

Special Section on Queer Archives



Note from the Guest Editors

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The year 1969 was significant for people whose sexuality has traditionally been perceived to run counter to prescriptive heteronormative models of identity. On 14 May of that year, the Liberal government of Pierre Elliott Trudeau passed legislation that effectively decriminalized homosexuality in Canada. The following month, on 28 June, patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in New York City's Greenwich Village, protested the bar's latest police incursion and raid, thus launching the now-famous Stonewall riots. On this, the fortieth anniversary of these pivotal events, which contributed to an even greater visibility of the gay rights movement, we are proud to present this special section on queer archives.

As guest editors, we were frankly overwhelmed by the positive response to our call for papers. We received no fewer than twenty-two expressions of interest for this special section, a number far greater than we had hoped. The volume of proposals we received is a clear indication of a pressing need to address a gap in the existing archival literature, and we are confident that authors will continue to submit articles on this theme in future issues of *Archivaria*.

It is important to take a close look at the word “queer.” In a recent issue of *Museums & Social Issues* titled *Where is Queer?*, editor Kristine Morrissey cautioned: “Using the word ‘queer’ is like dropping a pebble in a pond. Or more accurately, it’s like dropping a boulder into a pond: Ka-ploom!”¹ Originally meaning “strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric” and “[n]ot in a normal condition,”² the word “queer” was used during much of the twentieth century to denigrate gay men and lesbians.

One might justifiably ask why we consciously chose to use a word deemed to be offensive and derogatory. First, we are reminded of a Senegalese student

1 Kristine Morrissey, “Editor’s Note – Language as Context: Can I say ‘Queer’ if I’m not?” *Museums & Social Issues*, vol. 3 no. 1 (Spring 2008), p. 3.

2 *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 1728.

who once justified her use of the word “nigger” by stating: “Me and my friends use it, so we can take away the sting.”³ Re-appropriating a pejorative word to recast it in a positive light is a politically empowering act, and this provides the first reason for choosing the word “queer.”

Second, the use of the word “queer” is a matter of convenience. Institutionalized heterosexism affects a wide range of people from many different backgrounds, including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered, transsexual, intersexed, two-spirited, and questioning individuals. In referring to this diverse group of people, we could use the popular acronym LGBT (or GLBT), knowing that it excludes some members of the group; or, we could use the more inclusive acronym LGBTTTITSQ, which is admittedly cumbersome. Using the word “queer” as an umbrella word to designate all people whose sexuality is generally considered non-heteronormative is both a more inclusive and a more practical choice.

A third reason is supplied by looking beyond the use of the word as *identity*. In recent years, the word “queer” has also been used as a verb. “To queer” an object has come to mean to consider it beyond what is considered normal. In a sense, it is like following Alice through the looking-glass to look at an object from the other side, beyond its surface level, and to reveal what had been previously overlooked. In this sense, as David Halperin suggests, the word “queer” moves beyond identity towards *positionality*.⁴ In other words, anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, can queer – or “que(e)ry” – almost anything. This is precisely what the authors in this special section have done. Working within the framework of the archives, they have provided queer perspectives on multiple issues.

K.J. Rawson begins this special section by considering access and accessibility issues related to transgender archival collections. As a rhetorician, Rawson starts hir analysis by providing a close reading of archival codes of ethics relating to access, and then considers the implications of attempting to queer traditional archival logics. This important work lays the foundation for a new field of study. In her article, Patrizia Gentile continues this examination of access to archival collections. More specifically, she focuses on the difficulties she encountered when trying to access federal government records dealing with homosexuality in Canada after the Second World War. She examines how the *Access to Information Act* was used to limit access to these records, the release of which was sometimes deemed to be a potential threat to national security. Picking up on this theme of access to archival

3 The student in question was taking a class taught by Marcel Barriault in 1997 in the English department at the Université de Moncton.

4 David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford, 1995), cited in Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (New York, 2006), pp. 43–44.

collections, Steven Maynard uses the limited access to a specific set of police records at the Toronto Police Museum as the starting point for his reflection on Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, and offers an interesting and useful discussion of the police/archives conjuncture. Lyle Dick continues the discussion of the historical role of the State in regulating sexual behaviour in Canada. In examining the only surviving records available to study the moral panic in Edmonton in 1942, namely the criminal case files of the Supreme Court of Alberta, he has been able to queer the archival record; that is, to read it against the grain, thus revealing the police and judicial abuses that these records clearly imply. In his turn, Marcel Barriault queers a very different set of documents, gay male erotica and pornography. By offering a queer reading of these materials, he attempts to look beyond the immediately apparent purpose of these documents – to arouse and to titillate – and to show that they do have a demonstrable archival value.

Moving away from the scant resources available in archives, the next two articles in the special section focus on gaps in queer collections. Elise Chenier examines the current state of lesbian oral history in Canada. She shows that while a number of important oral history projects involving lesbians were conducted in Canada over the past thirty years, significant parts of Canadian lesbian history are at a very real risk of being lost forever because not all recordings are being properly preserved. For their part, Ajamu X, Topher Campbell, and Mary Stevens document the creation of rukus!, a Black queer archive for the United Kingdom. In this article, which originated as an interview, Ajamu and Campbell chart the history of an institution they created to ensure that the memory of their community was being preserved. The non-traditional format of the article clearly reinforces one of the running themes of this special section: queer archives, situated as they are on the margins, frequently employ non-traditional methods and approaches.

The last two authors, Jacques Prince and Kate Zieman, offer communications pieces that document the current state of queer archives in Québec and in Canada. Prince provides information on the Archives gaies du Québec (AGQ), which in 2008 celebrated its 25th anniversary. Zieman focuses on the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), which in 2008 celebrated its 35th anniversary. The reader is further invited to read reviews on five recent queer publications as well as a review of a permanent, virtual, queer exhibition.

Despite some of the painful memories and disturbing issues discussed in these articles, there are still so many reasons for the queer community in Canada to celebrate. And so, we joyfully invite you to join us as we queer archival records, we queer archival institutions, and we queer *Archivaria* itself.