particular kind of relationship with historical artifacts. Since Shakespeare was so far removed from my world, in the moment of touching the fourth folio I simply felt as though I was touching a sacred object. With the S&M toys, however, I vividly imagined the eroticism and pleasure that may have been part of their past. Only with the S&M toys was I able to imagine a reciprocated touch, a touch that I desired.

Recall the point I make earlier about the logic of the Sexual Minorities Archives being based on the idea that the archives have desires too and that browsing can lead to satisfaction, albeit deferred. By forcing researchers to browse the collection, to submit to the direction the archives take you, the queer logic of the Sexual Minorities Archives facilitates a meeting of desires, of touches, between archival materials and researchers, as I experienced

34 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), p. 40.

with the S&M toys at the GLBT Historical Society. Again, the satisfaction that seems to support this logic is based more on the internal desires of the researcher, such as my pleasure in touching the S&M toys, rather than the more external satisfaction that comes from an efficient and successful research process.

In the two examples I have offered, touching artifacts is a desirable and pleasurable experience. But queer archival encounters can be painful as well. Love's work is again useful to substantiate this claim; she writes: "The experience of queer historical subjects is not at a safe distance from contemporary experience; rather, their social marginality and abjection mirror our own. The relation to the queer past is suffused not only by feelings of regret, despair, and loss but also by the shame of identification."³⁵ This relation to the past is explicitly queer because, as Love argues, there is no safe distance, no real barrier, between the queer pain and trauma that we find in the archives and that of contemporary queers. It may be that this painful and shameful identification with archival materials is particularly possible for transgender people who experience very high rates of violence, both physical and verbal, both in the past and in contemporary society.

Conclusion

Queer and transgender archival experiences, then, include a complicated negotiation between the satisfaction of fulfilled desires and the discovery and the shame of identification with history. So despite what may sound like my glorification of the queer archival logic of the Sexual Minorities Archives, I am not advocating for a widespread embrace of this approach. Instead, my goal is to complicate what it might mean for a researcher to have satisfaction, pleasure, touch, and affect in the archives. I hope to have shown that the moment of touch, of both the researcher and the past, is a deeply affective moment, laced with desire and sometimes, shame.

It is not coincidental that the last thing a visitor sees after a research session at the Sexual Minorities Archives is the mirror that hangs on the back of the front door. In the above quote, Love describes the past abjection of historical subjects as mirroring our own contemporary abjection. In archives that collect transgender materials, this mirroring may become particularly intensified as a transgender researcher touches and is touched by transgender historical subjects of the past. But what that researcher experiences, be it satisfaction, shame, or any other emotion, is a product of both that researcher's approach to the past and the archival logics that design the archival experience.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 32.