

**FEMINIST INFORMATION ACTIVISM: NEWSLETTERS, INDEX CARDS AND
THE 21ST-CENTURY ARCHIVE**

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ABSTRACT

Feminist Information Activism: Newsletters, Index Cards and the 21st-century Archive develops an original approach to studying feminism's media infrastructures, focusing on U.S. lesbian feminism from the early 1970s to the present. The dissertation proposes the concept of "feminist information activism," in which engagements with commonplace media facilitate access to marginalized information and networks through purposefully designed interfaces. Newsletter print culture and other activist-oriented information contexts such as bibliographic and indexing projects, and community archives, sought to unite feminist publics with difficult-to-find published materials. In each of these cases, activists worked to collect and parse large amounts of information that would make marginal lesbian lives visible, adopting various information management and compression techniques to do so. These tactics often created anxieties over the effects rationalization procedures might have on information that ultimately attempted to represent messy and politically complex feminist lives. To address these tensions, activists re-worked existing standards in information management through the use of new networks, the design of unique subject-classification schemes, and the appropriation of tools such as index cards and early computer databases.

Chapter one investigates 1970s newsletter culture, drawing on a select print archive to argue that these documents imagined a mode of network thinking critical to feminist social movements prior to the web. Chapter two examines indexing and bibliography projects of the 1980s, tracing their critical appropriations of early database computing through interviews, archival research in these projects' papers, and historical research on indexing standards gathered from late 20th-century instructional manuals. Chapters three and four draw out connections between these print forms and today's digital feminisms through a study of ongoing digitization practices at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Through interviews and observation with archives staff, and documentary research in organizational records, these chapters examine feminism's influence on the design and implementation of accessible digitization projects that counter accepted archival standards. Framed by the historical chapters on feminist "print" activism; this study of feminist digitization re-casts indexing and bibliographic projects of the 1980s, and newsletters of the 1970s as media histories that situate today's digital feminisms in a longer genealogy.

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Introduction

Though it is much less exciting and less sweaty than the collective din of consciousness-raising circles and other embodied forms of activism, information has been just as critical to late 20th-century feminism. This dissertation examines a series of organizations, grassroots institutions, and individuals who I call feminist information activists: women who responded to their frustrated desire for information about lesbian history by generating that information themselves. Information activism describes the confluence of a range of materials and processes for “doing feminism,” including the media used to organize, store, and provide access: index cards, newsletters, and archives. Using these tools, feminists design complex multimedia practices to circulate information through their grassroots networks—practices that are critical for understanding feminism’s contributions to histories of commonplace media.

Feminist theory and politics develop alongside practical, technical skills (Travis 2008), the specific media formats feminists choose (Meagher 2013), and the distribution methods they develop to reach a public (Hilderbrand 2009); Historicizing feminism means exploring these engagements with media as conditions of possibility. Whether we speak of “movements,” “waves,” or the nebulous category “lesbian feminism” that is my focus, specific iterations of feminism form in part through media practices that enact philosophy and politics through formal means. Late 20th-century U.S. lesbian-feminist activists worked to collect and parse large amounts of information that would make marginal lives visible, adopting various information management and compression techniques to do so. Their tactics often created anxieties over the effects rationalization procedures might have on information that ultimately attempted to represent messy,

sexually and politically complex lives. To address these tensions, activists re-worked existing standards in information management through the use of new networks, the design of unique subject-classification schemes, and the appropriation of tools such as index cards and early computer databases.

In my wanderings through the range of archival documents, interviews, and second-wave publishing that forms my archive here, the term “information” is often bandied about in subtle ways that foreground its interstitial role in making possible collaboration amongst late-20th century feminists.¹ As “knowledge that is communicated,” (“information, n.”) information achieves its status as information through the act of being imparted and the forms that this movement takes. I approach information as the object that moves through the application of specific media practices—practices that form nascent political publics and shape their demands. Information is articulated to political visions of what might be, and so the ability to access information is always about much more than the simple fulfillment of a query. In its movement, information makes promises that are much greater than “finding things out.” Here is one such instance of information’s promise to help set the scene:

In the early 1980s, a “grassroots” organization calling itself “the Women’s Information Exchange” began to place ads in feminists print periodicals promoting a new mailing database service that would provide individuals and service organizations with access to a network of supporters. The ad reads: “Formed by grassroots feminists, the Women’s Information Exchange is dedicated to putting information technology to use in facilitating outreach, networking, and resource sharing among women. The goal of the organization is to use computer technology to support the efforts of women’s projects

throughout the country” (*Matrices* 1980: 21). The Information Exchange had witnessed the manipulation of computer databases by “enemies” to feminist causes such as the anti-abortion Moral Majority and thought it time to form information infrastructures of their own: “We recognize that many women are fearful about having their names on a computer. It is important to remember that most of us are already on any number of computerized mailing lists, none of which are voluntary nor oriented towards feminists.... Feminists, too, must come out of isolation and become part of a national communications network, made possible by computer technology” (Ibid).

The hope this classified listing invests in computer databases exemplifies a broader technological transition, critical to how information activists imagined and carried out their work across various forms of emergent media. Spanning a period from the early 1970s to the present day, this dissertation is concerned with feminist activism’s transition from paper-based methods to computing and other digital technologies. The women in print movement of the 1970s and 80s, in which feminist publishing houses, periodicals, and bookstores distributed a wide range of previously non-existent or inaccessible printed matter, is generally told as a story about paper, emphasizing what Barbara Sjoholm has so elegantly called “the sheer butch glamour of printing” (2012: 162). This “print” movement occurred during the emergence and wide-adoption of personal computing, accessible database technologies, and the Internet. Housed today in feminist archives such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), the paper records of this activism search out digital avenues in the present, as archives become interfaces for online engagement. Tracing the digital life of a paper movement responds to Lisa Gitelman’s critique of “print culture’s” conceptual paucity (2014: 7–9). Rather than rely

on print and digital as stable categories that represent a temporal progression—paper is scanned and “put online”—this project considers messier transitions between media, listening for the unexpected echoes of the digital in the past: how, for example, lesbian-feminist indexers sifted through mountains of 3X5 paper cards while dreaming of computer databases.

Echoes are not always easy to hear, and the historical dimensions of this work were not always obvious to me. The story of how the project evolved into its present form is important for explaining the stakes of historicizing feminist activism through the continuities and discontinuities between its “old” and “new” media. This dissertation began as a study of the technological, social and political conditions of producing feminist histories in the digital present. More specifically, it began in the LHA’s basement, where I found myself at the end of a tour of the archives on the first of what would prove to be many visits over the coming years. The LHA is an unusual space to begin with; an archive housed in a brownstone in Brooklyn, it’s part cultural heritage organization and part domestic space (Cvetkovich 2003; Corbman 2014). Working in the archives, you feel as if you’re in someone’s home. There are couches, a kitchen where coffee is often brewing, and an apartment on the third floor where the caretakers live. But there are also vertical files, worktables, computers, reference books, and acid-free boxes filed with special collections. The basement similarly straddles the domestic and archival spheres. Like the basements in many homes, it is filled with things that don’t quite belong upstairs but are impossible to throw out, except that these particular objects aren’t old Halloween costumes or forgotten-about sports equipment but the remnants of 20th-century lesbian history. Audio cassette-tapes, posters, records, and other ephemera crowd

the partially finished basement. Though there are occasional moisture problems, the materials are generally safe but take on an undeniable quality of “overflow” when situated in relation to what is upstairs.

Standing in this overcrowded basement, staring at the wall of 3,000 audio tapes that makes up the archives’ spoken word collection, I found myself thinking about the 20th-century archives as a space presented with a very 21st-century problem of transition: What to do with all this stuff? All this (mostly) paper? The archives was beginning to implement digitization projects they hoped would improve and expand access, address the problem of preservation, and ameliorate a physical space crunch. As I learned over the coming years, they were “doing” digitization their own way, bringing a feminist critique of technological accessibility and a resourceful, “good-enough” approach to bear on established archival standards. The feminist intervention with digital media at the archives quickly became the focus of my work.

Then, the project got bigger. What began as a study of this particular archives in transition expanded into a media history of the U.S. lesbian-feminist history and archives movement; it couldn’t have been any other way. Thinking about the digital archives in the present proved impossible without understanding a longer history of feminist appropriations of commonplace media towards the goals of better, more accessible information about the past. Watching archives volunteers create records using a late-model PC and simple database software called DB/TextWorks, I found myself asking when the archives got its first computer (1981)? What did the first mailing database look like (pretty rudimentary)? How did they learn how to use it (one computer-savvy woman was responsible for teaching everyone else)? I searched for ways to connect the archives’

choice of open-source audio software Audacity in the 2010s to the organization's founding principals of accessibility, written in 1974: "archival skills shall be taught, one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives" (LHA 1974).

In addition to looking both backwards and forwards in time, this project also looks outside the archives by framing a larger lesbian-feminist history and archives movement through examination of its media practices—practices that facilitated access to archival collections and made the work of doing lesbian history possible. Printed newsletters became a common technology of feminist activism beginning in the early 1970s, and have been important for uniting archival collections and other primary source materials with amateur and professional researchers, artists, and activists working on historical topics. These newsletters facilitated everyday connections amongst readers, while indexes and bibliographies were shared tools that provided broader pathfinding services by organizing printed materials by subject. Indexes to lesbian materials became definitive "guides to the literature," assembled by capable lesbian-feminist hands that parsed raw information using paper index cards. Circulated in the form of books or smaller, self-published documents, indexes were often advertised or even reproduced in these newsletters. The archives' attempts to organize and open access to collections through digitization evoked many of the management and pathfinding techniques of these earlier newsletters and indexes. Tensions between lesbian feminist and radical feminist ideologies on the one hand, and rationalization and compression processes on the other, were apparent across past and present projects, suggesting the need for a longer history of information management as a problem for feminist media.

Feminist newsletters have generally been approached through the rubric of print culture studies (Beins 2011; Jordan 2010; Meagher 2014; Meeker 2006); situating these newsletters as well as indexes and bibliographies in a longer media history, this project resists considering these materials solely in their printedness. Newsletters and index cards help to imagine the possibilities that online information contexts such as the digital archives might bring to lesbian-feminist activism; thus my approach to newsletters and indexes is framed by digital archives of the present. Newsletters are considered in their operation as “pre-web” communication networks, and my examination of indexing practices emphasizes the emergent personal computing and electronic information management contexts in which this work with “paper” took place.

Through this project’s historiographic method, archives become one site in larger activist media infrastructures. Broadly speaking, infrastructures are systems where resources operate in complex combination to make communication or knowledge-work possible (Bowker et al. 2010: 98). They often disappear from view and are taken for granted because they operate in the background (Star and Ruhleder 1996). This is especially the case with activist infrastructures, where the messy, grinding, often behind-the-scenes labour of “doing feminism” is bound up with the high-stakes goals that drive the movement in the first place, often manifesting as public spectacle. As Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder discuss, infrastructure is a “fundamentally relational concept” wherein processes, technologies, standards, systems, and work, only become infrastructures in relation to particular organized practices and cultural contexts (Star and Ruhleder 1996: 113). Though they are not writing about activism in particular, Star and Ruhleder’s emphasis on praxis is instructive: “Infrastructure is something that emerges

for people in practice, connected to activities and structures” (Star and Ruhleder 1996: 112).

Carrie Rentschler (2011) takes an infrastructural approach to the study of feminist social movements and their media practices, arguing that much of the work of feminist activism is “communicative labor” (17) that takes place out of sight of its final representational forms. Rentschler makes a methodological argument for studying the media of feminist social movements at “the midlevel scale of their communication” (17) through documentary research amongst memos, reports, newsletters and other movement texts. These papers form “rich documentary evidence” of a movement’s communication networks (19). This dissertation similarly focuses on this genre of document and work processes in order to approach the broader media infrastructures of feminist archival practices across time. Reading closely and for relationships across texts, the project examines a range of documents that includes newsletters, meeting minutes, internal memos, letters and other correspondence, online archival interfaces, photographs, catalogue records, log books, subject thesauri, instructional manuals, bibliographies, and actual index cards. Much work on unusual institutions such as The Lesbian Herstory Archives has emphasized the eccentric physical space of the archives in the present (c.f. Corbman 2014; Cvetkovich 2003); while a thick description of the basement is part of understanding the LHA’s media practices, an infrastructural approach also considers the invisible, interstitial processes that make archives tick, such as batches of index cards, written upon, edited, and sorted with care. The work of doing this dissertation began in a basement full of audio tapes and ended sorting through a stack of cards, and the differences between these materials—the often-invisible, strange paths taken to get from

one to the other—are precisely the project’s point. Studying information activism means following information as it moves—the logistics of information—in order to see the infrastructures that quietly get it where it needs to go: across space, across different forms of media, and through time.

As a method, following information lends itself towards studying process over product. My research objects tend to be less glamorous records; they document how books are assembled instead of the books themselves, and investigate how archives are run at the cost of paying close attention to the unique materials they house. This approach is foremost about the project’s grounding in media studies, a field that considers the infrastructures, technologies, standards and routines through which knowledge is produced. A media studies approach to process investigates the conditions of mediation through which identities such as lesbian are relegated, rationalized, and ordered retrospectively. Attending to process has also been about the objects that excited me as I began this work. From my place in the present, a finished index to lesbian materials lacked the sense of urgency this document may have once had for a marginalized public without access to representations of their lives; however, the idea that digital media histories might be written differently through a turn to the card and computer systems used to build these indexes seemed urgent to feminist media history. Attention to process also means that for a project “about” sex and sexuality, this dissertation devotes a great deal of space to analyzing the shuffling of paper—shuffling that is crucial and urgent even when it cannot capture the vitality or erotic energy represented by what is printed on these papers.

At the centre of information activism is of course, activists: the people who

publish newsletters and maintain archival collections, active participants in bold sexual subcultures who have taken great personal and professional risks by working to historicize sexuality. To supplement my documentary methods of working with papers, I have interviewed these women whenever possible. During three months of research at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, I interviewed a number of the archives' volunteers about digitization, online media, and the future of the archives. These interviews involved a lot of talking, but also showing; I asked each volunteer to walk me through the work they were doing, whether it was scanning photos of Dyke Marches from the 1980s and putting them online, "cleaning up" metadata in the archives' catalogue, or digitizing a tape-recorded speech by Audre Lorde. While the way in which these women described their work was important, I learned a great deal from this show-and-tell, especially about the purposeful politics of technological accessibility as it took form in practice. It was also an education in how community archives work; these women, not all of them professional librarians, taught me what my own training in the humanities and media studies had not. They patiently explained terms like "Dublin Core" (a metadata standard) and "OPAC" (Online Public Access Catalogue, or the database interface the public sees), equipping me with the quick education in information studies that I needed to do this work. By listening, watching, and allowing myself to be taught by these women, the interviews became opportunities for learning how information activists transgress archival standards (DiVeglia 2012: 72–73) through everyday technological decisions.

The volunteers at this archives and the other information activists whose work is considered here—newsletter-makers and indexers—engage with new media and technology in unique ways that are critical for establishing more expansive media

histories of such sites as “the Internet.” One of the contentions of this dissertation is that a general history of, for example, early consumer-grade database computing is made more nuanced by the interventions of feminist information activists. The critical attempts to “go electronic” made by figures such as the Circle of Lesbian Indexers of chapter two offer feminist interventions with common understandings of computing in the early 1980s. These women’s computing practices interrupt histories of the “user-friendly” computer as an accessible, time-saving device that instantly made information easier to collect, store, and sort. The Circle’s story of trying and failing to use these tools, and then turning back to the cards they knew, says something about the promise of emergent database computing. This work is aligned with others in feminist media studies whose archival research accounts for the contributions of apparently “minor figures” in media and technological history. Jennifer Light’s landmark study of mid-20th century woman computer programmers “hidden during this stage of computer history,” (1999: 455) and Lisa Nakamura’s work on the Navajo women who assembled early microchips in the late 1960s and early 1970s using hands practiced at weaving (2014), are two such examples.

Light, Nakamura, and others demonstrate how women’s work is often rendered invisible in histories of media and technology particularly when it takes the form of affective labour, care-work, or activist projects that are not valued as “paid work” and are difficult to account for following normative historiographic methods. While women’s work with media and technology has been undertheorized in communications history, it also sits stubbornly at the heart of the field: A “Telegraph Girl” is central to Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver’s foundational theory of communications transmission (the Shannon-Weaver model) (Weaver 1949) still taught in undergraduate communication

studies courses today. To explain how the content of a message does not matter to its successful transmission, Shannon and Weaver describe the “very proper and discreet girl accepting your telegram” who “pays no attention to the meaning, whether it be sad, or joyous, or embarrassing” (Weaver 1949: 15). The choice to include a Telegraph Girl was likely unremarkable in Shannon and Weaver’s writing process; telegraph operators and other low-level communications clerks simply were women in the post-war era, and these workers were expected not to remark on the sensitive information with which they were trusted. However, for feminist interventions in histories of media and technology, the excuse of happenstance simply isn’t good enough. The choice to read and then not act upon the content of hundreds of messages each day would take an emotional toll on the worker that might be accounted for in histories of the so-called neutrality of information, as would the subtle, subversive maneuvers these women surely took with whatever agential opportunities they found.²

What if the way in which this telegraph girl did or did not pay attention truly mattered? Such is a proposition of feminist media history and of this project: to insist that the contributions of figures considered minor to histories of emergent digital media—a circle of lesbians and their paper cards—need to be studied. This is especially so given this project’s focus on emergent media and the late origins of the digital. Following historiographic methods of considering media through emergence, negotiation, transition, and struggles over meaning and use, this project zeroes-in on a series of moments “before the material means and the conceptual modes of new media have become fixed, when such media are not yet accepted as natural, when their own meanings are in flux” (Pingree and Gitelman 2003: xii; see also Stern and Mulvin 2014: 122; Marvin 1988).

Through documents, artifacts, and interviews, the project examines how feminist information activists shaped developing understandings of digital media when it was new.

Archives of Access

Given that information describes knowledge as it is stored, sorted, searched for, and retrieved, to talk about archives as a form of information activism emphasizes access. Preservation and access share status as the “point” of archival collections and must be balanced by archivists as they undertake long-range strategic planning for acquisitions and collections development, and make everyday decisions about what restrictions to place on precious items or how to describe materials in a finding aid (Cloonan 2001). Preservation and access are inextricable aspects of collections management (de Lusenet and Drenth 1999: 162) that should ideally be complimentary but are often in tension (Astle and Muir 2002: 67). The LHA’s open access policy, where even special collections are stored on open-shelves so that archives visitors can take down boxes and peruse at will, materializes a unique feminist politics of access that shapes the archives’ overall preservation strategy—the public who handles these materials shares an unusual level of responsibility for their care.

Digitization offers no easy solutions for problems of preservation as it introduces a host of concerns about digital asset management, format-migration (archivists must preserve the integrity of files but also the hardware needed to read them), and the pressures of increased user demand for access to original records (Astle and Muir 2002; Cloonan 2001; de Lusenet and Drenth 1999; Koltun 1999). Bracketing many of these

concerns, the LHA's digitization initiatives seek improved access for community members and researchers, practicing a "good-enough" approach to creating and managing digital collections. Digitization follows as aesthetics of access (Hilderbrand 2009), where the goal of scanning this archives' photography collection, uploading the images to an online database, and assigning metadata through tagging is getting the best scans and description possible, but efforts are not stalled by waiting to acquire better technology or settle on a firm, controlled tagging vocabulary. "Digital archives have democratized historical research" (Bolick 2006: 122), but have done so long after information activists such as the women at the LHA sought to do this democratizing work with paper tools. The indexing projects and newsletters considered alongside the LHA's digitization practices are also aimed at improving access; access to primary sources, published research, and networks of community members and other researchers. These projects mediate between a public and information using guides to literature and print-based communications networks, each of which form part of the lesbian-feminist history and archives movement's larger media infrastructure. Approaching the archives through the rubric of information, infrastructure, and access allows me to re-consider the status of the "archive"; one theoretical stake of this project is a question about what a media studies approach might offer to recent queer and feminist archive theory.

The conditions of mediation through which archives are both managed and encountered by publics shape what the archives becomes. Michel Foucault's discussion of the archive in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002 [1972]) has been important for my theorizing of media's role in constructing archives of access. In this text Foucault describe the archive as a discursive system—a kind of infrastructure. The archive is made

up of statements, units of speech that have meaning only in relation to the communicative web in which they are situated. Archives organize statements in such a way as to produce a notion of “history,” grouping together what is thinkable and sayable in a given social context such as Lesbian Feminism (capital L, capital F). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the archive is a living constellation in which the relationships between statements are always under negotiation. Within the archival turn in the humanities, some scholars have bridged Foucauldian ideas about archives of knowledge with actual archival collections: Ann Stoler’s work on colonial archives (2010) and her methodological incitement to read along the archival grain imagines archives as systems that have particular organizing logics and governing effects to begin—colonial regimes depend upon archives to shore up power over colonized subjects over the long term; Kate Eichhorn’s (2013) work on feminist print archives of the recent past positions archival collections as technologies that order feminist social movements in retrospect, where archives make forms of feminist activism—her object is Riot grrl subculture—appear discrete at the cost of preserving their complex heterogeneity.

Stoler and Eichhorn each approach archives as historical interfaces and discursive systems caught up in larger operations of power. Their work frames archives as epistemological technologies that structure how the past is encountered; this dissertation’s intervention is to center media in this encounter, examining the ways that media practices facilitate historical ordering. The archive becomes indistinguishable from its conditions of mediation. Foregrounding information and access emphasizes archival encounters with the past as interfaces built purposefully through feminist activists efforts and the specific choices about media and technology these women make. This project

also seeks to account for the emotional currencies of information by drawing upon queer and feminist theorizations of the emotional lives of archives. Ann Cvetkovich turns to the queerness of archives to consider how shared cultural texts become unlikely “repositories of feelings emotions” (2003: 7), a concept further developed by J. Jack Halberstam’s queer archival method in which objects and fragments of study come into non-hierarchical relationships guided by multiple meanings and emotions that are both singular and shared (2005: 24, 2011a, 2011b).

Information activism is motivated by desires for shared history and an erotics of being in proximity to a past organized by sexuality—a history built and occupied by others. The term “erotics” is a deliberate choice, evoking Audre Lorde’s description of the joy and affective forms of community that are adjacent to concepts such as “lesbian” or “feminist” but transcend their identitarian terms (Lorde 1978 [2007]). Amber Jamilla Musser, reading Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic,” connects this nearly 40-year-old black lesbian feminist text to present affect theory: “Talking about affect helps displace identity as the basis for community formation and opens political possibilities. Lorde’s discussion of the erotic touches on this potential because the most central component of the erotic, after all, is its creation of an affective community.... This formation of community through affective flows is one of the hallmarks of the plural subject” (Musser 2014: 147).³ As an erotic practice, providing access to information is more than just helping publics find what they are looking for; it is a world-making gesture constructed by specific media interfaces and technologies. Information technologies are thought to carry emotional force that is seductive, overwhelming, and powerful, especially when these technologies are new and their introduction promises to deliver new intensities or

proximities via communication or information (Malin 2014 6–7). Brenton J. Malin explains that the “emotional power of communication technologies” is felt most acutely with “*developing* media that seem to be transforming a culture’s abilities to connect in ways that can only be imagined” (emphasis added, 6).

As an active stance generating these kinds of erotic but also identity-based communities, information activism can be thought as affective labour, which Michael Hardt (1999) defines as “the processes whereby our laboring practices produce collective subjectivities, produce sociality, and ultimately produce society itself” (89). Hardt’s emphasis on the labour of producing collectivity, or producing the spaces and contexts in which individuals might feel part of something, helps to explain information activism’s social role for lesbian feminism: information work gives ground to nascent feminist publics by establishing new networks and shared interfaces for encounter. This project’s use of “affective labour” also draws from feminist scholars who have considered domestic and care-work’s construction as women’s work and the ideals of “work-life balance” or a “second shift” (Hochschild and Machung 1989). More recently, Melissa Gregg (2011) has examined affective labour in relation to digital media: online and networked technologies allow women to work from home, sometimes with limited resources, “catching-up” or “getting-ahead” on paid work (Gregg 54). Though Gregg is critical of information technology’s ability to colonize women’s leisure time, her study also points to media as a site of infiltration, appropriation, and resourcefulness for marginalized users. These are the tactics through which feminists usurp or appropriate media toward collective ways of doing politics.

Immateriality is a common refrain in scholarship on affective labour and digital media, a concept explored by both Gregg and Hardt. Immateriality refers to affective labour's ill-fit with a traditional Marxist labour theory of value, and is used to describe the networked, hyper-mediated conditions of late capitalism in which contemporary theories of affective labour are formed. By reading across digital and "analog" media forms, this approach to information activism emphasizes the very present materiality of media practices, examining "objects" such as interfaces or bibliographies, especially the work entailed in their creation. For example chapter two considers the pathfinding work of index-making as a very material form of affective labour, read through Sara Ahmed's work on objects as they orient us in relation to others (2006). Never neatly digital or print, material or immaterial, this approach to affective labour pushes on the divisions that can bifurcate information and emotion in the first place.

This project takes an interdisciplinary humanities approach, bridging communications studies, media history, and gender and sexuality studies; however, scholarship by information professionals has also been indispensable. Practicing librarians and archives-scholars working within information studies have helped me consider how everyday, work-related choices such as the assignment of a particular subject-classification to materials (Drabinski 2010) mediate access to information in substantial ways. Queer and feminist librarians and archivists examine the digital present with an eye to a longer history of LGBT and feminist activism in library and archives access-debates (Berman 2008; Garrison 1972/73; Johnson 2008). In the early 1970s, at the height of the women's liberation movement, historian Dee Garrison published "The Tender Technicians," a landmark information studies text that identified a need for historians of

information science and women's work to recover the forgotten history of women's influence on information (143). Since then, theory and historiography by feminist information studies scholars has sought to fill this gap; a notable recent iteration is the Litwin Books series on Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies.⁴ Seeking to consider gendered ruptures with standards in libraries, archives, and other information contexts, this work considers such sites as the queerness of cataloguing practices (Drabinski 2010), and the trans-ing of archival fonds (Rawson 2009; Roberto 2011).

Access is one of the key terms for these critical information scholars (Diveglia 2012), bound up with the digital and articulated to online interfaces (Hedstrom 2002), search retrieval (Wolfe 2008), and networked databases (Manoff 2010). Critical information scholars explore the gendered valences of access promised by digital technologies. Through this body of literature access becomes a critical term that qualifies the forms of technological mediation layered between information and its public. Lesbian feminist activism's purposeful negotiation of historical interfaces using commonplace media considers access as one part of its broader gendered social analysis.

Access implies a public in the first place; its verb form is transitive, requiring a subject and object, or put another way, a public seeking access to something in particular. This project considers how the media practices of information access bring a public into existence, setting out shared interests and resources, political goals, and networks of connection. Processes of reading, researching, writing, publishing, communicating, and archiving are all tactics marginalized users adopt to imagine and enact transformative modes of counterpublic address (Warner 2002). They are discursive and self-organizing processes of circulating information, through which strangers with something in common

come into relation, working out the terms of shared (or divergent) political visions. Agatha Beins has documented the ways in which the women in print movement brought a lesbian-feminist public into existence, “maintaining communication, spreading information, and involving women in the movement” through books and periodicals, and their attendant reading practices (Beins 10). Also exploring the counterpublic development of U.S. sexual minorities but earlier on in the mid-century, Martin Meeker follows “sexual communication networks” as a method of tracing the diffusion and influence of cultural documents on nascent participatory publics, “their drives, ideas, passions, ambitions, and mistakes” (Meeker 2006: 15). This project’s method is similarly attuned to the media practices that allow documents to circulate, considering the communications infrastructure that supports the development of a shifting signifier called “lesbian feminism.”

The term “lesbian feminism” refers to both a historical social movement active in the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s, and an ongoing politics in the present. Historically speaking, lesbian feminism describes the branch of women’s liberation-era feminist activism that set itself apart from the mainstream feminist movement through the political and emotional ideals of lesbianism and the bond between women. The ideological underpinnings of the movement involved envisioning a life lived without a primary relationship to men as a choice made in service of emancipation rather than “merely” sexual gratification (Gerhard 2001: 111). The “Woman-Identified Woman” who the Lavender Menace—later Radicalesbians—described in their 1970s manifesto, is “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion” (Radicalesbians 1970: 1). Lesbian feminist rage is often described in hindsight as a response to exclusions within

the broader women's movement, within which acrimony became inevitable as radicals faced an increasingly moderate and strategically heterosexual women's movement (Hesford 2013: 94).⁵ After its heyday in the 1970s, Lesbian Feminism falls out of favour as a present, visible social movement with a firm set of aesthetic and actionable commitments; yet lesbian feminism continues in the present as a guiding principle of organizations such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, which is staffed by women who came to activism in the civil rights and women's liberation movements, but also by a growing contingent of young folks in their 20s born under the sign of queerness. This younger generation, whose commitments to feminist and queer politics vary from person to person, is motivated by the history of lesbian political organizing even as they do not quite occupy its terms.

The LHA's application of lesbian feminist ideals to its archiving practices is one practical example of lesbian feminism's ongoing effects, representing the affective pull this "historical" movement continues to exert upon the present and upon "queer" subjects (Freeman 2010: 62). This project investigates this pull in relation to media, searching for echoes of the digital in past lesbian-feminist media practices that shape the ongoing stakes of access to information. This theoretical approach has benefitted from an exciting body of emerging literature that has worked to historicize late 20th-century feminist history from the present through the rubric of affect theory (Hemmings 2011; Hesford 2013; Freeman 2010; Scott 2011; Wiegman 2012, 2010). Put broadly, this scholarship asks after historical feminisms' ongoing effects in the present, examining how feeling attachments to feminisms are continually re-enacted and enlivened through means that transcend the simple rubric of nostalgia, which has long been dismissed as apolitical by

cultural studies (Jameson 1991; Stewart 1993). Here, ambivalent feelings about feminisms of the past are held open: accusations of essentialism, normativity, single-issue politics, and racism often levied at lesbian feminism become potentially productive obstacles because of their continued pressure in the present (Freeman 2010: 62–64), challenging the celebration of queer as an inherently progressive and unmarred by these concerns (see Eng 2010; Puar 2007). As Victoria Hesford explores, it is precisely these antagonisms and the ambivalence they engender that give the women’s liberation movement boundaries and contours, making it nameable as a phenomenon both during its operation and from the present (2012: 32–33).

This work traces a *media history* of lesbian feminism in order to ask how lesbian feminist strategies of organization and protest, and commitment to certain kinds of world-making, continue to shape media practices in the digital present. I foreground ambivalence above because to some extent, my own ambivalent identifications with lesbian feminism are at the centre of this media history. As a researching subject bringing together a particular set of objects towards historiographic ends, I have tried as much as possible to foreground my own desiring attachments to this work, these women, and this political movement. Beginning in the LHA’s basement, I include my own “archive stories” (see Burton 2006) about coming to and moving between the objects and actors that make up my archive here. Doing this work has asked me to reckon with my own attachments to lesbian feminism and even to the category “lesbian,” never feeling as if I am quite that thing despite wanting to occupy some relation to it, and caring about its ongoing place in digital archives of the present.

Chapter Outlines

Though the chapters that follow cover a range of media and a span of decades, to some extent they consider a relatively small, or at least overlapping group of women based in the United States, who did their work in relation to lesbian-feminist archives and publishing. Figures whose work represents the subject of one chapter make cameos in others; for example, Julia Penelope Stanley who started the newsletter *Matrices* in 1979—the subject of chapter one—helped to found the Lesbian Herstory Archives three years earlier. Speaking to these women today through my interviews, they often knew or knew of each other, and seem to enjoy telling me about what they remember. Similarly, when I have presented this work at conferences, there are generally a few women in the audience who have come to my talk because they remember having been there—they subscribed to “that newsletter” or used “that index.” The theoretical underpinnings of the dissertation are similarly intertwined with the figures whose work forms its objects; Susan Leigh Star, one of *Matrices*’ founding editors, made her living as a pioneering theorist of feminist technoscience and she is quoted on media infrastructures above. The activist newsletter network she helped to build with *Matrices* grounds its philosophical underpinnings in her larger intellectual project and professional life. Feminist information activism is often guided by feminist theory, as are my own paths through this research, where I have sometimes found myself thinking about the digitization of audio tapes that record the very materials—feminist thought—that form my theoretical approach.

The dissertation begins with newsletters and the print-based communicative infrastructure they facilitated. Chapter one approaches newsletters as networked technologies that supported the lesbian feminist history and archives movement, focusing primarily on *Matrices: A Lesbian Feminist Research Newsletter* published from 1977

until 1996. Using a range of communications media including photocopiers and letter mail, *Matrices* figured itself explicitly as a network that would facilitate what the editors called “interconnections” amongst anyone doing research related to lesbian feminism. *Matrices*’ network operation was fairly typical of what feminist newsletter culture sought to do during this “pre-Internet” era, thus the publication is situated amongst other newsletters used by historical researchers and archives, including the LHA’s newsletter.

Matrices is approached through media and communications theory rather than simply as a proper object of “print culture” to argue that a feminist mode of network thinking can be traced through small-scale print newsletters that draw on the language and function of networks, where archives and newsletters work together as interconnected technologies of information activism. Publications such as *Matrices* emerge into wide production and circulation in the early 1970s and all but disappear by the mid 1990s, an era that spans the nascent women’s liberation and women in print movements on one end, and the emergence of the World Wide Web on the other. Looking from the present to examine how network thinking has been a feature of feminist activism and knowledge production since before the Internet, publications such as *Matrices* become part of a longer history of the cultural politics of networked communications media in feminist contexts.

Chapter two is similarly engaged with the ways in which print transcends the media of the page by examining the index, a genre that includes bibliographies, subject-based guides to whole runs of periodicals, and the familiar form of a topic listing by page found in the back of non-fiction books. The chapter considers three feminist indexing projects: the Circle of Lesbian Indexers (1980–86) and their *Lesbian Periodicals Index*

(Potter 1986), JR Roberts's *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* (1981), and finally Barbara Gittings's *Gay Bibliography* (published in six editions 1971–80). This research focuses on discovering a narrative of production for these indexes; rather than reading out from their published pages, I work with the paper records these projects left behind to document their work processes and circulation strategies. These “behind-the-scenes,” objects and procedures—everyday paper records such as letters, memos, and notes—are far removed in tone from the vibrant sexual subcultures they exist to serve. Feminist indexers worked with thousands of little paper slips to manage the working databases that would eventually become pathfinding tools through an explosion of lesbian-feminist publishing. They did this often-cumbersome work with paper when they could have been using computers and this moment of computational emergence is key to the chapter.

Feminist indexing in the 1980s takes place just as database computing and online search retrieval are becoming standard in institutional information contexts. This history of computing and information management is constructed by examining a series of formative indexing manuals published during this period and used by feminist indexers to guide their work. Enticed by the promise of computing but critical of technological accessibility, feminist indexers practice capable amateurism, craft techniques, and collectively organized work. The routine, meticulous tasks of sorting cards is made meaningful by a larger political vision of what might be achieved through better access to information, in an affective economy common to the broader scope of feminist information activism, including newsletter and archives. This chapter aims to recover the

feminist influence on indexing and emergent database computing by examining indexes as “pre-digital” interfaces facilitating access to information through search-retrieval.

Chapters three and four turn to feminist archiving’s media practices through a study of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Where chapters one and two are concerned with what appears to be print culture, they do so from the present in order to put pressure on established distinctions between digital and analog. This study of the LHA takes place in what is more clearly a digital moment, exploring this archives’ ongoing digitization practices, which began in the early 2010s. Through interviews, observation, and documentary research in organizational records at this grassroots archives, the chapter connects feminist political and activist commitments to the design and implementation of accessible digitization projects that sometimes counter accepted archival standards. For example, the LHA digitizes their audio cassette tapes using a commercial-grade analog to digital converter and the open-source software audacity, creating files that are above-all good enough even though they might not meet the fidelity standards at the Library of Congress. Practicing information management guided by feminist resourcefulness, the LHA’s approach to digitization is improvisational, self-reflexive, and willfully imperfect in its technological choices.

Chapter three is a general history of media at this archives, focused on the broad ethos behind the organization’s multiple digitization projects, which include digitizing oral histories tapes and other audio-visual materials and streaming them online, scanning photos and offering public access through an online image database, and updating the archives’ text-based catalog for eventual online access. Chapter four looks more closely at the archives’ photography collection, considering the ontological status of pornography

in the collection as the archives becomes a space of primarily digital encounter. Though the lesbian feminism that forms the backbone of this dissertation is necessarily organized around cultures of sexuality, the valences of sex and the erotic are often relegated to the background of my analysis, in part because my method is primarily attuned to the work processes that precede the making-public of information. Chapter four is where sex and the body truly become a focus; it is necessarily also one of the only places where my method turns to close reading of the actual materials publics encounter. The status of images of sexuality in this collection presents opportunities for reflecting on the cultural politics of digitization in community archives, including the accessibility of sexual materials in LGBT archives as they move online and deal with what it means to offer Internet porn as cultural heritage material. The design of this project has generated moments of reckoning with various political contexts in which the archives moves, including lesbian feminism's notable 1980s porn-wars. Digitization presents the archives with the opportunity to consider how the historical representations of sexuality it houses challenge the normative imperatives that can accompany digital media practices, including sexuality and gender's difficult fit with the categorical imperatives of structured databases.

The brief conclusion turns to the images of informational abundance that have continually crept up through this research. Whether it is talk of piles and stacks of cards managed by indexers, the countless networked connections the newsletter facilitates, or the mountains of old lesbian stuff trying to find its way from the shelves of the archives to the Internet, it seems as if there is always too much information to manage. Feminist information activism does its work within this economy of precarious abundance, where

it is normal to feel overwhelmed and to keep working despite the fear that you might drown in cards. Beginning with Lauren Berlant's turn to cruel optimism (2012), where the goal that is sought is precisely the obstacle in the way of its achievement, the conclusion examines the economies of information within which these projects take place. Lesbian history is always being made and we are always catching up, working to document and provide ongoing access in a project that is paradoxically un-completable. Here the impulse to archive, what Jacques Derrida famously called "archive fever" (1995), extends to a feminist practice of carrying on despite the odds. The digital, with its promise of limitless management through compression, instantaneous access, immateriality, and the rhetorics of Big Data, might be productively made into fodder for the lesbian-feminist killjoy.

Chapter One

The Internet that Lesbians Built: Newsletter Networks in the Feminist History and Archives Movement

From our place in the present the word “Network” is shorthand for so many kinds of interactions and media uses that the concept and its origins are easily taken for granted. New media scholars such as Manuel Castells (2001; 2009; 2012) have proposed that we live in a “network society,” where life is organized through networks characterized by digital, online media interfaces. We go to professional events to “network,” meeting in person and following-up online according to a structure for social encounter that normalizes conspicuous opportunism—exchanging information in order to “expand our networks” to mutual advantage. Online, we interact through “social networks,” and the ubiquity of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Grindr. Our lives offline—is there such a thing?—stage encounters with family, friends and potential lovers, through online interfaces and databases through which we construct a self in relation to the world. Coming into proximity with others is often facilitated by networks, shaping the ways affective encounters—dating, fucking, celebrating births and mourning deaths—are imagined and carried out, and guiding the pace of modern sociality itself (Turkle 2011).

Communication networks are also the privileged metaphor for imagining political speech, activist organizing, and public assembly (Dean 2009), guiding political theories of how multitudes assemble to make a demand. Movements such as Occupy, Idle No More, Slut Walks, and Black Lives Matter are well-documented examples of social movements that achieved a groundswell online, and transformed online activism into offline protest with degrees of efficacy debated by political science and media scholars

(Castells 2012; Lim 2012; Soon and Kluver 2014). Online communication also supports feminist organizing; through blogs and social media, feminists work out the very terms of what feminism means and how it might continue to operate in the present, a process built and shared through networks. For example, the 2014 women's rights campaign powered by the hashtag #YesAllWomen (as in, yes all women experience misogyny) was equal parts massive online movement and flash-in-the-pan—its virality inspired participation by more than two million users in its first twenty-four hours but interest quickly faded. All this buzz around the network is exemplary of how today, online media and social movement politics are difficult to even imagine in isolation from one another.

Part of the normalization of communication networks and their politics is a general acceptance that network communication is also nefarious—that these networks in their more formal technological manifestations are far from the utopic, “do no evil,” neutral communications infrastructures they promise to be.⁶ There is always a trade-off for the convenience of living through mediated networks, particularly those controlled by corporate interests, whether this comes in the form of compromised privacy and the acceptance of surveillance, or from the exhausting feeling of being always connected to others through handheld devices. While networks make clear promises in the present—ideals such as convenience, or the way they facilitate the speedy organization of massive collectives—their failings are as evident, including the “real-life” effects of merely tweeting about an injustice.

Feminist communication networks in the present inspire a similar ambivalence, shaped by questions about the future of feminism and its operating terms. The digital online networks that structure far-reaching women's movements are mired by unequal

power relations between participants determined by levels of technological access (Kannengiesser 2011: 509). But the politics described by the Digital Divide are not only germane to online media; the Internet's exclusions and divisions of access remediate all kinds of questions that have long been asked about feminist organizing, collectivity and accessibility, including who can take up a place in the network and find legitimacy as a node with something of value to say. Gatekeeping—structural, technological, ideological, racialized, classed—happens in feminist *print* networks as well, as we will see with the “pre-web” feminist networks of the 1970s and 80s that form my “objects” here.

Tracing valences of access across different forms of media is just one pathway opened by looking back at historical networks from a present time when what they offer to feminism is taken for granted. Sara Ahmed (2004) considers what happens when we stage encounters between feminisms of the past and present, when we pick up and hold the objects of feminist history as present attachments (187). One of the things that happens is that “feminism moves, and is moved” (188); in other words, when we look at the networks thought to be behind us from the places we occupy in networks of the present, we open ourselves to questions about “feminist visions of the future” that “have not been realized” (187), and in this opening the present might change or at the very least recognize the persistence of its mediated objects. This is the “why” of historicizing print networks—to see what persists and consider the ways in which particular media forms shape the conditions of possibility for feminist organization, set a rhythm or pace, or perhaps don't make any difference at all. The simplest definition of “network” describes a complex system or chain of inter-related things, typically understood in space as a web or net. Holding together feminist networks past and present is to extend this complex web

through a temporal rather than spatial dimension; spreading the net across time, we might imagine from the present a moment when the promise of networks for feminism felt new.

In this chapter I examine print networks, specifically those networks that supported the lesbian feminist history and archives movement emerging in the mid to late 1970s in the United States alongside gay and lesbian community archives. I begin this chapter with what networks mean right now to set the stakes for this historical inquiry, specifically how it might situate the media of feminist history-making in a longer trajectory. As Castells has shown “Twenty-first century social movements, purposive collective actions aiming at the transformation of values and institutions of society, manifest themselves on and by the Internet” (Castells 2001: 138). Here the Internet is not merely a tool put toward pre-determined ends, but a form of media that structures, in its specificity, what social movements look like in the present, including what kind of transformations they imagine to be possible in the first place (139). The risk of taking Castells’ and other presentist treatise on the Network Society at face value is that social movements of the past are bracketed to a time prior to the normalization of online communications. They are set apart because their conditions of mediation are thought to be radically different, a premise I challenge in this chapter through my consideration of a feminist social movement’s print networks. As I will show, these print networks are communication infrastructures that are different from contemporary communications networks, but also model in many ways what online networks would become using “pre-web” media and technology such as mimeographs, telephones, and letter mail. The chapter is organized around the story of *Matrices*, a late-20th century newsletter network that united artists, activists, and researchers doing work on Lesbian Feminist History.

While my focus is primarily on this particular publication and network, I locate the publication in the larger feminist history and archives movement and its general newsletter culture, including in relation to the newsletter of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, an organization whose broader media practices I turn to in depth in chapters three and four. Newsletters such as *Matrices* make up one component of the larger media infrastructure of this historical movement.

Matrices

Julia Penelope, professor of English at the University of Nebraska, once described herself as a “white, working-class, fat butch Dyke who never passed” (Brownsworth 2013). Penelope, a political lesbian separatist, edited several collected volumes of political and theoretical writings on lesbianism, but one of her greatest contributions to feminist politics begins with a modest, mimeographed form letter sent to lesbian academics in the Spring of 1977. Addressed “Dear Sister,” the letter proposes a newsletter to be circulated to academics, activists, artists, and community researchers across the U.S. working on lesbian-feminist topics, mostly historical in focus. It begins,

Several wimmin across the U.S. have been corresponding back and forth, exchanging papers, and we’ve been considering starting a Lesbian/Feminist Research Newsletter that would facilitate communication among the members of what we perceive to be a growing network of wimmin doing exciting research on issues and problems that touch on all of our lives. Right now, our communication is haphazard, and we don’t always know who’s doing what research. A newsletter would help to keep us in touch with each other, and inform us of recent papers and publications and ongoing research. (Stanley 1977, personal communication)

That fall, Penelope collaborated with four other women spread across the country—Sarah Hoagland, JR Roberts, Susan Leigh Star, and Libby Bouvier—to found *Matrices: A*

Lesbian/Feminist Research Newsletter.⁷ Penelope asked her department chair, John Robinson, if the department would fund the newsletter and he agreed. It was thus produced using departmental resources and distributed free of charge until 1982, when a modest subscription fee covering postage was charged. Circulation increased to “800 womyn in nearly every state and seven countries” by the newsletter’s fourth year of publication (*Matrices* 1980: 1). Subscribers and contributors include artists and academics who made major interventions in queer and feminist scholarship, from the gay and lesbian historian and founder of <http://outhistory.org>, Jonathan Katz, to the fiction writer Sarah Schulman, to the lesbian-feminist filmmaker Barbara Hammer, whose oeuvre includes the landmark short-film *Dyketactics* (1974).

Matrices supported each of these figure’s work; the publication functioned explicitly as a network designed for sharing information and resources amongst anyone doing research related to lesbian feminism. Using various forms of communications media—photocopiers, telephones, letter mail, and the newsletter itself—the *Matrices* network facilitated collaboration across space with people who were otherwise difficult to know about let alone reach. Though *Matrices* is the object of my focus here, its operation is not at all unusual situated in the larger context of newsletters during its time, and offers an entry into a broader general history of the idea of networks in this particular feminist print culture.

Newsletters in the late-20th century, U.S. lesbian feminist movement pre-date online communications media and the contemporary List Serv, but also used networked communication to circulate information to geographically dispersed but politically organized individuals and groups. Distributed primarily by letter mail, issues of these

newsletters acted as slower, print communication infrastructures, publishing requests for information and resources, updates on the activities of others, surveys, phone trees, listings of archival holdings and primary source materials at community and institutional archives, mailing lists, and bibliographies. Each issue's publication was an initial moment of communication facilitating a range of subsequent connections amongst recipients, generally taking the form of further, task-oriented correspondence between individuals and/or institutions. *Matrices's* first issue is exemplary of how the idea of networks animated the newsletter's communicative functions; announcing the first issue, the editors write, "we open what we hope will become a continuous dialogue and exchange of information, a network of Lesbian/Feminist researchers working in the community and academia...*Matrices* hopes to facilitate interconnectedness among us, so that we can work together, sharing information and resources" (Hoagland et al. 1977: 3).

This chapter illustrates how a feminist mode of network thinking animates small-scale print lesbian feminist newsletters that draw on the language and practice of networking. These publications emerge in the early 1970s and all but disappear by the mid 1990s, an era that spans the nascent women's liberation and women in print movements on one end, and the emergence of the World Wide Web on the other. While the early 1970s saw a veritable explosion of grassroots periodicals publishing by feminists, this movement modeled technics already developed in the midcentury through such publications as *The Ladder*, an early lesbian periodical published by the Daughters of Bilitis between 1956 and 1972. Though it was also sent under cover and included reader-generated material, *The Ladder's* project was assimilationist; routed in the homophile movement, the publication disarticulated itself from any radical feminist

project of social transformation (Cutler 2003: 234). Feminist social movements took political advantage of changes in the accessibility of communications media and printing technologies, such as the rise of the less expensive, simpler to operate offset printing press (Beins 2011: 9–10), or the normalization of copying machines in workplaces, used covertly by women clerical workers. Networks have been critical to the construction of feminist histories and the relationship between networked print cultures and the U.S. lesbian feminist history and archives movement is examined in order to demonstrate this. Archives and newsletters as interconnected social movement technologies that enable activists to share difficult-to-access information, resources and primary sources via photocopying and other modes of print reproduction. In the process, archival collections of these feminist print cultures redress the relative invisibility of essential media practices that have constituted the work of doing women's history.

Matrices is one among several newsletters that provided communicative support for grassroots lesbian (and gay) historical research. Others include *The Lesbian/Gay History Researchers Network Newsletter* (1980–81), and the annual newsletter of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) (1975–2004). A loosely organized community of academics, non-institutional researchers and activists worked within this movement to redress the elision of gay and lesbian experience from the historical record (Maynard 1991–92), establishing community archives across the U.S., Canada and elsewhere, and conducting primary source research and publication. Several intersecting politics form the movement's ideological roots: the post-Stonewall, gay liberation movement is key, as is the longer legacy of the midcentury Homophile movement, particularly its middle-class, assimilationist investment in the free circulation of gay and lesbian literature

depicting “accurate” information about homosexuality. Lesbian feminist historical organizations also emerge out of the women’s liberation movement in the 1970s, as do new university women’s studies departments and feminist oral histories methods. Organizations such as the New York-based LHA straddled both worlds; run by feminist activists who came of age in the women’s liberation era, the archives also found an uneasy home in a gay and lesbian historical movement noted for emphasizing the histories of white gay men.

Community archives such as the LHA constructed mailing lists to extend the reach of their work beyond the physical archive; the management of these lists often became the first impetus for the use of personal computers and database software at these archives.⁸ Mailed newsletters offered outreach that was critical to fledgling gay and lesbian archives for several reasons: first, newsletters sought funding from the community to run the archives; second, newsletters reported research findings or alerted readers to the publication of this research in monograph form; third, and key to my analysis here, newsletters told potential researchers what was available through archives so they could translate the raw stuff of a collection into published forms, disseminated in service of the historical movement’s ultimately pedagogical goals (Maynard 1991–92: 200).

I found *Matrices*, or maybe it found me, during my research period at the LHA, where I was studying the archives’ digitization practices. I was at the archives on a Saturday afternoon in my capacity as a volunteer, sorting through donor agreement forms to create a spreadsheet indicating which special collections of personal papers had the go-ahead from donors to be listed online. On Saturdays, the archives is staffed by Deb Edel,

one of the founders, and her partner Teddy Minucci. Deb and I were sitting in the archives' main floor library, at the large, shared worktable, talking about how my research was going. I told her I had begun to think that a longer history of media and technology at the archives' would be necessary to get at the questions I had about digitization in the present. We talked more generally about newsletters and the ways in which earlier feminist social movements, including the LHA, relied on networks of their own, albeit pre-digital ones. All of a sudden a light seemed to go off in Deb's head. There was a journal she wanted to show me, the name of which was on the tip of her tongue. Deb led me up the stairs to the periodicals room, and went straight to the Hollinger box that contained nearly every issue of *Matrices*. She thought I might find it helpful for my work.

I spent some time with the newsletter that day, but wasn't sure how it might fit with the rest of this project, yet I found myself returning to it each time I was in New York during that research year. Later I would learn that the women's and gender studies library at my home institution held a near-complete run of *Matrices*, which would make working closely with the publication much easier. Meanwhile *Matrices* and the figures who relied on the publication kept coming up as I continued my research on archives, feminist information activism and newsletters. For example, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993) comes up often in *Matrices*, in its pre-publication form as the Buffalo Women's Oral History Project. Davis and Kennedy used the newsletter to tell others about their project and find similar oral histories with a lesbian focus. Clare Potter and The Circle of Lesbian Indexers, and JR Roberts and her *Black Lesbian Bibliography* appear in *Matrices* as well as in the

newsletter of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Later I would learn that Julia Penelope was a member of the five-woman collective who founded the Lesbian Herstory Archives, four years prior to writing the letter that launched *Matrices*. To sum this all up, I realized gradually through my immersion in the media of the lesbian feminist history and archives movement, that though *Matrices* was not unique—it was one among several newsletters I might have studied here—it was certainly exemplary of how community archives including the LHA were built and are sustained through networks. *Matrices* became a way of considering some of the more interstitial forms of media that made archive and history projects possible. It tipped me off to the ways in which newsletters are a critical part of the longer story about these archives as sites of mediation, a story I initially thought I would tell only from the present digital moment.

Though it was not affiliated with any single archive, *Matrices* supported emerging community archives, publishing requests for donations of funds and primary source materials, and making potential researchers aware of collections they might access. *Matrices* is one outlet in a complex web of print-based communicative infrastructure that allowed these archives to operate, and by extension, allowed historical research on lesbian feminist topics to be produced. I focus my analysis on *Matrices* as one of a series of newsletters that facilitated the everyday work of historical research.

Matrices published three times a year from 1977 until the mid 1980s, and then infrequently until 1996, a moment when many of these newsletters lost relevance as email became widespread and List Servs became key networks of online distribution in humanities and social science research communities (Hyman 2003). I closely analyzed a total of twenty-four issues that I gathered from partial collections at two different

periodicals collections. My method of close reading across issues emphasizes the individuals, projects, spaces and conversations that transcend individual issues, rather than focusing on any of the publication's singular moments. For example, the New Alexandria Lesbian Library in Western Massachusetts appears in the pages of the publication beginning in 1978, with updates that chronicle its initial conception and fundraising drive, to its search for new volunteer staff and move from Chicago, updating readers on the status of the project and the sources the library offered, and soliciting input from the *Matrices* community along the way. Following this library's activities through *Matrices* over a period of years illustrates the publication's ongoing entanglement with a larger activist movement and its instrumental role in facilitating outreach.

In addition to reading across the archive of *Matrices*, my method situates the publication in a larger constellation of feminist periodicals by following citation practices across other newsletters (Hemmings 2011). Reading *Matrices* as a network is necessarily retrospective, requiring a larger view of various efforts toward history-making as a united movement. It has also required use of feminist libraries and archives with open-access policies that allow me to bring these publications into conversation with one another. I am literally describing the ability of a researcher at the LHA or York University's Nellie Langford Rowell Women's Studies Library—the periodicals collections where I conducted this research—to have open access to stacks that hold rare feminist printed matter, in order to follow a citation by pulling out more than one publication at the same time. As Kate Eichhorn (2013) has documented, this methodological proximity is rooted in a feminist, open-access archival politics that makes collaborative, network-based feminist histories possible. Libraries and archives practice access and classification

strategies that are critical to the preservation of feminist networks, which might not otherwise survive the isolating disciplinary technologies of archivization (Sloniowski 2013).

The first part of this chapter considers how the *Matrices* network operates at two levels: First as a conceptual model, where networked communication is articulated to the political goals of feminist print culture and of feminist historiography; Second as an actual schematic for uniting a community of researchers and activists through decentralized forms of communication, such as through the newsletter's maintenance of a shared subscriber profile system. The chapter then considers the role this Lesbian-Feminist Research Network had in building early lesbian history, situating the publication in a larger constellation of primary source research, publication, and the beginnings of women's and lesbian community archives, including the LHA's newsletter and its relation to *Matrices*. I argue that feminist historiography is built collaboratively, in and through print networks such as *Matrices*.

Toward a Lesbian-Feminist Network Model

Matrices drew upon cultural ideas of how a network could operate and what this operation might accomplish, re-working established network thinking in the specific context of feminism. This section situates *Matrices* in relation to circulating network models from computer science, and the network thinking germane to feminist print culture. Networks animate the design of *Matrices* at two distinct but interconnected levels, one high-level and ideational, the other pragmatic and operational. First, the network is a conceptual model for imagining a kind of utopian feminist politic.

“Network” stands in for an idea of what a large, organized feminist movement could do. The newsletter project is envisioned from within isolated patriarchal nodes, for example, by marginalized lesbian feminist academics who were often the only women, let alone the only queers—“fat, butch dykes who never passed”—in their departments.⁹ Imagined and accessed from these marginal spaces, the network represents a critical idealism that newsletter producers used to facilitate other kinds of collectivities from which to work collaboratively. *Matrices* emerges out of, and contributes to, the imagination of the political possibilities that networked communication could offer to feminism. These possibilities include the “recovery” of women’s history lost to the gendered biases of researchers and institutions, and the creation of sustainable feminist libraries and archives to support this research. Using the network, scholars might also circulate papers on lesbian topics outside the mainstream publication venues that failed to support this work. These achievements all fall under the broader, social-justice oriented goal of improved life chances for women. Far from merely political, these possibilities represent relief from the injustices of invisibility, marginalization, and diminished career chances, which are injustices felt as frustration, shame, and isolation, amongst other embodied affects; so while a goal such as “Build the Collection of Feminist Archive X” is practical, measurable, and aimed at correcting an informational omission, it also attempts to fulfill needs that highlight the emotional dimensions of networks. This desire for history is what animates or gives life to feminism, what gives this politics its willfulness (Ahmed 2014), and what lends the form of the network any kind of pull upon the feminist imagination. Information circulated through a newsletter network is always more than just informative; that is why it matters and how it has an affect.

Theorizing the roles of newsletters in this information economy, Beins (2011) and Meeker (2006) both argue that newsletter culture's ability to circulate information to wide-reaching groups of people was understood as a condition of possibility for feminist organizing. In the early 1970s, newsletters animated the idea that the women's liberation movement might become a singular, unified national and international undertaking. Newsletters promised informational support for the pedagogical drive to "recruit" women into feminism via consciousness-raising, a desire for proximity that is about more than just achieving a critical mass, couched as it was in the language of "sisterhood" and "survival." Meeker uses "sexual communication networks" as his analytic approach to studying the midcentury homophile movement and its transition into gay liberation in the 1970s. He argues that the "politics of communication [was placed] squarely at the center of the emerging movement for homosexual civil rights," reaching "its most forceful articulation in the context of lesbian feminism" (2006: 13).

Network imagery and language was prevalent across a range of lesbian feminist periodicals and newsletters in the 1970s (Meeker 2006: 234). These publications' names and purpose statements give a sense of the role mediated communication played in imagining a movement that would, above all, bring into the fold women who were *not yet* enfranchised as feminists. Countless publications feature the word "network" in their title, standing alongside names equally invested in the political possibility of communication, such as *Telewoman* (1977–86). This San Francisco-based publication attached the Greek prefix "*tele*," meaning "over a distance"—*telephone*, *television*, *telegraph*—to the newsletter form, and to the idea of woman. *Telewoman's* masthead reads:

We provide networking services for lesbians who live anywhere through this newsletter.... We connect lesbian mothers. We make referrals to women's service organizations, lesbian-feminist therapists, and give job/housing information. We connect city lesbians and country lesbians. We serve isolated lesbians and integrate them into the local and larger women's communities. (*Telewoman* 1983: 1)

Telewoman thought about connecting its subscribers over distance to service their need for information and their need for other emotional forms of care that would, among other things, ameliorate isolation or provide access to mental health services. Newsletter networks promised subscribers the possibility of feeling less alone against a world hostile to women's liberation, and especially cruel to the figure of the lesbian feminist (Hesford 2013).

For Meeker, the actual integration or connection offered by publications such as *Telewoman* mattered less than the awareness that such communication was possible. He writes, "lesbian-feminist networks...were the ideological basis of the social movement in which they originated; they were the *raison d'être* of the movement itself," unlike homophile networks, which he describes as "largely instrumental and nonideological" (2006: 243). Meeker's asserts that simply having an operational network was part of the goal of lesbian feminist newsletters and that as such, "the network" is fundamentally ideological, a perspective this analysis of *Matrices* departs from in two ways. First, the stakes of feminist social movements must be explored in relation to the network's promise: networks seem vital in ways that are particular to feminism, both in the 1970s U.S. context and as a politics operating heterogeneously in and upon the present. Second, Meeker's bracketing of the ideological from the instrumental is inadequate to the ways in which feminist politics entangles these spheres. Feminist organizing balances a grand vision of the world as it might be with the "instrumental" micropolitics of stuffing

envelopes or providing childcare; the women's liberation movement strategically insisted that these "practices of everyday life" were significant symbolic sites for much larger struggles over gender inequality (Hesford 2013: 178–79). Putting out a newsletter takes a great deal of work—work that is messy, physical, repetitive, and less-than-glamorous, even more so in the days before desktop publishing software. The work of small-scale publishing—page-setting, printing, folding, and gluing stamps—is nothing if not instrumental, yet it is precisely its entanglement with the affective and ideological promises of newsletters that makes this work bearable, even fun, turning the promise of an "Envelope Stuffing Party" into a tenable method of recruiting volunteers.

Newsletters have effects that transcend the expectations of a singular publication, effects related to the network forms they generate and the feminist social movement contexts these networks facilitate. As Anna Feigenbaum (2013) has argued, "More than instrumental tools, rituals or resources for mobilization," feminist newsletters are discursive communicative practices that *form* social movements—"the very means by which their politics garnered shape and meaning" (2). A newsletter network promised to deliver specific "goods" such as the recovery of women's history, but it also promised that feminism itself might carry on, taking the form of dispersed but networked communities united by shared interests and goals. Securing a future for feminism is a massive undertaking guided by much smaller communicative endeavors achievable for a thriving print culture; thus a newsletter network presents possibilities bound up with the more general connection between feminist social movements and a vision that is utopic but also grounded in a modest pragmatism symbolized by ink, newsprint and stamps.

Recent feminist theory that considers the relationship between affects such as optimism or hope, and the ability of feminist activists to carry on with their difficult, everyday work helps to explain a newsletter network's generative effects (Ahmed 2010; Wiegman 2010). A future orientation guides the work of making, circulating, reading, and re-circulating communicative materials, where a newsletter materializes political desires which are then chased through the network itself. *Matrices* facilitates networked communication that is ideological in the sense that it guides normative, politicized investments in feminism and its continuation.

Matrices' ideological operation works partly through an affective register where the newsletter network's generative promise exceeds pragmatic, individual moments of information exchange. Information offers much more than the satisfaction of a query with content. The ways in which *Matrices* described the service it *hoped* to offer point to the charge information was thought to carry. A 1980s editorial explains:

We need to share our knowledge and resources, including contacts, jobs, how and where to publish our work, exchanges about how we survive in academia or outside of it, offer support to each other, mobilize to help Lesbian/Feminists who are fired, or to know other Lesbian/Feminist researchers we can turn to when we are having specific research problems. Other possibilities: to serve as a liaison between researchers in academia (who have access to libraries, laboratories, meeting places) and those working without such support; to share information about our experiences in institutions—the courses we can offer, departmental colloquia we might be giving, which libraries have what kinds of information... . (Lacy 1980: 1)

Some of these proposals might seem only tangential to the actual work of “doing research,” demonstrating the forms of “instrumental,” emotional, and community-based support the network valued as critical to the work of feminist organizing. Beyond these stated aims, other instances of communication through the network provide examples of

the ways in which subscribers were connected to each other as more than just information-circulating hubs. In a 1980 letter placed on the publication's cover, feminist theorist and historian Gayle Rubin solicits small financial donations from subscribers to pay for the nursing home care of Jeannette Foster, author of *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (1956), the first comprehensive bibliographic study of lesbianism in literature (Rubin 1980: 1). Rubin's invitation to care for Foster, who she calls "a national treasure of the Lesbian Community," points to what else circulated through the network, beyond the proper object of information.

Subscribers connect to form a larger economy of care for their intellectual and political forebears, following a desire for a kind of intimacy through the network that was perhaps impossible to achieve in print. The idea that Foster might be cared for in her old age by other lesbian feminist historians points to the affective constellation of "sisterhood" that guided women's liberation-era organizing, promising belonging to some and threatening a persistent outsider status to those whose political desires, sex practices, or ways of being in relation to feminism contravened the ideal. Though *Matrices* ultimately sought to democratize history and the processes through which research is done, it still had a tenuous "cannon" to deal with; when Rubin invokes the language of "nation," "treasure," and "lesbian community" she describes an economy of attention that suggests all nodes in the network were not necessarily equal in terms of access, participation and perceived importance to research. These are just some of the network's gatekeeping functions, which point to a question about the extent to which the language of connection, care, and "sisterhood" articulated to feminist newsletter networks obscured boundaries and hierarchies intrinsic to any collective, particularly one self-consciously

grappling with the gendered, classed and racialized biases of knowledge production. Moreover, they choice to highlight this letter amongst other examples of care I might have found in nearly twenty years of *Matrices* points to a retrospective ordering and economy of attention determined by Rubin's status in the field of gay and lesbian studies.

Thus far I have described how *Matrices* used the idea of networks as a conceptual model that was both ideological and affective in the way it guided the newsletter's promises for feminist researchers. The second level at which the network functions is the newsletter's actual operation—its facilitation of centralized and decentralized communication. *Matrices* asked each subscriber to complete a profile with contact information, a short biography, research interests, titles of papers written and published and information on how off-prints could be acquired from other subscribers, current projects, and support needed from other subscribers. Published in each issue, these subscriber profiles presented readers with the possibility of communicating directly with other lesbian-feminist researchers who offered or requested information that might be of value. Five regional editors spread across the U.S. collected completed profiles and assembled other pieces of information submitted by subscribers, sending them on to the managing and general editors. Though serving to distribute labour, this purposeful spread of editors across the country points to a conscientious effort to create a network that would transcend the geography that made collaboration difficult. A 1985–86 callout for new regional editors to serve Canada and Europe demonstrates how international looking the newsletter was (*Matrices* 1985–86). The geographical distribution of editors materialized the desire for a dispersed network, and produced with some difficulty the quick and easy communication across space that online networks enjoy today; however,

the difficulties presented by the distance between editors—miscommunications, the defacto centralization of control in moments when it was easier to just make a decision already—represent the ways in which the print specificity of this network, and the speed of communication print engenders, set the rhythm of *Matrices*.

Issues of *Matrices* included sections that will be familiar to readers of any specialized academic List Serv. These include Conferences and Calls for Papers, Book Reviews/Articles, and a listing of lesbian and feminist periodicals and their subscription information. The section Notes and Queries includes more general callouts for information and assistance from the network. Issue number three, published in spring 1978, includes this request from Davis, who would go on to write, with Elizabeth Kennedy, the first comprehensive history of working-class lesbian subculture in the U.S.:

Madeline Davis wants to hear from other oral history projects currently being undertaken in lesbian communities — she is part of a group working on such a project in Buffalo, NY. Also, she has been teaching a course on lesbianism, an historical, political, and personal view, at State University NY at Buffalo.¹⁰ She would be grateful for any suggestions from women who are teaching or formulating courses on any aspect of the topic. (*Matrices* 1978: 7)

Some requests are even simpler. In the same issue, the notice “Mary C. Peterson wants to know what women/lesbians are doing in athletics” was also posted (7).

These notices point to networked modes of communication that reflect circulating understandings of networks illustrated by computer science models developed in the U.S. as early as the mid-20th century (Fig. 1). “Old” media such as a newsletter typically created a network that would be described as centralized, represented by the diagram on the left of Figure 1. Here, a publication is the central hub and each line or connection disperses out from or into this hub, in a “strategic massing of power and control”

(Galloway 2004: 201). The diagram on the right models a “distributed” network and is used to explain how the Internet works, distributing power “into small, autonomous enclaves” (Galloway 2004: 201). Distributed networks are less vulnerable because the destruction of one hub does not critically affect the network, while centralized networks crumble when the main hub fails (Galloway 2004: 200; Rosenzweig 1998: 1532–33); when a publication goes out of print.

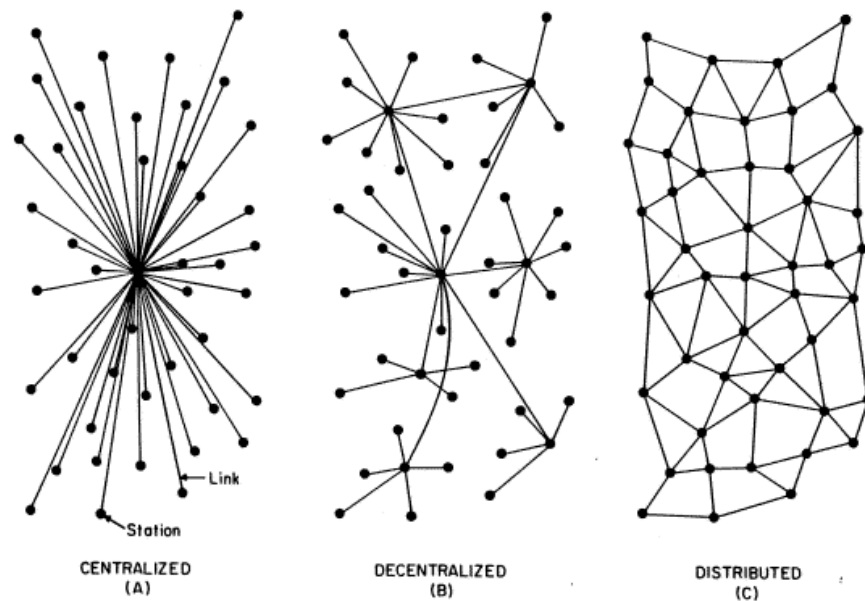


Figure 1: Centralized, Decentralized, and Distributed Network Diagrams created by computer scientist Paul Baran of the RAND corporation, ca. 1964.

Matrices, and feminist newsletter culture more generally, operated somewhere in between a decentralized (middle diagram) and distributed network (right diagram), creating connections that transcend the limits of the centralized network diagram on the left, which is typically associated with a print publication. In the case of *Matrices*, each individual researcher or organization is a “node” or “dot” that received the publication. *Matrices* presented opportunities for communication by making individual hubs aware of

the contact information, interests, or desires for input of other hubs. By publishing a request for materials in *Matrices*, a women's archive might become a small hub with lines emanating out to individual subscribers who began a relationship with the institution, a model represented by the "decentralized" diagram in the middle of Figure 1. *Matrices'* subscriber profiles further facilitated the distributed operation illustrated by the diagram on the right, where lines between individual subscribers represent opportunities for communication that became independent of the publication itself. "Opportunities" is an apt word given that *Matrices'* paper archive leaves the actual connections established by the publication difficult to trace with any certainty, a methodological problem considered at the end of this chapter.

On one level, *Matrices* "raison d'être" was the facilitation of a network as such, as Meeker suggests. But crucially the network is a means toward a very particular kind of end, where the ideological vision of making lesbian history visible is precisely what motivates the design and maintenance of the newsletter's networked communicative infrastructure and "instrumental" information sharing. Everyday information exchanges between researchers, activists, and archives make the larger project of doing feminist historiography possible. In their support of doing feminist history collaboratively, newsletter network bring a public into existence. Information activism's relationship to feminist public-formation is explored in some detail in chapter two, but the specific valences of *networked* publics as a sub-genre of mediated publics is worth noting here. dana boyd (2007) describes networked publics emerging through online social media as distinct from other kinds of mediated publics. Networks fundamentally extend the reach of publics beyond a singular website; networked publics facilitate participation by

“invisible audiences” that “*could* consist of all people across space and time” because they are not “constrained by geography and temporal collocation” (boyd 2007: 9). The *Matrices* network attempts to transcend these spatio-temporal limitations in search of a networked public for feminist historiography, but does so using print media.

By illustrating the operation of *Matrices* through the metaphor of a network, the publication’s editors deploy a purposeful mode of description that points to the imaginary of a strong, distributed, web-like structure for feminist organizing. Moreover, to continue to explore the metaphor of the network from my place in the present necessarily associates *Matrices* with a more recent moment mediated by the Internet and online communications media, as my turn to boyd above demonstrates. Publications such as *Matrices* become part of a longer history of the cultural politics of networked communications media.

Speculative Histories / Network Histories, or Did Lesbians Invent the Internet?

Julia Penelope and the women at *Matrices* did not invent the Internet; I seek to hold open rather than dismiss the absurdity of this claim, in order to trace a speculative history of networks through older forms of feminist print culture. Such a proposition takes up Roy Rosenzweig’s (1998) description of the Internet as a “meta-medium” in need of many histories that consider the multiple contexts of its conceptual and technical beginnings (1552). Rozenzweig and other media historians such as Fred Turner (2006) offer general histories of network *thinking* as a condition of possibility for the web—as opposed to actual technological design—where the social promises articulated to networked communication are critical for understanding the political possibilities associated with

emerging media in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Turner locates the idea of networks—a computational metaphor—in anti-bureaucratic, libertarian back-to-the land movements, organized around personal tool use as a key frame through which “the American public understood the social possibilities of computers and computer networking” (237). Network thinking is not a singular story: it ought to be conjunctural, following a path Lawrence Grossberg (2010) describes as “more complicated than any one trajectory, any one judgment, can thematize” (16).

Feminist media studies has considered multiple trajectories of “networks” across a range of media, documenting both the cultural politics of newsletters (Beins 2011), and the relationship between feminist social movements and other mediated network forms, such as zine distribution networks (Feigenbaum 2013), VHS “chainletters” (Hilderbrand 2009) and contemporary social media (Elsen-Ziya 2013). Building upon this scholarship, this exploration of early, print-based feminist networks intervenes into how histories of networked thinking based around the Internet are told. In this story, the web is not an event or turning point for feminist social movements; rather, it extends existing media infrastructures of networked communication. Consistencies and divergences in the politics of feminist networked communication across time take precedent over formal, technological changes. Lucas Hilderbrand’s (2009) history of Riot Grrl VHS chainletter distributions networks illustrates this approach; despite being “analog” and “specifically nondigital” in their formal properties, they share with the web a feminist cultural model for “social networking” (197).

Feminist networks are communicative infrastructures that extend across emerging forms of media, and across time, particularly in the case of a network that is “historical”:

Matrices is both of the past, and focused on facilitating historical research. Networked communication and feminist historiography are interdependent forms; feminist historiography is a heterogeneous set of practices and desires built through these networks, and thus it can be difficult to map onto more conventional understandings of history that emerges from a single, authoritative source. As the editors of *Matrices* put it, “Lesbian/Feminist research is significantly different from what we have been taught to regard as ‘research,’ because it arises out of our lives and the community we are creating” (Lacy 1980: 1). In other words, it arrives from multiple nodes, in ways that are difficult to isolate as singular or “rightfully historical.” Among these nodes are feminist archives and other spaces for historical research, which are themselves mediated through networks such as *Matrices*, and through network thinking more generally. Feminist organizations emerging out of the 1970s—artist-run centres, cooperative women’s buildings, bookstores, academic networks, journals, etc.—were informed by values of non-hierarchy, direct participation by members, and an investment in decentralized processes (Pourtavaf 2012: 9). Feminist archives and archival sensibilities share these traits (Sloniowski 2013).

Matrices facilitated the construction of these archives, and shows how a working communication network was vital for circulating information about the kinds of primary source materials that were available. Women’s and lesbian community libraries and archives called upon the network to help build their fledgling collections during the early days of these spaces in the 1970s and 80s. In a March 1984 issue callout, the new Archives lesbiennes in Paris declared that they “do not want to depend on any external powers: they will continue to exist and develop with the support and contributions of

lesbians. In order to realize our projects and plans, we have to believe in our collective power. Please send documents, information, or financial support” (*Matrices* 1984: 13). Every issue of *Matrices* contains some kind of listing of archival holdings or request for materials from an archive, including the Lesbian Herstory Archives and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA). By the early 1980s, the publication featured a distinct archives section. The 1982 Archives and History Projects insert re-printed from the CLGA’s newsletter explains the importance of communication networks for building these precarious institutions: “An intimate relationship should exist between history groups and archives.... To help groups to contact one another and allow others to do likewise we list here various archives and history groups. We encourage you to contact these people, offer your help and see what they can do for you” (*Matrices* 1982: 13–14). Feminist and queer histories emerge from collaborative processes that mirror the network mode of collective feminist organizing, and of non-institutional, “community archives” more generally.

These collaborative processes extend beyond *Matrices* to a larger network of feminist periodicals through content sharing and cross-citation. *Matrices* published requests for research assistance with projects that went on to become significant foundational texts in the gay and lesbian historical movement, such as Katz’s 1982 request for historical sources to support the project that would become *Gay American History* (1978). Requests such as Katz’s were often submitted directly to *Matrices*, but *Matrices* also borrowed content from other newsletters: for example, the Archives and History Projects insert originally produced by the CLGA, a 1979 issue includes a detailed, partial listing of primary source holdings at the LHA, and short entries in

Matrices “Notes and Queries” section were often gathered by editors from other lesbian-feminist periodicals, their provenance noted through citation. This exchange was reciprocal: The 1978 issue of the LHA’s newsletter announced the launch of *Matrices* to its readers. By reproducing content across periodicals, feminist newsletters ensured that requests for participation reached a wide range of feminist publics, a clever tactic given that these publications often served niche communities such as lesbian mothers, or a specific region. Read together in relationships that are only possibly through what Eichhorn (2013) calls “archival proximity”—the way in which archival documents make a certain kind of sense insofar as they are ordered in relation to one another—the larger practice of citation across these publications reveals how the minutia of classified-style “ads” circulated through these networks worked to construct norms about the kind of work thought to be worthy of attention and participation (Hemmings, 2011). This cross-citational economy of attention also affected the kinds of materials donated to archives and accessed by researchers, as community archives reproduced listings of holdings they anticipated to be of greatest research value across multiple platforms.

While the *Matrices* network supported the construction and use of community archives, it is this very network form that renders the publication’s effects difficult to archive. Women’s print cultures of the late 20th century are ephemeral in the sense that they have not been collected widely and evenly, and have rarely been preserved well (Ingold 2011). The ongoing connections they map out are also ephemeral because they are seldom documented. *Matrices* editorials often comment with frustration on a lack of feedback from subscribers about their use of the network structure. Michelle Meagher argues that feminist newsletter editorials provided space for reflection on a periodical’s

broad mandate, and frank, confessional commentary on how an issue was made (2014: 579). *Matrices* editorials follow this pattern. The October 1979 issue laments: “For two years, we have published *Matrices* as a source of networking, but have little indication if it is serving this function. We assume it is, because the mailing list has grown to over 600 and new subscriptions arrive regularly. So, if you have had any positive experiences through *Matrices*, we’d like to hear about them” (Penelope and Lacy 1979: 1). The publication’s reach is extended beyond those subscribers accounted for through profiles via the “after-market” circulation of newsletters through Xeroxing, further demonstrating the decentralized operation of these networks. *Matrices* initiated communications that were fleeting, a problem identified by the newsletter’s editors during its period of publication, and a methodological challenge for my study of the network from the present. These unmappable connections are how newsletters most elude their printedness, mirroring the undocumentability of feminism’s other communicative activist technology of the 1970s: the phone tree, whose documentary remnants frustrate by giving up only names and telephone numbers. Research conducted through the network depended on the interplay of the newsletter, archives, and the quite concrete form of books and articles that this research left behind, asking us to reckon with feminist historiography’s conditions of mediation as a formative subject of these very histories.

The Newsletter and the Archive

In the 1970s, newsletters were a primary form of outreach for social movement organizations housed in physical spaces, including community archives. These DIY publications could be printed cheaply and easily on an informal schedule, and they could

be sent through regular mail, all of which suited cash and labour-strapped grassroots organizations. The LHA's newsletter was a significant communications and fundraising device for the archives in its early days, and provides a foreword to the longer history of media and digitization at these archives. The newsletter's importance to the LHA's early operation points to the archives' role as more than just a repository for records; wide-reaching activities, articles, events, and other forms of outreach published through the newsletter evidence the organization's broader, pedagogical information strategy. The 1979 issue announced the incorporation of the LHA as the Lesbian Herstory Education Foundation Inc., a move that "broadens our scope to be an information service that publishes a newsletter, does public speaking and in as many ways as possible gathers and shares information about the Lesbian Experience" (*LHA Newsletter* 5, 1979b, 5). The physical archives would function as the "resource room" and "cultural center" for this expansive mandate (5). As a printed document that mediates between the archives and its public, the newsletter speaks to the LHA's goals of outreach and access, rather than just preservation and research. And while *Matrices* demonstrates the interstitial role of newsletters in a larger, dispersed feminist history and archives movement, the LHA's use of newsletters shows how community archives, far from being the static repositories grounding this movement, are dynamic networks in their own rights.

The LHA newsletter published from June 1975 until Spring 2004, generally once a year with occasional longer periods between publication, for a total of nineteen issues. Today, the LHA communicates primarily via a Facebook page and email blasts sent every few months to advertise events. In 1974, Julia Penelope was one of the founding collective members of the LHA, four years before she sent the letter that would spark

Matrices. Her sense of a network's vitality to feminist historiography is clearly articulated in the newsletter's content. Penelope contributed a note to the first issue, published in 1975, which imagined a mailing list of lesbians to be illustrated by a map. Wrote Penelope, "One of the projects of the Archives Collective will be a large map of the United States on which we will represent the Lesbian network by marking the small towns and villages where Lesbians are establishing themselves on farms and in communes. We would also like to maintain a mailing list of rural lesbians. This project is an effort to keep all of us in touch with each other and to provide records of our lives" (*LHA Newsletter* 1, 1975, 5). These kinds of tactics established a wider reach for the archives, expanding the range of materials donors might send, and providing knowledge of the archives' work to a growing network of lesbians. "A Plea for Regional Clippers" (*LHA Newsletter* 4, 1978) asked readers to clip articles of relevance about lesbians in their local press and mail them to the archives for inclusion in the subject files, a workflow that further demonstrates the reliance of these networks on print technologies.¹¹ A kind of de-centralized regionalism also informed the suggestion to establish smaller, satellite archives, which was often floated in the newsletter. This never-realized regional system of archives would work as a network facilitated by print communications such as the newsletter.

The LHA imagined a functioning network as crucial to building an archives that was above all inclusive of as many lesbian lives as possible—outreach through the newsletter was a tactic for developing a collection reflective of this social movement organization's feminist mandate. Building a collection, and by extension, materializing a mostly unwritten history, was a group effort in which the newsletter was used to formally

assign specific tasks to readers, and to informally create a sense of shared responsibility by promoting the ideal of a network. Issue five (1979b) describes the need for a “grassroots network” to make the work of the archives possible: “To all lesbians who read this newsletter. The Archives grows in fullness only when you take the time to send us a contribution—a photo, a tape, a letter, something of your lives. We cannot personally attend every Lesbian event, go to every organizational meeting, but a grassroots network can. Please make tapes of events in your area, clip articles, write your impressions and send them to the Archives. We need all your voices! (15).” In this way, the newsletter often articulates the responsibility for history and for the archives to the community, a community constituted in and through the newsletter and its culture of participation, as Meeker’s theorization of gay and lesbian print networks suggests.

The LHA’s newsletter worked to democratize the archives collection partly by insisting that readers take responsibility for documenting their lives and communities so that their personal and political experiences might be rightfully historicized. Part of the newsletter’s pedagogical strategy was convincing readers of this responsibility and of the relevance of their papers: “Our legacy will be realized only through the efforts of every lesbian... it is through our collective rejoicing, reclaiming and renewing that our survival as a Lesbian community will be determined” (*LHA Newsletter* 4, 1978, 2). By insisting readers believe in the importance of their collections, teaching them how to document their lives, and inviting them to donate the materials created by this documentation, the newsletter becomes entangled with other forms of mediation that constitute the work of archiving—forms that include photographs, other print media (the materials of “clipping” culture), and video and audio tapes. Inspired by the oral histories movement, issues from

the late 1970s and early 1980s often encourage readers to make audio, film, and later video tapes documenting aspects of their lives, recordings on which subscribers were encouraged to “Talk about important memories... people, places, experiences, things that touched you deeply or angered you. Don’t lose your own history in the rush of daily life” (*LHA Newsletter* 7, 1981, 17). Through notices in the newsletter, the LHA offers to lend eager contributors recording equipment and supply blank tapes. Out of these calls for audio visual recordings emerged a 3,000-tape spoken word collection that would later become one of the archives’ earliest comprehensive digitization projects.

Situated in the larger conditions of mediation at this archive—amongst the tapes, the buttons, the yellowing magazine clippings and polaroids, the email blasts and streaming audio of the present—the print specificity of the newsletter both does and does not matter to the network it facilitated. I have argued that newsletter networks share many characteristics with online media in the present, and are critical for a more expansive media history of the feminist history and archives movement, and perhaps of what it means to build a “feminist network” in the present. To this extent, I have suggested that print matters less than we might initially think—the idea of networks, detached from their particular media, is perhaps more critical to this movement. Investing firmly in either position—that the print form of the newsletter network matters, or it doesn’t—would be to simplify the nuanced treatment such a history requires, and would dismiss too readily the formal properties of print.

My attention to newsletters and the idea of networks that runs through them, as opposed to an approach focused on something like the “print culture” of archives, is a move that builds on recent media history’s efforts to de-centre “the media concept”

(Guillory 2010). John Guillory has called for the de-emphasis of many of the monolithic concepts that discipline media history, such as “medium.” He writes, “No cultural work comes to us except through such multiple categorical mediations, never simply reducible to the effects of technical media. For this reason, a new instauration of the cultural disciplines depends on the integration of the media concept into a general theory of mediation” (261). In *Paper Knowledge* (2014), Lisa Gitelman answers Guillory’s invitation by approaching media history through the *genre* of the document, a concept borrowed from literary history to describe the cultural understandings and expectations that transcend periodizing technological advances or overdetermined obsolescence.¹² Gitelman is also critical of the use of “print culture” as a shorthand analytic, because of the ways it eludes specific histories of “printing, print publication, regulation, distribution, and circulation” (9). On her turn to genre Gitelman writes, “Better instead to resist any but local and constrastive logics for media; better to look for meanings that arise, shift, and persist according to the uses that media—emergent, dominant, and residual—familiarily have. Better, indeed, to admit that no medium has a single, particular logic, while every genre does and is” (Gitelman 2014: 9).

Newsletters are a kind of genre in that they represent a set of formal expectations about how organizations will communicate. These formal expectations include how the documents are produced (on the cheap, on the fly) and circulated (with specific politicized ends in mind, such as the support of a historical “network”). As a genre, newsletters transcend specific techniques of printing: *Matrices* and the LHA newsletter were both mimeographed, Xeroxed, paste-boarded, and desktop published at various points in their lifespans. Today the LHA uses its Facebook page in ways that evoke the

format of the earlier newsletter, and indeed, the List Servs that have replaced scholarly communications endeavors such as *Matrices* also bear similarities to the newsletter genre. Avi Hyman (2003) offers a discussion of List Servs that describes the anti-authorial function this format shares with a newsletter such as *Matrices*. Contemporary academic ListServs undermine the singular author function and “intellectual property” politics of institutional academic research and publishing. This is because List Servs lack citation conventions or norms around acknowledging the originality of ideas, and also because the kinds of “collaborative electronic scholarship” that takes place in these communities do not easily map on to institutional models of scholarly legitimacy (Hyman 2003: 22).

The importance of genre notwithstanding, print does matter to the feminist history and archives movement’s newsletters. Printed newsletters have a rhythm, a speed, for example, that contemporary networks do not. They are slow, messy, deliberate, and labour-intensive, a sometimes-cumbersome format that seemed to frustrate the archives’ coordinators at times. When the LHA acquired a computer in 1981, its first use was to create a mailing database for the newsletter, which was followed by a shift to desktop publishing in 1986. The first issue made with a computer (*LHA Newsletter* 9, 1986) looks different; it is cleaner, easier to read, and features a description of how the newsletter will be changing, becoming more “streamlined” in both its form and content. The newsletter’s function changes along with its format in relation to technological shifts at the archives; news computers mean new desktop publishing platforms. The newsletter’s last page often featured a section with general information such as how to subscribe, and when issues would be printed, and it often reminded readers not to worry about long pauses between issues: “Putting out the newsletter is a time consuming and costly project. Please do not

give up on us if there is a long pause between Newsletters. Be assured that our daily functioning is ongoing” (*LHA Newsletter* 7, 1981, 53). This reassurance demonstrates how the newsletter was the means through which most women stayed in touch with the archives, and suggests that the pace of print structured the rhythm of these always-already affective informational encounters. Today the faster pace of archival outreach through media—the prevalence of Facebook pages, twitter accounts, even Tumblr amongst cultural heritage organizations—is perhaps part of the move toward more fleeting forms of encounter between archives and their publics; the ways in which, for example, online exhibitions that are only very partial reflections of a collection have become how most casual users encounter community archives.¹³

Elusive Remnants of Feminist Networks

Because the LHA newsletter was tied to a physical space that still operates in the present, the publication’s effects are visible in the organization’s development; for example, the requests for regional clippers led to the development of subject files so unique and comprehensive that they were purchased for microfilming by Primary Source Microfilm (a division of GALE) as part of its Gay Rights Movement series. The LHA’s newsletter facilitated a somewhat centralized network by design, ultimately serving the archives as its central hub. *Matrices*, on the other hand, leaves less of a trace; the network is difficult to historicize precisely because of its dispersed form, even though the “interconnections” hoped for by the editorial staff were articulated to a desire for historical research. *Matrices* editors saw the newsletter’s printed form as an invitation to begin, invoked through their choice of name:

Because we believe that our work is a beginning, we decided to call this newsletter '*Matrices*,' 'a situation or surrounding substance within which something originates'... Our research is the material of our lives. *Matrices* seemed to capture all of our meanings for the newsletter, the interconnections we wish to establish and maintain, the intersections of research interests, our womon-identification. (Lacy, 1980: 1)

Undocumented "interconnections" are incommensurate with the editorial staff and subscriber list's desire for history more broadly. We might say that *Matrices* failed to deliver evidence of its effects and sometimes failed to circulate information according to the tacit ethics and expectations of subscribers. Out of these so-called failures, productive conflicts specific to the publication's mediated forms unfold.

These conflicts sometimes emerge when more centralized controls undermine the publication's investments in the anti-hierarchical, decentralized circulation of information; or, put another way, when the centralized network model more familiar to print publications such as the LHA newsletter asserts its effects over the decentralized and distributed network model *Matrices* imagined as its infrastructure. Examples of these conflicts are plentiful, but tend to galvanize around issues of privacy and control, and the rationalizing effects of information management on the publication's feminist politics. East co-ordinator JR Roberts's 1984 resignation letter, published in the newsletter, is critical of the publication's movements towards centralized control. Roberts writes, "The present structure, in which a decision is made by one woman and then presented in print as a 'group decision' supposedly made by *all* the editors, is not a structure I feel comfortable with.... It just goes against my grain of how things need to work in the world.... It is difficult because we are all so busy and our geographical separation and distance is not conducive to group activity" (Roberts 1984: 2). Roberts' resignation

suggests that in practice, the *Matrices* network did not always operate according to its egalitarian “network” ideal. Making subscribers aware of this incongruity seemed an urgent project for Roberts as she resigned her post. Roberts, who also wrote the *Black Lesbian Bibliography* (1981), points out how the realities of collective organizing through a print network were sometimes incommensurate with a lesbian feminist desire for “sisterhood” built on shared values and equal footing. This disjuncture says as much about feminism as it does about media: North American feminism, especially its “second-wave” manifestation, has been criticized for a singular focus on gender (Mohanty 2003: 55) and ongoing “inability to account for racism within its ranks,” (Puar 2007: 89), amongst other forms of difference; while the network form might promise media as a solution to these implicit exclusions, it cannot overcome what are ultimately interpersonal and structural factors delimiting lesbian feminism’s ability to operate as the umbrella it claimed to be for all women.

Divisions along these lines also occur regarding privacy, which became a heated issue when *Penthouse* magazine salaciously excerpted the lesbian activist / “lavender menace” Karla Jay’s book on lesbian sexuality, *The Gay Report* (1979). Jay relied on the lesbian-feminist print movement to circulate the survey that formed the primary source research for this book, and she heavily promoted the work and its importance in the Notes and Queries section of *Matrices*. In a letter of complaint printed in the June 1979 issue, a reader named Amethyst explains that she was “shocked/angered/infuriated by this exploitative, anti-feminist, misogynist act/use of Lesbian/‘Feminist’ research!” (Amethyst 1979: 3). Amethyst lists the lesbian periodicals that distributed the survey—*Lesbian Connection*, *Lesbian Tide*, etc.—then writes, “We remember how we were urged

by Karla Jay's many ads to fill in her questionnaire and send it to her. It was beneficial to the Lesbian Feminist movement. I/We were suspicious at the time of how this could benefit us..." (Amethyst 1979: 3). Though Jay explains in a follow-up letter that her publisher provided the excerpt to *Penthouse* without her permission, the incident points to how certain norms in the lesbian-feminist community more generally—in this case, a sex-wars prohibition on pornography or "obscenity"—influence *Matrices'* circulation of information, here under the guise of providing "privacy" to members of the network.

It is worth considering for whom "privacy" mattered most amongst *Matrices* readers given the gradations of financial autonomy and cultural and intellectual capital in a network that served both tenured professors and "non-professional" researchers who would call themselves writers, artists, activists, or simply feminists before they would take up the label of "Historian." This network aimed to democratize history and its methods, but in ways that often stayed bound to Western, institutional models of knowledge production such as the product-oriented format of Research —> Writing —> Book. *Matrices* was not immune to this model's normative status, despite its best intentions, which raises questions of who felt at home in the network, comfortable enough to become an active, named participant, and who remained silent in the background, "lurking" amidst the exchanges of others, to borrow a term from online communications networks. Moreover, what kind of knowledge is valued most vocally by the network, and what forms of historical research are simply not recognizable as such? Anti-racist interventions in queer theory and the history of sexuality have shown how queers of colour and their subcultural worlds often resist documentation through forms of knowledge production characterized by whiteness, sometimes for reasons as simple as a

tradition of performance genres over the form of the history book (Munoz 1999; Johnson 2006). The historical contributions of lesbians of colour is no exception to these methodological oversights, a point illustrated by the necessity JR Roberts's saw to create *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* (1981).

While the network *Matrices* designed aimed to do away with centralized control, it was also caught up in larger operations of power and political formations that put it in conflict with certain lesbian feminist norms about who could rightfully represent women's sexuality. Responding to another subscriber's query was a choice underwritten by a tacit trust that was quite tenuous in the case of Jay's book. This trust was built on shared values around the politics of information that in the end could not be fully respected by the publishing house that saw *Penthouse* as an ideal publicity mechanism for Jay's book. In an Internet age where it is easy to take for granted that information "wants to be free," this incident from *Matrices* is a reminder that a mediated network cannot transcend the political norms in which it operates through formal means alone. *Matrices* often represented "the network" as a ideal political structure, and yet this form emerged from multiple communities with visions that overlapped as much as they conflicted; from the ongoing debates over sexual politics in lesbian-feminist communities, to tensions between feminist activist and academic communities evidenced by the class-inflected condemnation of Karla Jay as a producer of knowledge exploiting the experience of her research subjects, to the larger late-20th century print culture in which *Penthouse* and *Matrices* shared space. The *Matrices* community sometimes sought centralized characteristics such as privacy and control, while eschewing them more generally in pursuit of the network's promise.

Matrices' effects lack documentation in ways that counter the Lesbian Feminist Research Network's political desire for historiography; however, this lack also secures a certain futurity. To return to Baran's network models, connections facilitated by the network are strong because they no longer rely on the central hub of the publication; they are semi-autonomous from the printed newsletter and have effects that exceed its pages. Distributedness offers a kind of future because it facilitates a network mode that can carry on past the life of *Matrices* itself, and this is a different kind of relationship to feminist futurity than working to sustain publications, institutions, social movement organizations, and even archives, at all costs. The network's promise of futurity is salient given that grassroots feminist spaces always seem so precarious. They are always on the verge of collapse, and we are always lamenting their demise. The Lesbian Herstory Archives' precarious revenue stream, collection that grows in relation to storage space that shrinks, and the threat all this poses to its continued operation point to the precarity of a centralized network structure. Beins (2011) details how feminist newsletter culture created networks that promised a future for feminist social movements dependent on the circulation of information (13). As a historiographic network, *Matrices* promised this future by promising a past, or a past that would carry on into the future provided information continued to circulate freely amongst the researchers producing this work.

Just as the LHA's newsletter was phased out in the mid-2000s, mostly replaced by online communications, *Matrices* stopped publishing in 1996. This happened after several years of infrequent publication, marked by a shift in tone toward more editorial content and away from subscriber participation. Notably, the last two issues include a new column on "lesbian cyberspace," and an announcement of the creation of a *Matrices*

website, signaling what Barbara Sjöholm marks as the end of the women in print movement in the 1990s—replaced, ostensibly by the “digital universe” of “Amazon,” “the Internet,” and “digital publishing” (2012 166). And yet zine culture in the 1990s reinvigorated feminist print cultures (Piepmeier 2009), which suggests that the Internet does not replace earlier forms of feminist publishing, but becomes part of the networked media channels that link print “texts”—including their forms of distribution, and the connections they engender—with contemporary feminist blogs and social media culture. Given this continuum, the end of the *Matrices* newsletter does not foreclose its effects; rather *Matrices*’ remnants can be located in this ongoing networked “print” culture, as well as in the digital and online outreach efforts of feminist community archives, in a more expansive feminist “network” that extends across a range of media, including into the digital realm.

Davis’ and Kennedy’s *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, which used the *Matrices* network and other lesbian newsletters to locate oral history participants and resources for more than a decade, illustrates the extended life of this network. Upon completion of the book project in 1993, Davis and Kennedy donated all their audio tapes to the LHA, where they have recently been digitized, and are offered as streaming MP3s on the archives’ website.¹⁴ This is one of the first attempts by this archive to offer a piece of its collection through an online interface, and represents a significant expansion of the archives’ reach. The longevity of the relationship between the *Boots of Leather* project, publications such as *Matrices*, archives such as the LHA, and the network behind this type of work, points to the need for longer histories of mediation as the very conditions of possibility for feminist historiography. One way to think about listening to these tapes online in the

present is as a gesture of taking up a place in a more expansive feminist “network,” one that extends across a range of media, including feminist newsletters and actors from the past forty years.

Conclusion

This chapter has closely examined *Matrices* as one example of feminist newsletter culture’s development of new communications networks in the 1970s and 80s. Today’s feminist networks are easy to take for granted because they are steeped in everyday digital contexts and different expectations of communications media. Purposefully built networks that felt urgent and deliberate when they were new risk becoming formally unremarkable today. This chapter has offered a model for reading backwards and forwards across feminist media practices in order to resist the fade of network politics into the background of feminist political projects. The “back and forth” of this method is key: print media practices that facilitated networked communications amongst second-wave feminist are not simple “pre-histories” of today’s digital networks, and newsletter networks do not progressively evolve into social media networks in any straightforward way. While there is much to be learned from mapping historical print network forms in “digital” networks of the present, the echoes of the digital can just as readily be found in the past. By centering the network concept as a feminist communications genre, I have argued that media practices might be understood both in their singular contexts, and for what they share across evolving forms and technological changes. For example, rationalization and exclusion techniques practiced by networks as they stake out their publics might be more difficult to pin down online than in a newsletter with a set

subscriber list, but forms of social gatekeeping occur in any network run by feminist activists regardless of what technology it runs on. In the next chapter, I take up this challenge of reading across media practices in relation to feminist indexing and the paper-based machines feminist information activists used in the shadow of emergent database computing.

Chapter Two

A Marvelous Facility to Sort and File: Index Cards and the Promise of Information

“One of the most useful types of index which can be compiled is a guide to the literature of a subject...if it is the product of experience and good judgment it may save many another person much time and may introduce him to sources whose existence he might otherwise never have known.”

– Robert Collison, Hon. Treasurer, The Society of Indexers (Collison 1959: 123)

“For some who write to us, it’s their first contact with a gay/lesbian group. The “information” they often need is more than finding gay reading—it means finding other gay people.”

– Barbara Gittings, coordinator of the American Library Association’s Gay Bibliography (Gittings 1990: 10)

“I hope this bibliography will be important to Black lesbians as a beginning resource for their culture and history. I also hope that it will be instrumental in introducing the Black community and the white community, lesbian, gay, and heterosexual, to ideas that will lead to a better understanding of Black lesbian life and that this knowledge will help us all as we attempt to revolutionize our relationships with one another.”

– JR Roberts, author of *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* (1981: xii).

An index shows the way; it is an object that points someone else in the direction of a path that may not have been obvious to them before. In semiotics, the index’s sign-function is to point out “something real or imaginary in temporal, spatial, or relational terms” (Danesi 2000: 119). One of the tool’s most “digital” manifestations is the pointing index finger, a gesture that shows others where to go in space, or where to focus their attention. By pointing at some things over others, indexes make choices about what is most valuable or important to denote—such is their symbolic economy. A pointing finger also makes accusations or adds emphasis—“you did this” or “an injustice is happening right

here”—and an index can point to evidence in order to correct an unjust omission or denial. The index that points to a body of marginalized “evidence” becomes an activist tool: “X” is true, X matters, because all of these “Ys” I have collected and synthesized say so.

Index and bibliography-making by feminist information activists followed just such a trajectory, collecting disparate resources into print archives that served to self-consciously construct lesbian history. These indexes are collections of statements in the Foucauldian sense: they determine what is thinkable and sayable on a particular topic by rendering their subject’s existence intelligible in a larger historical discourse within which they had been inconceivable before (Foucault 2002 [1972]). The index becomes a tool for what Joan Scott calls “the evidence of experience” (1993: 776); feminist indexing aspires toward the *correction* of histories that exclude marginalized subjects, but does not necessarily correct the form of History itself. Strategies of inclusion and plurality maintain history’s search for evidentiary transparency.

Published in 1981 by the lesbian feminist press Naiad, *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* (Fig. 2) began with just such a search for evidence, offering an index to published and primary source materials on black, mostly U.S.-based lesbian lives and topics. The bibliography is comprehensive of every reference to black lesbians the author JR Roberts was able to find through her work in archives, special collections, periodicals, and literature (Roberts 1981: xiii). It features 341 detailed annotations on a range of media, including books, magazines, photography, and recorded oral histories.

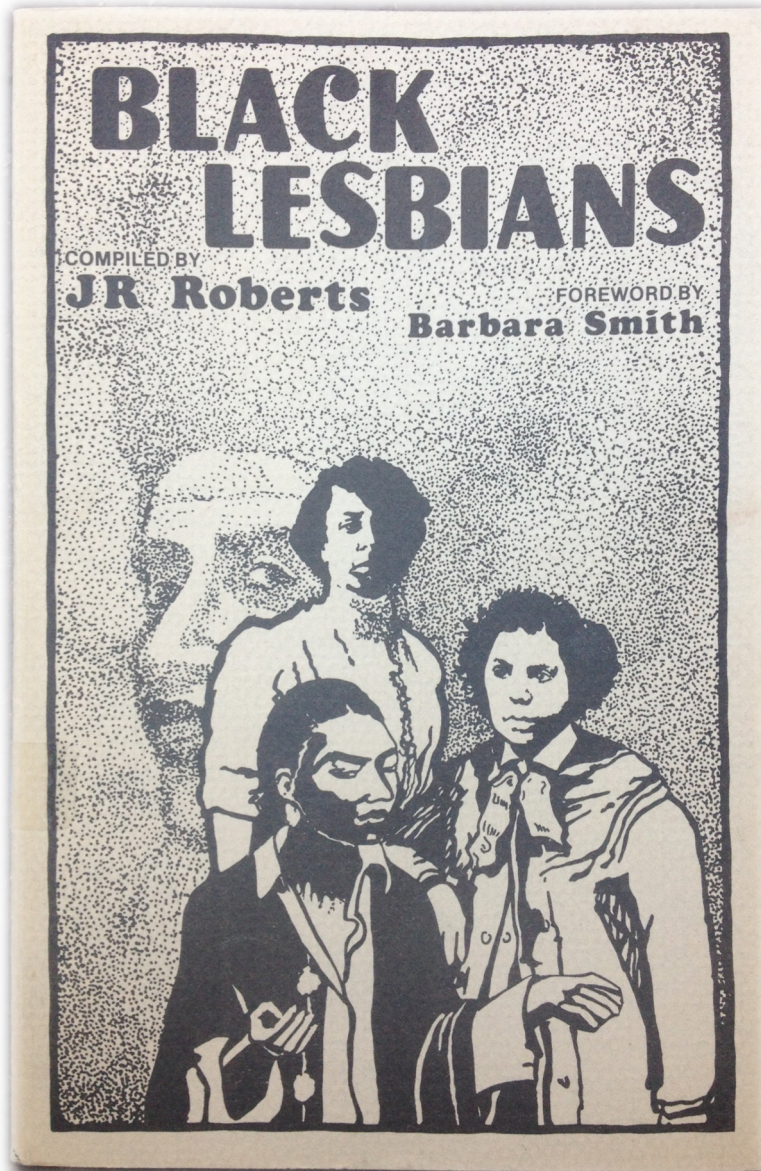


Figure 2: *Black Lesbian: An Annotated Bibliography*, compiled by JR Roberts and published by Naiad Press (1981).

Black lesbian-feminist activist and writer Barbara Smith wrote the foreword to the book, which was compiled by Roberts, a white librarian who lived in Virginia at the time the book was published.¹⁵ Smith predicted that this bibliography's effects would be monumental for black feminist scholarship, historical visibility, and by extension, social

justice. Smith asserts that a bibliography of black lesbian scholarship and primary source materials would make ridiculous the frequent “claim that there are no Black lesbians and other lesbians of color” (1981: ix) Smith is unequivocal on the project’s potential, claiming: “This bibliography puts that lie to rest” (1981: ix). Lies are put to rest under the weight of evidence, by which marginalized subjects begin to count in a larger cultural field.

The explicit strategies and goals of *Black Lesbians* as laid out in the document’s front and back matter and annotations do little to trouble the figure of the “Black Lesbian” subject. The category’s political affect, its intelligibility, and its coherence are all taken for granted, assumed as ground for knowledge in ways that naturalized and solidified both “blackness” and “lesbianism” (see Scott 1993: 782). The document operated within an existing white lesbian-feminist economy that privileged visibility. To be seen in the right ways was the most sought-after pre-condition for politics, from which women of colour were often excluded, rendered entirely invisible. The bibliography further addressed the exclusion of lesbian sexuality from black feminism’s purported intersectionality (Nash 2011). As Amber Musser argues of this period in black feminism, “black women became *the* sign of marginalization; they were invoked as a trope to consider the multiplicity of marginalization, but the category’s own multitudes were seldom interrogated” (2014: 157). Sexuality is unthinkable, or at the very least subsumed within this framework, and a black-lesbian bibliography becomes an “activist-intellectual project” (Nash 2011) guided by intersectional erotics of gender, sexuality and race.

By the time of *Black Lesbians*' 1981 publication, women's libraries, archives and book stores had been well established over the preceding decade of women's liberation. Woman of Colour critique had begun to interrupt the whiteness of feminism through publishing, notably with the Barbara Smith and Audre Lorde–founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press (see hooks 2000 [1984]; Lorde 2007 [1984]; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1983 [1981]; Smith 1983). Information management contexts such as archives, bibliographies, and indexes were not exempt from these anti-racist interventions (Gumbs 2012). Writes Roberts, “This bibliographic situation mirrors the denial and invalidation of Black lesbian experience and uniqueness by a homophobic, white racist society and a lesbian-fearing Black culture” (1981: xi). Roberts' position as a white woman and a trained librarian lends the strategy of creating *Black Lesbians* an aura of appeasement aimed at reconciling excluded (and angry) black women with (white) lesbian feminism (see Ahmed 2010: 66–69); Roberts' book promised to reverse a racist bibliographic situation by creating more bibliographies, providing validation through evidence. As Roberts put it, “Black lesbian materials *do* exist” (Roberts 1981: xv).

Black Lesbians' content does not approach historical experience as a discursive category in need of any historicizing of its own (Scott 1993: 779), however the document performs this critical work at the level of form, through awareness of itself as a tool constructed by, and in service of, a social movement excluded from mainstream information contexts. These exclusions were often formal, operating systemically through such structures as the Library of Congress's misogynist, racist, and homophobic subject headings (Berman 2008). Technological exclusions from information management took other forms, such as the gendering of access to computing resources. Feminist indexers

worked as benevolent infiltrators, skillfully challenging these conditions: Roberts describes her always-interpretive, sleuthing method of turning raw information into a usable index—she describes searching under “cloaked” euphemisms, and drawing on “grassroots communication networks and newsletters” to find newspapers, journals, and magazines that had never been indexed and were “inaccessible” as a result (Roberts 1981: xiv).

Roberts’s tactics bypassed established strategies of bibliographic searching and assemblage to create a document whose formal qualities and research strategies matched the forms of black lesbian knowledge production. Her index took raw information and made it into something a public could use, rendering what was previously inaccessible into a document whose primary aim was access—access purposefully mediated by Roberts’ particular techniques. This chapter approaches the index as an interface between users and information, built most often of paper cards but sometimes constructed using the “new” tool of computers. By analyzing indexing as a set of media practices for “doing feminism” through information management, the chapter asks: to what extent did these reference tools succeed in establishing new methodologies when altered from their traditional forms by capable feminist hands? My attention to processes of making and distributing indexes resists the kind of conclusions that a method of simply reading these paper documents from the present might make: that as relics of “second-wave” feminism, these tools simply reproduce the same conditions by inviting more identities to the table (or reference desk).

At the beginning of this research, indexes and bibliographies seemed like a pretty boring document genre; they are a common place reference tool for learning, research,

and scholarship, a professional expectation that is easy to take for granted. In academia, we make bibliographies—the most common type of “index”—at the beginning of a new research project; I made several bibliographies in the early stages of this research. We write bibliographies to accompany grant applications in order to demonstrate expertise, breadth and depth, and the rootedness of our projects in a field. Undergraduate students make and annotate bibliographies as one step in learning how to perform the sometimes-nebulous task called “humanities research.” Overall, we use bibliographies to get a sense of a field and relate that overall sense to others, providing pathways through large, obscure, or otherwise difficult to navigate bodies of literature.

Subject indexes similarly provide pathways, but do so by organizing materials through the attribution of categorical meanings through which users can find information on a very specific topic. There are many different kinds of indexes but the most common is found in the backs of books. These indexes call out topics and sections of the volume that the indexer anticipates being of greatest quick-reference importance to an imagined readership. If I want to quickly find Raymond Williams’s thoughts on “structures of feeling,” I search out this term in the index to *Marxism and Literature* (1977) and then flip to page 132; that familiar passage, “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling,” is ready to hand (132). Online “indexes and databases” for journals and primary source materials similarly index printed matter by subject through the attribution of keywords. Today’s indexes are primarily digital—google is in itself a kind of index; the search algorithm “crawls” the web in order to index content and render it findable through online search retrieval. Preparing this manuscript, it was faster to perform a google search of “not feeling against thought Williams” than to pull down *Marxism and*

Literature from my shelf. Crawling is of course a metaphor for what these bots do; far from arbitrary, “crawling” evokes the kind of careful, thorough, and tiring process any decent indexing job requires. And though computing is imagined to be near instantaneous, the use of slow and cumbersome imagery references indexing’s paper roots, and hints at the fact that computers weren’t always so expedient either.

Whether they are made of paper or code, the fantasy of indexes is routed in a digital imaginary of unencumbered mediation—stripped-down interfaces that create clear paths between users and materials (Friedberg 2009). Writing long before Google, Clare Potter, editor of *The Lesbian Periodicals Index* (Fig. 3) (1986), explains the role of indexes in these terms:

In your library jargon an index is a link between the user who wants information and the actual source of that information, functioning like a library card catalog. An index pulls together people, events and concepts and is a medium for the delineation of culture. This is the reason our efforts to bring into being a lesbian periodicals index are profoundly cultural because we are documenting lesbian experience and thought, and, most importantly, organizing this experience when we assign subject headings. (Potter 1979a: 4)

Potter and Roberts each described their indexes and bibliographies as pathbreaking—as guides that would point researchers—scholars and amateurs alike—in new directions for discovering and synthesizing information so they might create new materials that would point others down subsequent paths of their own. Information organized through the index becomes an invitation to explore a path that was unimaginable before. Roberts even ends her bibliography with a two-page article titled “Some Suggested Activities for Black Lesbian Research,” a list of instructions that includes “create oral histories of older Black lesbians,” “collect Black lesbian poetry, both published and unpublished,” and “write

your life story” (1981: 91). The preceding bibliography points the way to the generative activities this list proposes.

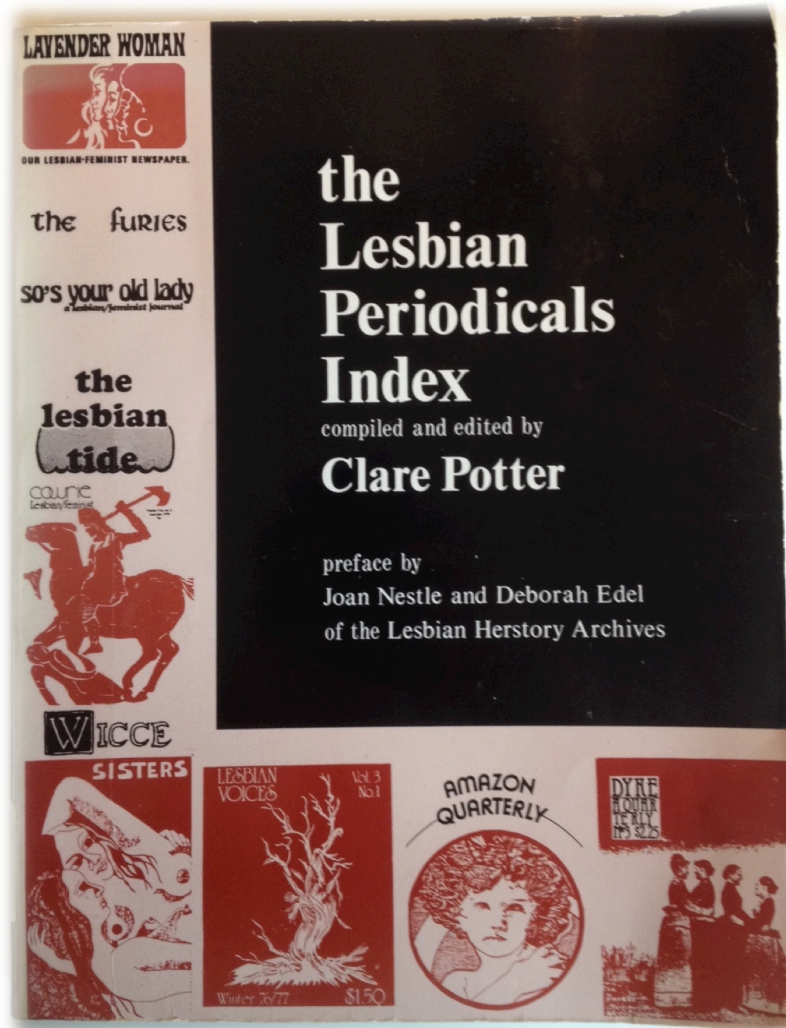


Figure 3: *The Lesbian Periodicals Index*, edited by Clare Potter and published by Naiad Press (1986).

Sarah Ahmed’s work on the pathfinding effects of tools helps to illustrate how the index or bibliography points. Ahmed describes the architectural concept of “desire lines”: unofficial paths that mark the ways in which travellers deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow (Ahmed 2006: 19–20).¹⁶ Imagine an urban park whose paths do not lead to the destination some users seek; over time, the deviations of this small group will

wear marks into the grass that become paths of their own. These “traces of desire” are generative (20): they shape a new landscape that others might follow. Indexes to materials marginalized from the historical record or from institutional information repositories such as public libraries are not merely pathfinding; they are pathbreaking, wearing lines in the grass where no one has walked before. Their published forms—the book or printed bibliography—become objects that take on this quality; they become objects that orient or point, encouraging readers to turn in certain directions because of their encounter with the index. In *Willful Subjects* (2014), Ahmed extends her earlier discussion of desire lines to the book as an object that points readers via the rubric of scholarship (14). Books insist on getting their way, turning wanderings and digressions into lines worn in the ground that others might follow. Books present willful deviations “premised on hope: the hope that those who wander away from the paths they are supposed to follow leave their footprints behind” (Ahmed 2014: 21). Barbara Smith expresses just such a point in her foreword to *Black Lesbians*: “This book encourages and strengthens us to keep on living as fully as possible *against the grain*” (Smith 1981: x, emphasis added).

This chapter considers three indexing projects, the paths they followed in their production from idea to database to finished form, and the paths these finished forms pointed users toward. The projects are: the Circle of Lesbian Indexers (1980–86) and their *Lesbian Periodicals Index* (Potter 1986), Roberts’s *Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography* (1981), and finally Barbara Gittings’s *Gay Bibliography* (published in six editions 1971–80), produced through her work as coordinator of the American Library Association’s (ALA) Task Force on Gay Liberation. I focus on the Circle of Lesbian

Indexers, a group of lesbian-feminist information activists scattered across the U.S. and lead by Potter, who located and indexed by subject hundreds of periodicals from 1980–86. The Circle is foregrounded in my analysis because the group’s papers, housed at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, leave a fairly complete record of the organization’s work process and use of computers. I was also able to interview Potter to fill in the holes these papers left, unlike Gittings who died in 2007, and Roberts, who does not wish to revisit this work.

The Circle’s goal was a complete, “usable,” subject-based index of lesbian-focused newsletters and small-scale magazines that emerged from the women in print movement beginning in the late 1960s; among them, *Matrices*. Like *Matrices*, these publications were produced and reproduced using low-cost printing methods such as the mimeograph—later Xerox machines—and circulated under cover to small subscriber lists through the post, or shared and reproduced amongst friends. Because these distribution networks were informal and unsupported by institutions such as libraries, mediating access through indexing became an urgent project for information activists. These women worked outside of formal institutions, often at night or on weekends after their day jobs. They drew on the resources of community archives that collected these publications, including the Lesbian Herstory Archives, where the organizational papers documenting both the Circle and JR Roberts’s work are kept today. In some ways, the story of the Circle of Lesbians Indexers picks up where the last chapter left off, considering forms of feminist information activism that worked to facilitate better access to published materials through considered, “pre-digital” interfaces that offered a kind of search-retrieval function for eager publics marginalized from print cultures.

Working independently in their corners of the country, each member of the Circle would index the issues for which she was responsible using standard index cards, drawing on the fledgling collections of organizations such as the LHA. Complete cards were mailed in batches to Potter, the central coordinator who processed the work into a volume eventually published as *The Lesbian Periodicals Index* (1986, Naiad Press). Potter was also the primary indexer on the project, particularly in its final years when the ongoing work of long-distance collaboration by letter mail proved to be more time consuming and cumbersome for Potter than just doing the work on her own. What began as a work process designed to put into practice feminist commitments to what Potter describes as “community, cooperation, women loving women, we’ll all work together,” was in the end “idealistic”: she explains, “In theory it was a good idea but it didn’t work out.”¹⁷

Though the Circle’s work process ultimately failed, the finished *Lesbian Periodicals Index* works exactly as Potter had planned. The book functions like a pretty typical subject index, where The Circle organized every article published in selected lesbian periodicals under descriptive subject headings. Readers could then look up a particular topic in the index—for example, “lesbian mothers”—and find a definitive list of every image or piece of writing published on this topic. Headings were unconventional, generated by the Circle out of the materials themselves, with the goal of representing lesbian “realities” and “every aspect of experience” (Potter 1979b: 1–2). Here is an alphabetized sampling of headings: Black lesbians, Coming out, Class and Classism, Home Remedies, Hotlines, Isolation and Loneliness, Menstruation, Michigan Women’s Music Festival, Pornography, Softball, Women’s Studies.

This reference text became critical for community archives, as well as institutional libraries and archives when they began to acquire past runs of feminist periodicals—so it was not only a subject index, it was also *the* definitive list of lesbian print ephemera from the women’s liberation era. Indeed, a lot of the Circle’s work was just gaining access to complete collections of periodicals—a kind of taking inventory of what was out there. The Circle’s rapidly growing index became a paper database guided by their knowledge of emergent database computing. Potter considered converting the paper index to an electronic database partway through the project.¹⁸ She trained on a computer system called WYLBUR in hopes that it would help her wrangle a project that was becoming unruly to manage by hand. The Circle’s papers discuss the promises of computers alongside their frustrating inaccessibility, a tension that frames a feminist critique of early personal computing.

JR Roberts became a member of the Circle after sharpening her indexing skills on the *Black Lesbians* project. By the time she came to the *Lesbian Periodicals Index*, Potter was an expert “amateur” indexer, having already produced a batch of cards she called “Master List of Lesbian Serials Published in The United States Since 1947” (Roberts 1978). There is little documentation of Roberts’s production of *Black Lesbians*, but the document itself is an important example of how DIY reference tools were implicated in critiques of lesbian feminism’s implicit whiteness; in other words, *Black Lesbians* stands as a record of how the lesbian feminist history and archives movement was very much aware of the discursive operations it performed by framing the public-facing identity of “lesbian” in historical terms. Feminist information activists assumed responsibility for this enframing through commonplace information management tools, including indexes.

Gittings also worked with index cards to produce the *Gay Bibliography*, a self-published document that was circulated widely but through letter mail, sent out ad-hoc in response to requests from individuals and service organizations. The *Gay Bibliography* might seem to be an awkward fit with this project's focus on feminist information activism given its status as a product of the gay liberation movement. Gittings distanced her activism more generally from feminist causes, and even from the kind of DIY tactics and aesthetics of the Circle and the LHA.¹⁹ Nonetheless, her bibliography shared these other projects' impetus toward pathfinding for a public unable to access materials through traditional means such as public libraries. The *Gay Bibliography* provides a compelling example of a unique distribution model that extends these projects' formal qualities of access into the realm of circulation, accounting for the moment when the index finds its public.

Gittings's bibliography was distributed using a model that required people to write to her and request the document; her archive contains dozens of these letters, saved by her assistant. These letters usually explain why the writer, often a teenager, needed the bibliography in the first place: generally to find their way along paths they sought but couldn't seem to find on their own. Intense vulnerability comes along with the act of making this request, palpable in reading the letters. Through Gittings's archive, the index becomes much more than an everyday document genre of research—it becomes an object to which emotions attach and move as the document circulates. From these letters, index-making emerges as a form of care-work, articulated to such promises as “finding other gay people” or as Potter put it, “revolutionizing our relationships.” Put simply, Gittings's archive shows why index cards and indexes matter.

My own path to working on these indexes was about finding my way through a dissertation, from one research object to another in ways that are never anticipated at the foggy beginnings of a project. The story of how I came to the index and an appreciation of its relevance to this larger project is a story of wayfinding—of using the tool to find something I thought I needed, and then finding something else instead. I was at the LHA on a hot day in early September, working with their collection of *Matrices*. The catalogue entry for the newsletter failed to list whether or not the archives held a complete or partial run. The volunteer staffing that day told me to cross-reference the LHA's holdings with the *Lesbian Periodicals Index*, pointing to the book on a small reference shelf in the entryway of the building. I was immediately brought in by the existence of this text and learned that the LHA held the Circle's papers. Familiarizing myself with their work process, I moved through their papers on a hunch that indexes and bibliographies formed another important, though perhaps less glamorous, aspect of the story about lesbian-feminist information activism I was piecing together. Through the archive and the newsletter, I found my path to the index, a sort of reverse order of what *The Lesbian Periodicals Index* promised to do for its readers. This historical index found its way into the present through service as a research tool. The encounter staged with this peculiar index felt very specific to the kinds of relationships amongst texts and historical periods that the LHA can facilitate at its best; through the serendipity of the archives' open collections, generous browsing policies, the specialized knowledge of its long-time staff, and the way in which this space seems to value such feelings as a hunch, my research became something else altogether.

This was my path to indexes. This chapter traces a path of its own through these projects. It begins with an overview of the dominant indexing culture within which each of these grassroots projects took place, reading indexing manuals from the second half of the 20th century. Next the chapter considers indexes as media—paper documents that operated as interfaces between published materials and a public, and in their operation, brought these publics into coherence in the first place. In the next section, index production is considered in relation to emergent computing in grassroots indexing through the Circle’s early efforts at “going electronic.” The promise of computer indexes is contrasted with the messy, gendered work of index-making, foregrounding the paper 3X5 card and its status as a tool for amateurs to argue that the Circle offered a feminist critique of technological accessibility in the early days of personal computing. Finally, the conclusion extends this story about indexes-as-media to the distribution strage through close reading of the Gittings letters.

A “Great Age of Indexing,” Built of “Little” Paper Slips

The Circle, Gittings and Roberts each did their work within an existing culture of indexing and information management. Index culture in this broader sense describes three things: First, it is a set of techniques, semi-professional standards, physical equipment, best practices, and folk wisdom for the work of making an index; Second, it is a set of qualities, traits, and habits that the ideal indexer—one who is ready to roll up their sleeves and do this meticulous work—ought to possess; third, and finally, index culture refers to a set of expectations about what indexes could do for a public with vested stakes in a given subject matter. In the cases I examine here, these are gay and lesbian, feminist,

and black-feminist publics, who would use indexes to access information from positions of marginalization conditioned, in part, by their exclusion from information in the first place. Such is the paradox of indexes and index-making.

Each of the three factors that constitute an indexing culture are part of a common discursive understanding of what the index was thought to do, as an interface for providing access to published information. These indexing projects were imagined as informational tactics in broader lesbian-feminist and gay and lesbian social movement strategies, and so they worked both within, and from the margins of, normative techniques and expectations established in library science. This section investigates this broader culture of information management, focusing on each of the three factors outlined above. Index culture from the midcentury to the 1980s also contributes to a history of digital culture. Indexing was imagined through computational metaphors and early ideas of the electronic database. To some extent, paper index cards and other simple materials promised the kinds of data archiving, search retrieval, and cross-referencing possibilities of today's digital networks. The conscientiously "pre-digital" index helps to frame common understandings of the value of access to information.

Indexing manuals published between the late 1950s and early 1970s were formative for establishing a culture of indexing and of the indexer into which the feminist projects under investigation here enter. The manuals examined here were published by the British and American societies for indexers, and by the RAND corporation, a computer science think-tank and research hub. Works produced by these indexing societies are emphasized because they remain the two leading professional associations for indexers, publishing most of the books in circulation on the topic. The manual I

examine most closely is Robert Collison's *Indexes and Indexing* (1959), because Potter and Roberts identify the text as the "background reading" that they "found most helpful" (Potter 1979: 4). I supplement these books about indexing with manuals from RAND because of the formative role the corporation played in early computing and database management in the U.S.

These manuals are part of a document genre aimed at providing instruction and setting the stakes for what indexes could do; in the case of RAND, what computers could do for indexes. These manuals describe the materials of indexing as tools to facilitate processual filing systems that became early "relational databases" (Gitelman and Jackson 2013: 9) for information retrieval on a given subject; they wove together data in ways that facilitate relationships amongst users and across subject-matter, engendering the formation of publics. These materials and their applications were understood through computational metaphors informed by the emergence of "business machines" in bureaucratic settings, including libraries; for example, the use of a card and shoebox system over a bound notebook was a way of imagining autonomous files that could be edited, sorted, and deleted, without consequence to the larger system (Knight 1979). Emphasizing the accessibility of these "tools" (Turner 2006) and of index production, rather than automation, these manuals construct a common typology of the ideal, non-expert "indexer," and the information systems that might be built by their capable hands. Hand-made indexes would mediate between a confusing mass of "data" (Gitelman and Jackson 2013: 8) and a public with search queries. The simple paper database offers a recent history of amateur information management that confronts the database in its very

material state, during a period in which personal computing was new and unsettled in its meanings and applications.

These simple, hand-made databases were gendered endeavors in their construction, employing accessible materials, tools, and design. A DIY sensibility of hands-on intervention familiar to feminist activism (Piepmeier 2009; Spencer 2008) and more generally “women’s work” made creating an index to published materials at home, in one’s spare time, seem manageable. Feminist indexers were not unlike the women behind *Matrices* and other newsletters in their drive to mediate access to feminist materials. Indexers, however, work most explicitly with “raw” information, and perhaps best exemplify the term “information activist.” The writing these women did about their projects often frames the indexes they worked on as indispensable interfaces that would mediate between a public and the information they both desired and couldn’t do without—the information they needed to be intelligible as a “public” in the first place.

As a concept, “interface” bridges media theory and information science. The interface is the object through which a user encounters information—in today’s Internet-speak, it is the “front-end,” user-facing window on a “back-end” database of information. Interfaces often use visual metaphors to represent information through means that are easier for users to understand and manipulate than raw information (Friedberg 2009: 226). The forms interfaces take matter—they “classify, frame, and link” users to information in ways that are caught up in larger gendered and racialized operations of power (Nakamura 2008: 28). As Lisa Nakamura explains, the interface can withhold, foreclose, and distribute, or provide ways of “negotiating, navigating, and situating oneself” (28). In information management contexts such as archives, libraries, and

indexing projects, interfaces also become metaphors for the indexer's role as "intermediary" between "documentary evidence and its readers" (Hedstrom 2002: 21). Interfaces are "neither natural nor neutral"—they are tools that impose "an interpretive framework" (21).

For feminist indexers, information in its raw form was merely out there; in order to be corralled into something meaningful and usable as part of a nascent political movement, it required a dedicated hand with specialized knowledge of its subjects to a) find the materials; b) parse their meaning through the attribution of subject descriptions; c) create an index or bibliography form that was easy for lay people to use; and d) circulate the completed documents through activist networks of their design, whether through Gittings's elaborate mail system, or through the use of specialized women's presses chosen by the Circle and Roberts. This subjective work was above all a labour of love, far from Shannon and Weaver's neutral, disinterested Telegraph Girl who merely parses information without regard for its meaning (Weaver 1964: 27).

Made of paper and circulated in their finished form as Xeroxed documents or small-press books, these indexes could be theorized as their own "print culture"; however, their status as information management tools foregrounds the index as a document *in process*: this analysis dwells on the work of imagining, creating, and distributing these indexes, rather than reading out from their printed "object" form. This history of amateur indexing is thus part of a larger move in media and communication studies to recover the forgotten gendered histories of information, databases, early computing, and their socially situated processes of women's work (c.f. Light 1999).

In the instruction manual *Indexes and Indexing* (1959), Robert Collison describes the 20th century as “the great age of indexing,” in which “heroic efforts” are needed “to provide a key to the growing mass of information which is accumulating so rapidly that no-one can grasp its immensity” (19). This effusive description of the stakes of making indexes contrasts with Collison’s modest dedicatory epigraph, in which he thanks his family for bearing “the sight of many little slips being shuffled and reshuffled without any apparent result” (front matter, n.p.). Here the index as a promise of information management, random access, and easy retrieval is set against the simple materials of its making; these “keys to a growing mass” might be built by amateurs using regular “stuff” at hand: cut-up paper, index cards, old shoeboxes, hole punches, and knitting needles used for sorting.

Collison identifies a historically specific information management problem, using a tone close to the register of crisis, designed to compel would-be indexers to act using modest and manageable means. In Collison’s mid-20th century this crisis moment is characterized by a massive proliferation of printed information in workplaces, libraries, institutions, and other contexts, all of which ushered in an era of bureaucratic, scientific management and emerging computational understandings of how information might be organized and used.²⁰ Lisa Gitelman traces the emergence of a contemporary indexing sensibility to the rapid expansion of scholarly publishing in the United States that began in the 1930s, an emerging “scriptural economy” she attributes to changes in printing methods, the availability of cheap paper, and scholarly subspecialization (2014: 54). For Gitelman, indexes and bibliographies represent a new genre of midcentury document,

constituting “materials that inventory, describe, catalog, or otherwise facilitate control over other materials” (58).

The midcentury index ushered in a modern, nearly electronic era of indexing but is part of modernity’s longer appeal to human mastery over information, born out of 18th- and 19th-century celebrations of rationalism, classification, professionalization, formal education, and general knowledge. The late-19th century saw the beginning of international maneuvers to produce bibliographic systems, an organized effort described by Gitelman as a “bibliographic movement” (2014: 59). The 19th-century index was imagined by, and in turn helped to shore up, a new sort of specialist learner who was after the efficiency of what is called “search retrieval” today, rather than a more romantic ideal of generalized knowledge or well-roundedness (Archibald 2014: 58). Evoking the kind of answers gleaned from Google and other at-your-fingertips founts of knowledge, Sasha Archibald explains the 19th-century turn to indexes and the random access they provide as a shift to knowing conceived as the search for problem-based “detail” and “verification,” and away from knowledge for its own sake (58). Archibald continues, “an index adds usability, accessibility, and efficiency—practical, important values indeed, but values not dear to the heart of literature” (59). The age of the specialist welcomed a narrowing and professionalization of knowledge made possible by tools such as indexes (Gitelman 2014: 58).

The index’s promise builds on the belief that humans had the ability to wrangle information; that information was a kind of standing reserve at the disposal of knowledge and *not* knowledge itself. Information required a human actor to make sense of it, and mediate access for others through the index or bibliography’s printed interface. This

human actor is stirred by an impulse unique to those who work closely with information: writes Collison, “No person who is engaged in the work of extracting information from printed sources—be he librarian, information officer, journalist, secretary, scientist, or research worker, etc.—can fail to be aware of the frustration constantly presented by knowing that the information exists, without knowing where it exists” (1959: 19–20). Roberts describes beginning *Black Lesbians* in 1977 while at graduate school in Massachusetts: “On the surface not a great deal was readily available, and a frequent refrain of those in search of these materials was, ‘But there just *isn’t* anything!’ Yet many materials do exist, although as a result of racist, sexist, and heterosexist politics, there is a lack” (Roberts 1981: xi). In the case of feminist indexing projects, frustration at a lack of access to materials that are surely “out there” is further affected by the marginalization of this information from institutional contexts such as book publishing and public libraries (Gumbs 2012; Johnson 2008; Travis 2008). In the case of *Black Lesbians*, it is frustration at exclusion from the centre of lesbian feminism itself.

Index as Mediation: Distanciation and Index Publics

Collison’s frustration evident in his indexing manual might be understood as a product of distance and the desire to close that distance. The index responds to a feeling that information is “out there” and that the right tools might bring it closer. In media studies, this feeling of distance and attendant desire for proximity is called “distanciation,” a concept John Guillory describes in terms that evoke the pull to create or use media as one motivated by affects such as pleasure, attachment, and anxiousness. Guillory writes:

Distanciation creates the possibility of media, which become both means and ends in themselves—not the default substitute for an absent object. If

this were not the case, we would be unable to explain the pleasure of talking on the telephone, reading novels, or even accumulating money as the medium of exchange. Pleasure in mediation may have grown out of the need to relieve the anxiety attached to the dispersion of persons in social space, but this pleasure now spurs the creation of new media where there is no compelling social necessity for their existence. (2010: 357)

Distanciation bears upon the drive to make an index, where sharing information resources imagines a public also doing the same thing. Gittings describes the bibliography's role as such: "For thousands of gay people who aren't active in our movement, information is more than finding gay books and newspapers—it means finding other gay people" (Gittings 1983: 1). The index creates proximity through an interface that is in itself a shared printed resource, and it also imagines a field of users collectively accessing the same materials it lists. Indexes engender a proximity and public that is part of the familiar fantasy of libraries more generally: think of the singular check-out card once tucked into the back cover of each library book, replaced today by a disposable "date due" slip printed on flimsy receipt paper and meant to be discarded. Check-out cards, which are also index cards, document who borrowed the book before you and when, with a signature written in each library user's unique hand under the column "Borrower's Name." The card becomes an index to a user-public with shared stakes in the book's content. Making an index, whether by signing the card or by creating a substantial guide to resources on a topic, creates proximities that are much greater than simple information retrieval: the index, in its creation, circulation, and use, carries all kinds of promises of what informational media might do for emerging gay and lesbian, and lesbian feminist publics. Located on the fringes of mainstream library use, these publics begin to gain legitimacy and a critical mass during the late 1970s and early 1980s, partly through the growing print culture documented by bibliographies and indexes.²¹

Indexes imagine and delineate a public through the selection of entries, the organization of information into headings, and the way in which the finished index is circulated. These techniques carve out a textual community already caught up in the cultural politics of gay and lesbian, and women's liberation. Michael Warner's work on "counterpublics," particularly its focus on textuality and reading, helps to illustrate how these index-publics take shape in relation to shared materials and marginal reading practices. Though these materials were largely excluded from public libraries, they gained "legitimacy" through the gatekeeping function of documents such as the *Gay Bibliography*. These reference documents support the readership's acquisition of what Warner calls "agency in relation to the state" (89).

For Warner, counterpublics are discursive and self-organizing imaginaries whose terms of existence are not pre-public but are formed and transformed through participation in the public. Politically speaking, publics seek to replicate conditions as they are and reproduce the world that is known, while counterpublics work to transform (88). Counterpublics are poetic and "world-making," bringing together strangers in new modes of sociality that are outside the critical-rational discourse of publics proper (85). On the other hand, the index is also the ultimate critical-rational tool facilitating knowledge through an ask-and-answer mode of efficient search retrieval. Straddling this tension, the *Gay Bibliography*, *The Lesbian Periodicals Index*, and *Black Lesbians* address a readership that is difficult to locate in either public or counterpublic terms; these publics had been excluded from reading practices and left to "mumble" or "fantasize" (88) their way through an opaque field of texts; however, bibliographies and indexes offered them legitimacy by facilitating entry to the "critical-rational discourse" of

reading, which would provide both a shape for participation in the public and a forward political direction.

Indexes and bibliographies also affirmed the existence of past lesbian publics once marginalized from historical records. The index reaches backwards in time to establish a public retrospectively, but does so in order to secure a public in the future—one that is unthreatening to the present because it is recognizable and anticipated. Potter explains, “I think we are trying to imaginatively connect with the next generation of lesbian women, to speak to them, and so this work we are doing, I think of metaphorically, as a long letter to our lesbian daughters, a work of our hands for them” (Potter 1979a: 1–2). Here Potter invokes the matriarchal trope of inheritance and recognition—“this is my daughter”—that often serves to smooth over histories of feminist acrimony (Creet 1991; Noble 2006: 19). Potter’s vision of writing the self as “woman” into a coherent narrative that moves developmentally across eras is precisely the “fantasy of feminist history” (Scott 2011: 51). Stability effaces discontinuity (51) for the political sure-bet of a “lesbian feminism” that means one thing across multiple time periods, racial formations, and gendered ways of being. The index writes this coherent feminist across time, becoming an affective tool in its generative guarantee of feminist futurity.

As the laudatory words of Potter and others articulate, feelings of liberation and futurity attach to indexes, seemingly because of their role in manifesting and sustaining publics; yet paradoxically, the best kind of index is one that disappears from view, becoming merely a tool. The index should point but should do so as an apparently neutral interface accessed by an agential user. Writes Archibald, “A good index does not

advertise, promote, or flaunt itself, but crisply details a series of perfect routes, from heading to subheading to page number to morsel of information. The less time spent considering the index, the better the index” (2014: 57). A “good index” evokes fantasies of pure mediation, transcending the distance between a user and the information they desire through an easy process of information retrieval that feels virtually seamless.

Ambivalent Machines: “The subject of computers and their marvelous facility to sort and file”

In her study of the window as a metaphor for designing human-computer interfaces, Anne Friedberg argues that graphic user interfaces (GUIs) allowed information to be managed easily by human actors. The replacement of text-based, command-line operating systems like MS-DOS with operating systems such as Windows allowed users to visually manipulate information, for example, by dragging a folder from one window to another, rather than having to recall and execute a line of code. Technically GUIs “increased” the layers of mediation between user and machine by adding a sometimes poorly functioning interface layer between the operator and executable code; in practice though, GUIs respond to the familiar pull of distantiation: interfaces are tools that make information *feel* more ready-to-hand because they promise manipulability without specialist knowledge. They are also metaphors that aid in understanding informational media (Friedberg 220). Computers, for example, depend on visual metaphors—window, desktop, mouse, dashboard—to build rapport with users. These metaphors are “key cultural accommodations to a ‘digital revolution’ and an interface with a new ‘space’ of information” (221).

Computational metaphors are similarly at play in constructing the index as a potentially seamless means of information retrieval during the period immediately preceding the introduction of the personal computer, when these indexes were made. Like a desktop “window” or “file folder,” the index becomes a metaphor for understanding information as a containable whole that can be grasped and manipulated by users. The user here is both the reader of the finished, published index (the index-public) and the women like Potter who made indexes in the first place “using” the tools and strategies of indexing outlined in popular indexing manuals. Computational metaphors influence both kinds of user interactions with indexes, particularly given emergent computing’s position on the cutting edge of information management during this period.

Indexes promote efficiency and usability. Like computers, they are a technology based in a fantasy of capacity for controlling the abundance of information produced in the era of mass mediation characterized by the second half of the 20th century. The index wants to work as a computer would, by mastering a quantity of information that a human being cannot, though it ultimately organizes this information in service of human knowledge pursuits (Goble 2010: 289). Gitelman locates the index at the apex of “unresolved tension” between “a machinic or an informatics sensibility” and “a more humanist” one (2014: 64). Indexing manuals tend to include anecdotes that celebrate the fantasy of rapid information retrieval and clean management. Collison describes the index as an elaborate system for managing a quantity of information that could not be managed otherwise. He writes, “since we are now having to grapple with a thousand facets of a complex industrial civilization, it is just as well that we should embrace such modern substitutes as logarithms, and indexes and formulae, so that we can leave our

memories free...” (1959: 13–14). Foreshadowing the life-altering rhetoric that accompanies the introduction of new forms of computing today, Collison goes on: “indexing can be used to make life easier and more efficient, to eliminate time- and money-wasting and to avoid mistakes and irritation. Indexing is not a panacea for all modern evils, but it can certainly be a palliative for some of the more common of them” (15).

Collison writes as if he has computers in mind when he describes the revolution indexing could bring. Indeed, his manual concludes with a chapter that outlines a hypothetical system of “mechanized indexing” using computer punch cards. Similarly, G. Norman Knight’s *Indexing, The Art Of* (1979) outlines the need for indexers to design alphabetizing systems that would anticipate the needs of computer languages, or what a computer could read and sort (116). During the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Gittings, the Circle, and Roberts did their work, computers were emerging widely into office environments, and had also begun to enter the public imagination as tools that might find value in personal use. The first truly “personal computer”—the IBM PC—was introduced in 1981, and in 1982, *Time* magazine named the computer its annual “person” of the year. In 1981 the LHA used by both the Circle and Roberts to do their work bought its first computer to manage a text-based address database of newsletter subscribers. Indexers such as the Circle thought about computers as they designed and carried out their work just as early computer users and software designers thought about indexes when they imagined computing’s transition into common information management settings such as the LHA. In her *Guide to Indexing in the Circle of Lesbian Indexers*, a shared reference written in the Circle’s early days, Potter imagined the role computer

databases might eventually play in the project: “That brings us to the subject of computers and their marvelous facility to sort and file. If anybody out there knows a lesbian programmer who could write a lesbian periodicals indexing program *gratis*, we need this woman! Beyond the need for an indexing program, using computers involves money—for computing time on the machine, for inputting, for storage—and who knows what else” (Potter 1979a: 9).

In 1979, when Potter wrote these words, The RAND corporation and its Santa Monica California Computer Center was a leading computer-science think-tank. Its campus was located 400 miles down the California coastline from the Stanford University Computer Center where Potter went in her spare time to learn database software beginning in 1981. RAND was originally dedicated to research on future weapons but shifted focus to computing and became an intellectual home to researchers such as Paul Baran, who designed the network models I explored in the previous chapter.²² RAND produced its own “indexing manuals” in the form of a series of instructional publications, each marked with the subheading “A RAND Computation Center Reference.” These manuals outline common applications for computer-generated indexing and data management, including the sort of mailing list management tasks performed at the LHA. A registered U.S. non-profit founded in 1948, The RAND manuals explain how to use computer database software designed by the organization, including tasks performed by paper-based indexes.

RAND developed a text-based abstract and index system in 1967, which was replaced with a much more sophisticated version in 1973, and is detailed in the manual *Specifications for the RAND Abstract and Index System* (RAND: 1975). This program

was similar to the WYLBUR software Potter was learning at Stanford: it could perform a range of indexing tasks, and was used to generate a searchable and editable database of RAND's internal publications (abstracts, reports, working notes) that could be output (or printed) as a versioned catalogue. Although designed to be used at RAND, the software and manual was also offered to clients of the RAND computation center: "it [the program] can easily be adapted to meet the specific requirements of organizations other than RAND" (1975: iii). Today the manuals are held by most university libraries and are still available for purchase from RAND.²³

RAND's indexing software was written in the programming language PL/I and relied on IBM's utility and sort/merge programs. Documents and their identifying information were input as text on an early word processor called the IBM MT/ST (Magnetic Tape Selectric Typewriter), so although the system used a mainframe computer to store and process data, users input text entries into the system using individual terminals that looked like typewriters: the same interface Potter confronted. All of the entries were stored in the "master catalogue," a database kept on an IBM 2314 Direct Access Storage Device (a large hard-disk). By issuing run-type commands to the database via punch-cards input into the master computer, one could output magnetic tapes that could then be sent to a printer to generate hard copies of indexes and bibliographies. The documents that the program generated look and function like annotated bibliographies, listing titles and abstracts on a given subject. They are computer-generated but part of a familiar document genre (Gitelman 2014) normally produced with paper cards; the similarities in the appearance of these documents and

Black Lesbians is a testament to how the document genre of paper indexes influenced emergent computing, and vice-versa.

RAND's indexing program represented a computational way of understanding how an index could be stored as one "disordered" thing in a kind of "database cloud" and then output as a more traditional bibliographic document. The database stores thousands of "documents" in the form of titles and abstracts; the program offered the ability to store them out of order and then order them in any which-way for output. An example of a common ordering run-type command one might issue is to output a list organized by author or subject; Selective Dissemination of Information, or SDI in library terms (Wilks 1982: 8). The program also allowed abstracts to be modified, or replaced with new versions of documents. This promise of easy revision was precisely what made text-based computer databases appealing for managing the Circle's thesaurus of vocabulary terms, a document that contained a standard list of subject headings and sub-headings Circle indexers could attribute to materials in order to maintain consistency across the work they were each doing in different corners of the country. The thesaurus was an in-process document that required ongoing revision as Potter and other Circle indexers uncovered new material that required more and more specialized terms of description. The vocabulary acted as a standard (Stern and Mulvin 2014: 124) ensuring interoperability. It facilitated a necessary relationship between Circle members, their shared documents and norms of practice in indexing. But it was a standard the Circle was willing to adjust, despite the inconvenient extra work presented by such revision.

Potter managed the central document, incorporating new headings and then issuing updated printed versions to each member of the Circle via letter mail, a time-

consuming, centralized process that she understandably imagined would benefit from automation through transition to an electronic database. A thesaurus of subject terms is a key document for any indexer; acting as a framework or systems-design guiding the whole project from its inception, the thesaurus has to be good if the finished index has a hope of being any good. As Potter explained to me, The Circle “would be a collaborative project... like a hub and spoke with the thesaurus and communication. We would funnel it out. I felt like it would really work and the work would get done more quickly if it was a group working on it” (Potter 2014). Part of the Circle’s failure to collaborate effectively was about the thesaurus failing to produce this interoperability between members: as Potter explained, “The work would come in and the cards weren’t following the rules and procedures that were set up. In order to make this work as a cohesive publication it had to be correct, it had to be accurate” (Potter 2014).

Potter explains the significant political implications and potential effects of a feminist thesaurus in particular: “We... see our attempts to build a thesaurus of subject terms applicable to lesbian realities as a way to help us pose the kinds of questions we need to ask about our experience. The thesaurus is truly a conceptualizing medium with an organic relationship to the culture—its people and ideas—from which it is derived” (Potter 1982: 153). The “organic” status of the thesaurus begs for an organic technological solution in the form of the editable electronic database. Computer databases promised to enhance the work of second-wave feminist consciousness-raising, in which the ability to explain, listen to, understand, revisit and revise a position was a key (see Freeman 2013). When Potter felt uncertain about a term, she would make a note of her uncertainty on the card and return to it once she discovered “*the* perfect term to describe a

specific reality” (Potter 1979a: 7). Potter explains, “I think we have to recognize that there will be a certain degree of re-indexing involved in creating the Lesbian Periodicals index.... That’s ok, but we have to have a good communication network...” (Potter 1979a: 7). Put simply, “re-indexing” enacted the indexer’s commitment to feminist methods, and computers promised to make this practice easier to carry out.

The Circle’s emphasis on revising its subject terms towards greater precision using the revision-oriented media of cards and computer databases is echoed in the LHA’s assignment (and re-assignment) of metadata descriptors to its photography collection as it is scanned and put online. While Potter sought “the perfect term to describe a specific reality,” photography collection coordinator Saskia Scheffer revises keywords whenever she realizes that she “can be more exact...more precise” (Scheffer 2013). While Potter found herself revising through a feminist commitment to lived experience and self description developed out of the women’s liberation movement, Scheffer faces a decidedly more digital task, grappling with the shifting signifiers and identifications of materials that resist classification under some of lesbian feminism’s narrower terms. Despite different time periods, technologies and publics, both women approach revision as a feminist practice requiring particular media forms.

Computerized functions such as editability and sorting re-mediated the paper index form, for which cards were used precisely because they are all singular, modular entries that can be re-ordered, edited, replaced, shuffled, sorted and re-sorted. As Markus Krajewski explains, paper-card indexes such as the one produced by the Circle satisfy all the “basic operations” of Alan Turing’s universal discrete machine (the theoretical prototype for the computer): paper indexes store, process, and transfer data, and

“information is available on separate, uniform, and *mobile* carriers” that “can be further arranged and processed according to strict systems of order” (2011: 4). The computer index transcends some of the limits of a paper system in that it allows instantaneous sorting and re-sorting without any material handling of files, however, the system required a great deal of technical skill to operate, and did not readily embrace amateurism, or the feminist politics of accessible materials, tools, processes, and skills practiced by the Circle.

As Krajewski’s study of 18th and 19th-century card catalogs shows, index cards were a way of imagining autonomous files that could be altered without consequence to the bigger system. They were pre-computational but shaped the way early computer hardware (punch-card systems) and computer software (database programs) took shape. Cards were preferred over other possible ways of managing paper indexes for reasons that were similar to the appeal of computer files. Knight makes this clear in *Indexing, The Art Of* (1979) when he describes the limited effectiveness of notebooks for indexing projects because of their lack of modularity:

The use of a notebook—preferably loose-leaf—is one of the earliest methods of recording the entries for an index. Indeed it has been described as ‘primitive.’ I used it in some of my early indexes and found it completely satisfactory for a short, simple index of, say, six to eight pages. But the consensus of opinion among experienced indexers is that it lacks the flexibility of cards or slips and that it could not be expected to work well for a larger index, or one involving many sub-subheadings. (Knight 1979)

Throughout his manual, Knight makes many different suggestions for card size, thickness, and the everyday materials that might be repurposed to sort them (such as an old shoe box). No matter their size, cards are always described advantageously in terms of their manipulability. The materiality of index cards is precisely what allows for a kind

of database imaginary to take hold. Potter's investment in learning computers, even though it often felt like a waste of precious "spare time" she could otherwise be spending on more pressing Circle-related tasks, is its own kind of digital imperative, not unlike the one that guides 21st-century community archives towards digitization. Potter imagined that computers would allow the Circle to do the same things they were already doing with cards, but more easily and efficiently, a technical solution to the flood of cards with which she struggled to keep pace (see Potter 1981c).

The RAND manuals and Potter's fantasies about taking the Circle's indexing work online each illustrate how computers were used to build databases in ways that emulated the function of "more material" indexes. In-process bibliographies such as Gittings' *Gay Bibliography*, which was edited each year and re-compiled from a shifting stable of cards, were also collections of hundreds of individual "documents" that could be deleted, modified in their storage capacity, and then organized and output in a number of different ways. Gittings performed this kind of modification when she crossed-out outdated information about a periodical on its index card, or when she used her existing collection of cards to re-sort a more specialized bibliography on a sub-topic (SDI). Task Force sub-indexes grew to include "Gay Resources for Religious Study," "Gay Materials for Use in Schools," "Gay Aids for Counselors," and "A Short Lesbian Reading List" (all 1978), and later "Gay Teachers Resources" (1979) (Gittings 1990: 10).

Though Gittings, the Circle, and Roberts used paper cards, pens, and pencils to build the databases through which they generated their indexes, their work was animated by the potential of computer databases in other information contexts they knew. These included the archives from which they drew their print sources, and the more institutional

information contexts—public and university archives—where some of these women had day jobs. During the final years of producing the *Lesbian Periodicals Index*, Potter experienced a workplace transition to computer databases in her job as a librarian for the California Medial Association (Potter 2014). Potter spent many evenings at the computer center learning how to use WYLBUR, a process she relates with frustration in a 1981 letter to Karen Brown, one of the other indexers: “I find I just can’t spend my every night and weekend at the Stanford center learning and then inputting. I need to spread some of the parts of this to others!” (Potter 1981c). Potter’s willingness to show up at the Stanford computer lab to learn demonstrates a familiarity with institutional information contexts and a facility with learning new technology acquired no doubt through her exposure to library school and professional library work.

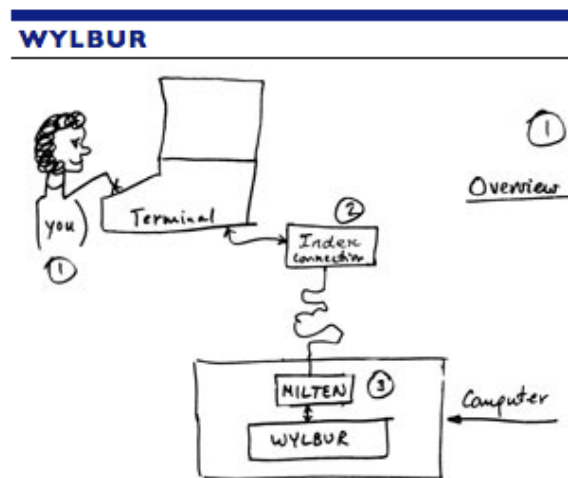


Figure 4: John Ehrman, illustration for WYLBUR user manual (c. late 1970s).

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, online search retrieval and database computing were the cutting edge of information science, at the forefront of library school curriculum, professional development and technical skills acquisition for information

workers (see Bourne and Hahn 2003).²⁴ Online search retrieval—the method through which librarians used computer terminals to search networked databases for reference materials, rather than card catalogs—had seemed like futurism to mid-century information practitioners, but was quickly becoming a standard, well-established operation by the early 1980s (Bourne and Hahn 2003: 1).

The influence of computers on the work of feminist indexers was not always positive or generative, and in fact may have acted as a normative trajectory against which these women designed their indexing systems; Reflecting on her lack of experience with indexing despite completing library school, Potter writes in the Circle's manual: "JR and I are both librarians, but must confess to having been rotten students. I remember my course in "Indexing and Abstracting" as one long, hot (it was summer) dull panegyric to computers and information science" (Potter 1979a: 2). In her letters to the Circle, Potter often seems to have hated WYLBUR; she expresses resentment of the opacity of computing and a skepticism about whether WYLBUR's value for managing the thesaurus or index would ever pay off: "I haven't quite been able to understand the costing of all this. Computers have such a jargon" (Potter 1981b). In the same set of letters, alongside her perplexity at trying to learn computers, Potter describes paper cards with fondness for both the materials, and her collaborator's acuity: "Judy Lerner works [on the index] on Sunday afternoons. She has proceeded so quickly...that I'm passing on to her the title of ace-indexer. My role is becoming files of 3X5 cards! I'm serious. I have about 12 inches of Judy's indexing to incorporate, plus about that much of my own" (Potter 1981c).

Feminist indexers were skeptical about computers because they were expensive: users of shared labs had to pay for computer time and to have their work output.

Computers also took a long time to learn, and were difficult to use. Despite Potter's complaints about these systems, she also invested a great deal of time and hope in the possibilities computer databases presented for managing the *Lesbian Periodicals Index*. In the Circle's guide to indexing, she writes, "the numbers of cards we can safely manage without the help of machines seems finite. We can keep on top of hundreds (no problem), or a few thousand cards, but even dykedom has its limits" (Potter 1979a: 9). At the limits of dykedom lies emergent database computing, evidently, though in the end, Potter stuck with her paper system. She hired a woman with facility for word processing to turn the finished card index into a word-processed document that Naiad ultimately published as is, skipping the step of typesetting the manuscript. The finished book has the look and feel of a print-out from an early word-processor. Potter's willingness to sit with and explore her shifting, frustrated relationships towards both computers and cards enacts a feminist practice of carrying on alongside and in acknowledgement of one's ambivalence, a position given language in feminist texts of this period such as Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1977). Potter's reflections on computers offer a critical intervention with progress narratives about technology and information management during the early days of widespread database computing.

Situating these feminist interventions with normative practices of indexing explicitly alongside the emergence of computer indexes emphasizes the moment of informational abundance and management in which these information activist projects took place. This was a time when indexes were urgently needed to organize and provide access to a growing mass of paper documents related to feminist, and gay and lesbian politics. Just as Krajewski (2011) identifies the post-Gutenberg "book flood" as the

impetus for 19th-century card catalogs, these indexes responded to changes in publishing that were in turn the result of related “arms” of activism, and the new visible publics they supported: the gay liberation and women’s liberation movements, the women in print movement (Sjoholm 2012) and the gay and lesbian archives movement (see Marks Ridinger 1997). These energetic social movements generated a great deal of vital yet disorganized printed matter to which information activists working through the medium of indexes hoped to provide easy access.²⁵

Foregrounding the emergence of computers and computational metaphors is also part the larger project of discovering feminism’s “pre-digital” histories; women’s indexing work offers a history of how emergent database computing both influenced and was influenced by feminist activities. Feminist indexing is one example of how amateur information workers understood and imagined databases during the early days of the personal computer, and thus situate emergent database logics and informational sensibilities taken for granted today in the specific historical context of feminist research, publishing, and their attendant publics. One of the ways this feminist intervention with the history of computing takes shape is in the desire to apply a cooperative or collective model to the use of this technology, notable when Potter laments the nights spent alone at the computer centre when she could be participating in more obviously productive Circle activities (1981c), and expresses hope that other women with facility for computers would join the Circle (1981c) so that she could “ask every question [about computers] I’ve always wanted to ask but had no one to ask” (1981a).

Of course, there are limits to the reach of computational metaphors; importantly, these woman information activists were not computers (see Light 1999), and these paper

indexes are not databases generated through algorithms—they are built by people with subjective, specialist feminist engagements with their subject matter. To be sure, computing has made the work of indexing much easier—the messy materiality of index cards and glue is done away with—but because of the high level of expertise about periodicals and minority subjects required for this work, any kind of advanced automation of indexing is impossible; to some extent, even today, “the usefulness of computers vis-à-vis indexing ends” at material convenience (Archibald 2014: 62). So while *The Circle*’s story is framed by emergent computing cultures of the early 1980s, the work of building paper indexes is also a gendered style of routine, meticulous, and very material labour, where index cards might be thought of as a relic of women’s work.²⁶

The Gendered Labour of Indexing

While the standard 3X5 index card is a familiar indexing material, the knitting needle’s application to this work is less immediately clear. Nonetheless, this tool of women’s craft is instrumental in Collison’s chapter on mechanized indexing, in which he offers a hypothetical discussion of how “business machines”—early punch-card operated computers—might be “adapted” “for indexing purposes” (1959: 143). Following Collison’s instructions, punch cards used to input data and run-type commands into these computers could be appropriated for use in a paper classification system; holes on each card would be punched to correspond with the alphabetical title of the text and the numerical page number of the reference (Fig. 5). These cards would then be sorted using “a knitting needle of slightly smaller diameter than the holes in the cards” (144).

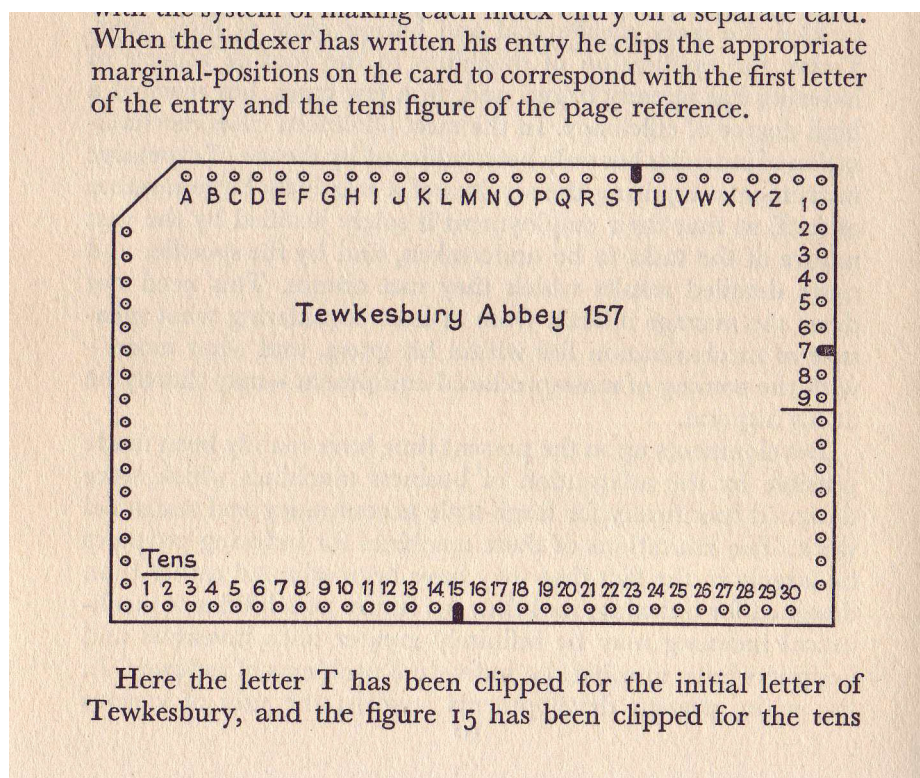


Figure 5: Illustration of punch card and knitting needle mechanized indexing system (Collison 1959: 144).

Taking out her knitting needle and a batch of “not more than two hundred” cards ready to be sorted, “the indexer thrusts the knitting needles through the hole denoting the letter A and shakes the cards, on which the index entries beginning with A will fall out. This process is repeated batch by batch and letter by letter until, at the end all the cards will be found to have been sorted automatically into the order of the letters of the alphabet” (145). Collison gives no indication that he has ever actually used the system he describes, in fact, it reads a bit like mechanization for mechanization’s sake. I imagine a mess of cards that don’t begin with the letter “A” falling onto the table and floor in a nightmarish scene of 200-pickup. The system provides an example of how emergent computing figured in the imaginations of indexers even when actual computers were not accessible to them. Collison explains that the inaccessibility of computers “need not deter

the average indexer from at least considering what measure of mechanization lies within his grasp, and what more—with the coming of mass-produced equipment—may shortly be at his disposal” (143).

Though Collison does not remark on his choice of a knitting needle, the tool is notable for its status as a familiar, common household item that is used in everyday domestic work. The adaptation of these kinds of tools has precedent in indexing culture beginning as early as the 16th century when the standard device for arranging and sorting slips was based on looms used to weave fibers, in yet another application of textile work to classification work (see Krajewski 2011: 13–14; Wellisch 1981: 12). To be sure, weaving and knitting are tactile skills requiring a great deal of manual dexterity, but they are crafts performed with accessible tools that are approachable by amateurs (Sennett 2008). This is part of their gendered quality.

Indexing’s approachability by non-professionals is often explained through gendered, domestic metaphors. Indexing manuals describe the commonplace, household “system designs” of women as examples of “indexing” to cast the process as second-nature. Writes Collison, “Indexing is largely a matter of setting one’s house in order. Nearly everyone does it in private life in some way or other, merely so that they can find things again when they need them. When a housewife makes a separate place for everything in the kitchen she is in fact creating a living index, for not only she, but all her household, will gradually get used to the system she has created and be able to discover things for themselves, even though it may involve knowing that sugar is always kept in a jar labeled SAGO” (12). Here women workers are conceived as a general type, ideal for the practice of indexing because of experience designing small-scale functional

systems—pantries, recipe boxes, domestic schedules. Both the organizational concepts and common materials of indexing are articulated to the realm of women's work in order to communicate a sense of ease and accessibility. By turning woman indexers into an abstraction or metaphor, Collison ignores the historically important role women played in the development of indexing systems: some of the earliest indexers were women, including Mary Petherbridge, whose foundational but now not so highly regarded book *The Technique of Indexing* (1904) was an important early instructional manual (see Armstrong 2014).

Collison construction of the domestic sphere as an illustration of how indexing is easy also has the effect of diminishing indexing work: *if a woman can index, anyone can.*²⁷ Potter and Roberts turn this logic on its head, describing a feminist ethic of resourcefulness and willingness to try something at which one is not an expert as the impetus for allowing them to go forward with *The Lesbian Periodicals Index* even though they didn't really know what they were doing, having each "glossed over" that part of library school (see Potter 1979a). The "genesis of the idea of creating a Lesbian Periodicals Index" (Potter 1979a: 1) was a simple connection between two women both enmeshed in feminist politics and activism: Potter was motivated by "the many hours of conversation between J.R. and myself concerning just about everything—from recipes and families, to our dreams of lesbian books and archives, and of communities of women" (Potter 1979a: 1).

If indexing in general relies on the status of women's work to relay its approachability, then these particular indexes model feminist activist understandings of women's work as powerful and unique. For example, the willingness of women like

Potter and Roberts to take on a “second shift,” indexing at night after their day jobs and domestic responsibilities had been fulfilled, or their readiness to implement a collective work model that was often frustrating to maintain, according to Potter (2014). As Trysh Travis explains in her history of the women in print movement (2008), the acquisition and application of technical skills, especially those related to the management and reproduction of paper documents, was thought to be a way of materializing feminist theory. Writes Travis, “the simultaneous development of women’s heads and hands was necessary to prevent a divisive split between radical theory and practice. Without a conscious blurring of the lines between manual and mental labor, feminists risked recreating among themselves the hierarchies of class, intellect, power, and so forth, that they were committed to eradicating” (Travis 2008: 280).

Roberts’s and Potter’s schooling in feminist activism structures the organization of the Circle’s workflow, and also informs the choices these indexers make about how to describe materials. Consciousness-raising, lived experience, self-determination, and the personal-as-political—characteristic women’s liberation movement philosophies (Hesford 2013: 117–132)—are all evoked in Potter’s description of the subjective, interpretive act performed when one indexes an article through the attribution of subject headings:

But “subjects” is a term that encompasses events, emotions, concepts, images, places—every aspect of experience. In fact the term is so broad that the imagination stretches to consider all the possible meanings adhering to such an innocuous looking word. We must keep in mind that lesbian realities reflected in our periodicals are just as vast, as all-encompassing as the word subjects implies. The task we have set for ourselves is to try to name this vast, fluid, and changing experience.... the LPI subject headings were going to reflect internal realities—our life and times in the lesbian community—and external realities—our life and times interacting with the mainstream society. (Potter 1979b: 1–2)

The approach outlined here reflects some of the central commitments of any feminist methodology; if, as Joan Scott points out (2011), such a thing can be said to exist in any kind of coherence in the first place, it might be summarized by such axiomatics as: “there is no inclusiveness without exclusion, no universal without a rejected particular, no neutrality that doesn’t privilege an interested point of view; and power is always an issue in the articulation of these relationships. Put in other words, we might say that all categories do some kind of productive work; the questions are how, and to what effect” (Scott 2011: 73). Indexing by subject is the ultimate, systematic act of categorization and classification by attributing set meanings to another person’s words. As such, for Potter, it necessarily “violates any sense that reality is process, flux, and change, that it defies categorization, and that each event, idea, or person is perceived differently by different people in different circumstances” (Potter 1979b: 2). The Circle’s feminist indexing method is based in an acknowledgment of these limitations by an indexer who then proceeds with care, and is willing to revise, even if it means having to discard or redo an entry or two (see Potter 1979a: 7). Writes Potter, “with the recognition that at some level, indexing is delusive, we can, I think, try to make the best judgments and the most informed decisions that we can about the subject(s) of the material we’re indexing” (2).

These lesbian feminist efforts to use the index as a “woman-centered” form of mediation are critical interventions with the default rationales and thesaurus terms for subject description.²⁸ Enacted here on cards, the 1980s feminist tactic of dismantling the masculine structures and epistemologies of language finds other iterations elsewhere: in activists spellings of “womyn” for example, or in French feminist critiques of language that were beginning to find U.S. audiences through English translation during this period.

A notable example of feminist language politics applied to the index is Dale Spender's unorthodox, self-authored index to her own book *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* (1982), which includes such subjects headings as "reasoning, male limitations of" (See Armstrong 2014: 57, n. 7). Spender enacts her book's argument—that women's perspectives have been erased from literary history—through the form of the index, calling out this ubiquitous tool and the vocabulary it relies upon as anything but innocuous. Though she claimed to be uninterested in feminist perspectives, Gittings was also concerned with the index form's language politics. In her role as Task Force coordinator, Gittings convened a committee to advocate for re-developing Library of Congress subject headings to reflect the terms sexual minorities used to describe themselves, rather than the standard practice of classifying all materials under the blanket heading "homosexuality" (Task Force on Gay Liberation 1974; see also Berman 2008).²⁹

Though feminist information workers brought an insurgent energy to these language reforms, they learned cataloguing and indexing at library schools under the auspices of being trainable, complacent, and amicable to the status quo. In her history of the feminization of public librarianship, Dee Garrison argues that the proliferation of women library workers in the late 19th century—in 1910, more than three-quarters of U.S. librarians were women—met little social resistance from male librarians, in part because library work "appeared similar to the work of the home" (Garrison 1972/73: 131–32). Organizing information was thought not to threaten the constitution of women or their suitability for domestic roles, and shored up the existing social order. Women workers were preferred for the "tedious job" of cataloging in particular because of their "stored great reserves of patience," which allowed them to perform "the most monotonous tasks

without boredom” (Garrison 1972/73: 137). Put another way, this willingness to perform the small, routine tasks necessary to achieve a larger vision is precisely the kind of scrappiness that makes feminist direct action so effective.

From early on, index cards were gendered materials in their form and use, even in the kind of writing style expected of the genre. “Library Hand” is a rounded-style of standardized script for writing on index cards (not unlike school teachers’ printing) developed by Melvil Dewey (of the Dewey Decimal System) when he ran the library school at Columbia University in the late-19th century (Miksa 1988: 250). Whether because of Dewey’s particular aesthetic choices, or his investment in the feminization of librarianship (see Garrison 1972/73: 148–51), or merely because most catalogers were women, library hand has a “feminized” look and feel, characterized by a neat, compact, looping script and the occasional serif. All this is to say that the handwriting on index cards matters; its cultural politics is steeped in a gendered history.

The average index card is a work in progress, returned to and edited over the years as information about an entry changes. For example, Gittings would return to a card that represented a particular periodical in order to update subscription information, crossing out writing from previous years, sometimes in different-coloured ink. Members of the Circle sent their cards to Potter for feedback on their work—she would Xerox the cards on 8 ½ by 11 sheets, mark up the sheets, and mail them back to the indexer so that they might improve their work. Some of these cards are included in the Circle’s collection of papers at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Potter’s marginalia does not just instruct, it also reflects a process of collaboration and revision: there are scribbles of “make sense?” and “what do you think?” and “sounds like a good article, was it?” (Potter

and Brown n.d.). Cards leave behind a material history of women's information management that might be preserved, as we will see in the case of the LHA, which keeps records of previous volunteer-generated subject classifications of materials, even when they are updated and replaced with "better" description. If writing on index cards is generally women's work, then the replacement of card catalogs made of index cards with networked databases and digital interfaces effaces a history of women's hands in information management by rendering the physical materials of this work invisible.

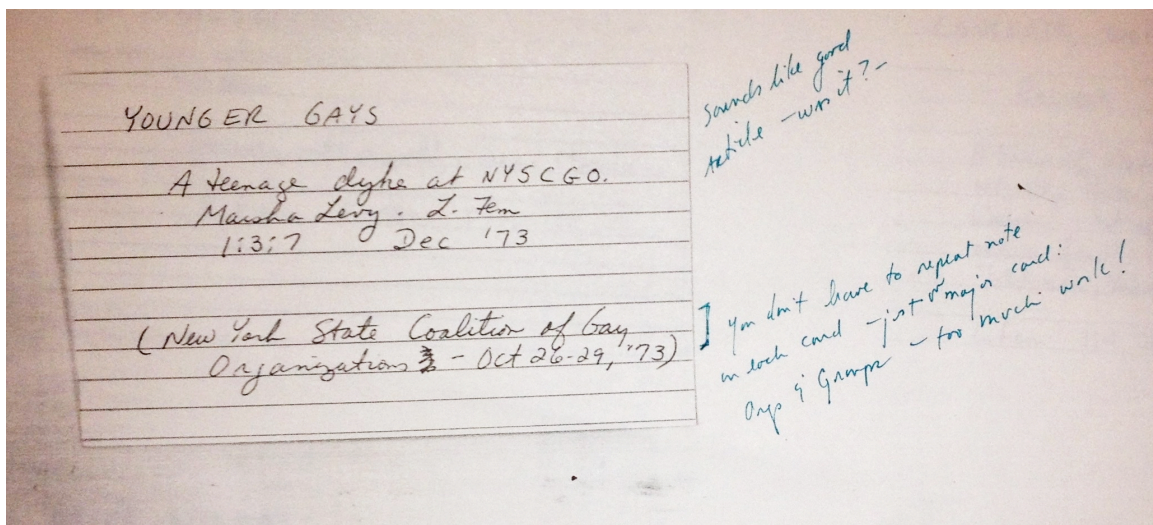


Figure 6: Index card written by Circle member Karen Brown and annotated by Clare Potter, ca. early 1980s, collection of Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Circle of Lesbian Indexers papers, folder 5.

The actual index cards produced by the Circle of Lesbian Indexers reveal far more than just the hand of the indexer, or the bibliographic details of a text; they offer contextual information about the project, its reach across lesbian and feminist communities, and the wide networks information activists called upon to help with this project. For example, Figure 7 is a sample card written by JR Roberts that identifies a woman who owns a full set of a newsletter that might be indexed, and lists another woman who might have her contact information. The connections between information

activists and their shared resources emerges through the card, which becomes a peculiar kind of archival document attuned to what Lisa Sloniowski “the network...of feminist cultural production” in which the Circle’s project, and each individual card, are nodes (2013: 481).

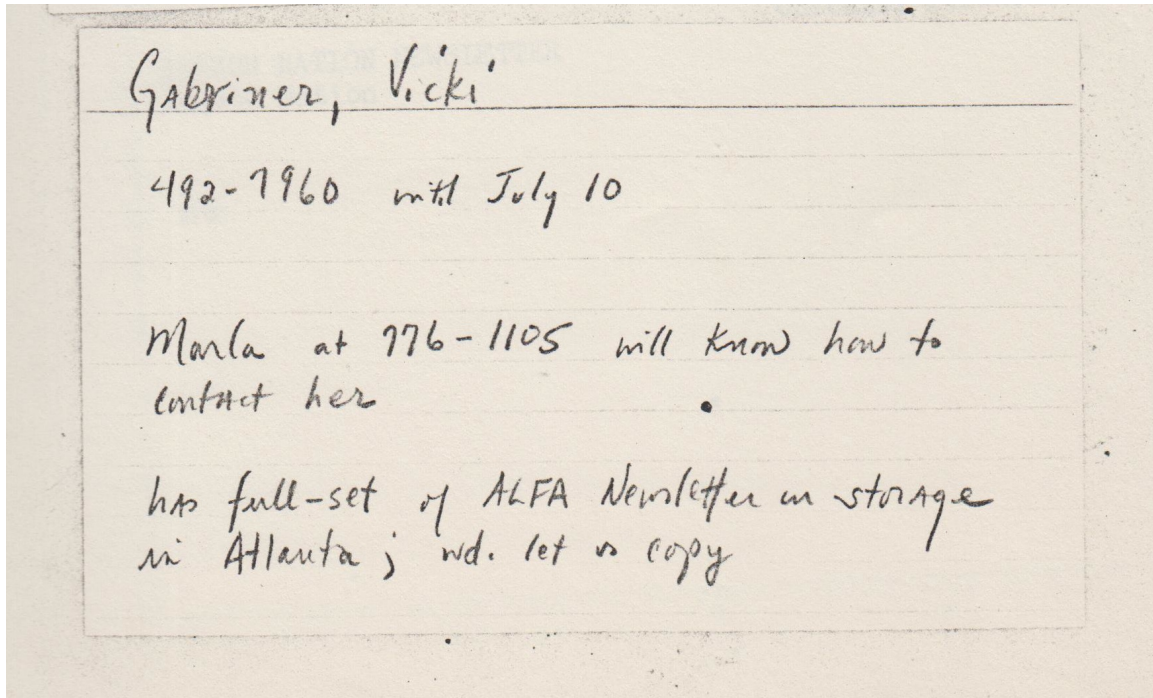


Figure 7: Index card by JR Roberts (1979), collection of The Lesbian Herstory Archives, the Circle of Lesbian Indexers papers.

Connections traceable through the cards provide a record of the ways in which the index-public responded to the Circle’s requests for assistance published elsewhere. As Potter explained in the midst of the project, “We also need the continuing support of women to help us locate copies of periodicals not presently in our collection in order to expand the resource base of our indexing” (Potter n.d.: 4). Potter remembers collecting most of the periodical runs herself, often with Roberts’ help. Many rare issues were recovered from the basement of a Madison, Wisconsin lesbian activist (Potter 2014). Once the indexing

project was finished, Potter donated most of the periodicals to San Francisco's West Coast Lesbian Collections (now the Los Angeles June Mazer Archives), of which she was an early coordinator (Potter 2014). Drawing out these connection in the form of a map might look a lot like the *Matrices* network diagrams, illustrating the wide networks of resource-sharing and support out of which the tools of feminist historiography were built.

Distribution: Please Send Under Cover

Focused so far on index production and index publics, this chapter now turns to the processes of distribution that come between the stage when the index is made and the stage when it is read. Distribution was key to the political imaginaries of all three of these indexing projects: after calling for *Black Lesbians* to be "available in every library in this country, particularly those in Black communities," Barbara Smith states plainly, "Distributing this book is about supporting Black lesbian freedom" (Smith 1981: ix). *Black Lesbians* and *The Lesbian Periodicals Index* found distribution primarily through libraries, archives, and women's bookstores because they were published as more traditional reference texts. While the women in print movement and the network of publishers and feminist bookstores behind it is a fascinating and important history, it has already been written by feminist book historians (Travis 2008; Sjöholm 2012). The focus here is the unique distribution model exemplified by the archive of letters requesting copies of Gittings's *Gay Bibliography*. Like index-making, distribution is another stage in producing bibliographies, encompassing promotion, the re-cooping of printing costs, and the management of postal correspondence. To some extent this analysis has skipped

over close consideration of the content of these indexes, jumping from processes of making to distribution because these two production stages emphasize the index's public function. Distribution is particularly important to the story of feminist index-making because it represents the moment when the affective labour of assembling these documents and putting them out into the world becomes most explicit as indexers interact directly with users. Analyzing distribution makes more apparent the care and love for a public that is also present in other stages of the process.

Unlike a traditional book, the *Gay Bibliography* took the form of a large-format, offset-print pamphlet closer in resemblance to a periodical. It was self-published by the American Library Association's Task Force on Gay Liberation. This format made the document easy to update and re-issue in editions, reproduce through photocopying, and send out cheaply and quickly to readers in geographic locations where gay-friendly libraries or social services were non-existent. The *Gay Bibliography* model presents a unique case of grassroots distribution using the postal system prior to the age of zines and exemplifies the ways in which information activists built pre-digital systems designed to circulate information.

Letter mail was the primary mode of distribution for this bibliography. The price-per-copy varied over its years of publication, but was generally about 25 cents, adjusted over time to cover the base-cost of postage and production with discounts for bulk orders (Gittings 1983: 2). The bibliography was sent to service organizations, a range of institutions including government agencies, schools, and prisons, social workers, and libraries and archives on their request. According to Gittings's own records, more than 30,000 copies of the 1975 edition of the bibliography were distributed (Gittings 1975).

Though institutional contexts likely made up the bulk of the bibliography's circulation, Gittings received hundreds of requests for the document from individuals, sent to the Philadelphia P.O. Box she used to manage the Task Force. Many of these letter-writers explain that they learned of Gittings and her work from her 1971 appearance on PBS's David Susskind Show, in an episode titled "Women Who Love Women – Seven Lesbians."³⁰

The New York Public Library's manuscripts and archives division houses Gittings's archive. The collection is hers and her longtime partner's—gay liberation photographer Kay Lahusen—and contains a wide range of documents covering a lifetime of activist work, as well as some personal correspondence. Marjorie Greenfield, a medical librarian and member of the Task Force, prepared the collection of letters for acquisition by the NYPL. The letter collection represents selected requests sent to Gittings between 1972–87, the period she was coordinator. Greenfield's handwritten note, composed in verse, introduces the letters. The note lays out some of the stakes of this distribution strategy, including the liberal story of U.S. sexual exceptionalism (Puar 2007) and gay-and-lesbian nation-building often attached to the gesture of receiving a request and sending a bibliography:

In weeding Barbara Gittings' correspondence,
I did not save all foreign
correspondence to
Ms. Gittings over the
years, but just want
to note here that
she received requests from
all over the world (even
from behind iron curtain)
for her bibliography of booklists,
and from every level of religious belief +
demonstration, as well as from a

wide variety of schools,
colleges, universities, libraries (of course)
and social agencies — plus every level
of many governments, including our military.

She received so much gratitude
from isolated individuals
plus people in the helping +
education professions
that one wonders
at the ideological revolution
that she certainly
generated. (Greenfield n.d.)

The letters Greenfield chose form a clear genre. They contain what the NYPL finding aid describes as “short personal narratives” and likely represent what Gittings’ found most vital about her work, given that she emphasized them elsewhere in her writing and public speaking (Karas and Malsbury 2011/2014: 9). Generally the letters begin with a sad story about isolation or familial abandonment and secrecy, described as a problem to be remedied through better access to better information about what it really means to live a public life as gay or lesbian. The letters often praise Gittings’s work or ask for advice, and then conclude by requesting the bibliography, sometimes asking that the document be sent “under cover” to protect anonymity. Through this structure, the reference tool is constructed as the solution to whatever problem the letter writer lays out for Gittings. Gittings validated the bibliography’s liberal pedagogical role by quoting often from these letters in her speaking engagements (Karas and Malsbury 2011/2014: 9) and her published writing (c.f. Gittings 1990). This particular type of problem—isolation or lack of access to information—was the bibliography’s *raison-d’être* and motivation for distribution.

Gittings received letters from many different kinds of people spread all over the U.S. There are letters from men and women, trans people, teenagers, teachers, librarians, many incarcerated people, and a wide range of education levels and socio-economic positions. Despite all these differences, the request-genre prevails. Letter writers tell stories of being achingly in love with a friend who does not know their secret (July 5 1973), transitioning gender and falling in love for the first time (April 9 1973), living celibate or secrete lives into old age (n.d.), or dealing with a homophobic college roommate (February 25 1974).³¹ Some letters come from situations with very limited access to information: one letter from a federally incarcerated man in Colorado who works in his prison library requests the bibliography so that the “40–50 gays” imprisoned there might pool their personal resources to select books the library would not buy (June 19 1981).

Each of these letters poses a problem the bibliography might solve, though it is often unclear whether this solution comes from the bibliography itself, or from the simple gesture of reaching out to Gittings and receiving a response. The pathfinding effects of this bibliography begin at the moment of request—to receive a response points the way not merely to a book, newsletter, or film, but to the assurance that these materials are out there, as are other people who might be “like me.” A short letter from a teenage girl, dated October 26, 1972, illustrates distribution’s pathfinding effects:

Dear Miss Gittings,

I am a young girl-woman, 19, discovering that all is not heterosexual with me and that the only person I’ve loved at all has been a woman. I need information, more information and a belief that there are others like me with a need for other kinds of love stories.

In other words please send me A Gay Bibliography: Basic Materials on Homosexuality.

Sincerely,
[Name Redacted]

P.S. Do you have any info on how I could get in contact with other young lesbians, bisexuals, or am I knocking on the wrong door? Like many others I admit I'm lost at this kind of tracking down, though *I'm slowly finding the lines to my own people*. (October 26, 1972, emphasis added)

To find the lines to others with whom one feels akin illustrates the idea of what circulated alongside these indexes and bibliographies besides information. But where do the *Gay Bibliography's* lines point? The bibliography's ability to define a field and stake out a path shapes the what and who of gay liberation's concerns. These effects crystalize in a liberal subject imagined by the Gittings letters.

This subject emerges from a complex intersection of discourses that include: the pedagogical role of public libraries; the work of social movement organizations such as The Task Force on Gay Liberation; the newly visible (white, middle class) gay and lesbian citizen-subject exemplified by Kate Millet or Harvey Milk; and the bibliography's formal quality of user-led information search-retrieval. Lisa Duggan (2002) has examined gay liberation's adoption of the earlier, mid-century Homophile movement's rhetorical strategies, including its emphasis on the role of books and libraries. Duggan describes Gittings as a "single-issue activist" (181), and raises the question of the extent to which her work, and the idea of libraries, depended on a politics of assimilation. Postcolonial and queer of colour critique further explains how this politics of assimilation begins during the gay liberation era and continues into the present. Access to "good" and "gay" information sets the stage for what David Eng has called a

growing queer liberalism: a “confluence of the political and economic spheres that forms the basis for the liberal inclusion of particular gay and lesbian U.S. citizen-subjects petitioning for rights and recognition before the law” (Eng 2010: 2–3). In exchange for the limited freedoms offered by initiatives such as being included in library collections, queer communities passively accept other forms of inequality by abandoning more radical political concerns (Manalanzan 2005: 142).

In her role as Task Force coordinator, Gittings wrote articles outlining what libraries ought to do for gay liberation (1983, 1990). She imagined a liberal role for libraries and other information services, wherein their rightful job is to provide plurality, offering access to multiple perspectives from which users could choose without taking a singular stance. Libraries would be democratic, American institutions because they provided users with the opportunity to choose (Turner 2014). Gittings went to great efforts to make the bibliography seem as neutral as possible, using words such as “good” and “better” to describe what qualified materials for inclusion in the listing. Backmatter from the 1975 edition reads: “We work to promote the creation, publication, and dissemination of more and better materials on gay people and the gay liberation movement, and to raise within the library profession issues of discrimination against gay people both as librarians and as library users” (1975b). In the draft manuscript for this edition included in Gittings’s papers, the word “liberation” is struck out in pen and is not included in the final print edition of the bibliography: “gay liberation movement” becomes the decidedly less toothy “gay movement” (1975a). Far from inconsequential when situated in Gittings’s larger political approach, this edit represents a process of stripping the bibliographic tool down into a “neutral” interface for conveying

information; it was up to users to make political use of what they subsequently found. As Nakamura has shown, however, information interfaces may portend to neutrality but always formally shape user experience in ways that stratify access (2008).

The *Gay Bibliography* imagines a subject Gittings affectionately called “The Hungry Gay Bookworm” (1983). This ideal bibliography user might be recruited to a less demanding, more assimilationist gay liberation movement. The letters selected for inclusion in Gittings’s archive manifest this normative subject, emphasizes the informational needs of youth. They deploy a pedagogical coming-out narrative in which young people who are always-already either “gay” or “lesbian” might use the bibliography to explore and accept their “true” selves. While this subject dominates in Gittings’s archive, there are occasional breaks with the typology; one letter requests the bibliography to support what we might describe today as a form of queer non-monogamy, in which the woman writer wants to accept her husband’s ongoing sex with other men while learning “how to open up all the feelings I have” (n.d.). Letters from prisoners, who represent deviance from societal norms simply by being incarcerated in the first place, challenge the construction of gay liberation as a movement aimed at assimilating upstanding citizen-subjects who “just happen to be gay.”

Gittings often explicitly disarticulated her politics and work from feminism in order to promote this assimilationist politics.³² In this respect, her bibliography is not an easy fit with the Circle of Lesbian Indexers and *Black Lesbians*, which are unapologetic women’s liberation movement documents. Gittings’s archive of letters include very few of her responses to bibliography requests; a notable exception is her take-down of a requester who outlines a lesbian-feminist, separatist, anti-rape position. Gittings writes

back: “In my experience, most gay women are not really interested in dwelling on how downtrodden and oppressed they are, or in being reconstructed according to some group-think ideology, or in engaging in sexual-politics warfare. And in my view these are the weakest grounds for an appeal to reach a diversity of lesbians” (July 14 1977). As neutral tool, the *Gay Bibliography* had no room for what Gittings dismissed as “rape,” “rage,” and “oppression,” (July 14 1977), topics that, ironically, were fitting terms for inclusion in the Circle’s indexing subject thesaurus.

While Gittings carefully and repeatedly disarticulated her work from feminism (c.f. Gittings 1990), her project belongs in this chapter because it engages an economy of care: care is directed to users via Gittings’s distribution model, in which the bibliographic tool and its anticipated effects are delivered in response to rather vulnerable requests for help from letter-writers. Following Ahmed, we might think of the bibliography as an object that circulates the care, affecting users through its movement and shaping their relationships to the social worlds in which they live (Ahmed 2010, 2006). Ahmed recounts how emotions attach to objects, get stuck to them even; this is the method through which care circulates and proximities are established. As the bibliography is sent from Gittings to a letter-writer, it establishes proximity to others—“the lines to my people”—and to a social movement, much like Roberts’s hope for *Black Lesbians* as an object with the potential to move would-be black feminist researchers into action.³³

Gittings’s commitment to gay liberation over and above feminist causes was, moreover, about another form of care: what she cared about or what brought her to activism in the first place. Invoking Frederic Jameson’s (1991) axiom “history is what hurts,” recently explored by Lauren Berlant in the context of how emotion brings us to

the political (Berlant 2012), Gittings explained: “I think that are plenty of women in the world that can be tapped to take care of women’s issues and I have not patience or time for dealing with...schooling, child care and other issues that might be dear to the hearts of feminists. I’m interested in gay issues because that’s where it hurt the most for me. I had no trouble being my own person as a female growing up, but I did have a lot of trouble coming to grips with being gay” (Gittings 1990).³⁴ The index, as it were, lends a grip to hold on to, a path to find.

Conclusion

Gittings’s image of “coming to grips” seems apt; the women who imagined, designed, and carried out each of these bibliographic and indexing projects sought to grasp and wrangle a mass of information through the reference tools they built. To this end they managed a range of materials (cards, computers, thesauri) and served a number of intersecting and competing publics (feminist, lesbian, gay, *not*-feminist). Despite their differences, each of these projects asks us to reckon with the politics of various informational tools put toward “pre-digital” feminist appropriations of commonplace media. As I explore at the LHA in the chapters that follow, this pathfinding work continues to shape activist feminist work with information in the present. Indexes of the 1980s are not digital in the sense that we use “digitization” today to describe how archives and other historical projects seek to improve access for publics through online interfaces; however these indexing projects share archival digitization’s investment in compression, rationalization, and streamlined access to information. By turning to the LHA’s recent engagements with “properly” digital media, the next chapters explore how

contemporary investments in digitization re-imagine feminist engagements with information in the days prior to computers and the web.

Chapter Three

Feminist Digitization Practices at the Lesbian Herstory Archives

There are 3,000 audio tapes in the basement of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in Brooklyn. A wall of bookshelves is lined top-to-bottom with acid-free document boxes, each of which contains about twenty tapes, mostly consumer-grade compact cassettes manufactured in the 1980s. The precious audio they record documents an exciting time in U.S.-based feminist organizing, and constitutes the material remnants of an active feminist oral histories movement, politically conscious of its role in constructing documentary evidence of women's history. There are big names—speeches and readings by Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, and Sarah Schulman—and big events, recorded without knowledge of how they would be memorialized—the 1982 Barnard College conference “Towards a Politics of Sexuality” often touted in retrospect as the moment when the porn wars exploded (Gerhard 2001: 183–95). These “events” share space with more modest recordings: scratchy, hard-to-decipher sounds of the birthday parties of “regular” lesbians. The very existence of the collection—the sheer number of tapes—speaks to the conditions of possibility for the feminist oral history movement: a combination of technological changes that made audio recording affordable and easy to do, and a ideological shift in academic feminism toward the recovery of women's histories (Scott 2011: 8–11). Today these tapes—all 3,000 of them—are in the process of being digitized and offered online as streaming audio, an endeavor that brings this history and the archives' operation into the technological present.

During my three months of documentary research and interviews at the LHA, I spend an afternoon hanging out with Colette, the volunteer who works on digitizing these

tapes every Friday. I ask her questions as she shows me how the tapes are digitized, and am shocked by the scale of this task relative to what Collette can actually do in a day, a week, or a year. Non-plussed by my surprise, Collette explains, “All these boxes are tapes,” she tells me, pointing at the wall, “and they’re in sort of an order. I’m on my third box and I’ve been doing this for almost two years” (Montoya 2013).³⁵ Watching Colette, who is a little over five feet tall, stand in front of the wall of 3,000 tapes and pull down the third box out of hundreds is a striking image, one that reflects a larger politics of digitization at this archive. Completing the digitization of this collection might not be possible but the LHA is doing it anyway, following the kind of philosophically utopian but technologically pragmatic feminist media politics that guided the oral histories movement out of which these tapes were created. If digitization, with its big promises of preservation and access, can only ever be a partial gesture or “attempt” in practice, then what does it mean when a feminist organization invests in making a dent in its collection, especially given the urgencies of preservation through format-migration, and the desires for access archival publics have begun to articulate in an era increasingly mediated by online interfaces?

Feminist Digitization Practices

To digitize is “to convert (analogue data, esp. in later use images, video, and text) to digital form, typically for storage or processing by a computer;” or “to represent in digital form” (v. digitize). Digitization has become an expectation publics have of archives, particularly regarding digitization’s representational aspect. Archives and library users may not be occupied with questions about preservation, the concern and responsibility of

archivists, but these users do have growing expectations that online interfaces will be the means through which they encounter holdings. More and more undergraduate students manage to avoid ever setting foot in a library thanks to the wide availability of full-text databases such as Google Books and EBSCO. Primary source materials are not exempted from this expectation and large clearing-houses such as Thomson Gale's Primary Source Microfilm produce themed microfilm and digital collections of full-text primary source materials to sell to libraries.³⁶ The Gay Rights Movement series is drawn from many LGBT community archives including the LHA's subject files and newsletter collection.³⁷ Through a combination of many factors that include user expectation, the service-oriented shift in undergraduate education, the political economy of academic publishing, and technological change, digitization takes on a kind of hegemonic function in the strategic planning of libraries and archives, what I am calling "the digital imperative"—the idea that digitization is a necessary, inherently progressive process the archive must carry out. Information professionals work under constant pressure from their institutional employers and users to invest time and financial resources into measures that will provide easy online access to materials.

Set apart from these large institutions, the LHA is a volunteer-run, community archives that operates on a shoestring budget funded mostly by individual donations—the archives will not accept state-supported grants and is skeptical of institutional partnerships.³⁸ An evolving, intergenerational coordinator committee of "archivettes"—during my research there were fifteen, ten of whom are active and attend meetings—manages the archives, making decisions on a consensus basis. The archives' founders Joan Nestle and Deb Edel both remain on the coordinating committee into their 70. The

archives was originally housed in their apartment—they were lovers at the time. The archives are administrated today very much as they were then. Most coordinators also work at the archives, staffing open hours, leading tours, and processing collections alongside a loyal group of interns and volunteers, many of whom are information studies students in their 20s.

Materials are spread over the basement and first two stories of the archives' three-story, Park Slope heritage home, while the top floor is home to the archives' "caretakers" who also serve on the coordinating committee. The collection includes vertical subject files on dozens of topics related to lesbian culture—bathhouses, fat liberation, matriarchy, nuns, utopia—a book collection, 3,000 spoken-word tapes, videos, "special collections" which are personal papers donated by individuals and organizations, periodicals, and all kinds of ephemera including sex toys, buttons, posters, and t-shirts. The space feels unlike a conventional archive in that there are cozy reading nooks, macramé adornments, a kitchen where coffee is often brewing, and visitors are allowed to access and handle any part of the collection without prior request. This warm, welcoming environment is deliberately constructed to reflect, in material terms, the archives' guiding commitments that "all Lesbian women must have access to the Archives," which "shall be housed in the community" (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1979a). The statement of principals, originally written in 1979 and mostly unchanged in its current iteration, includes several collection and admission policies that influence the archive's decisions about media, including an anti-institutional position (one coordinator I interviewed wouldn't say the word "Google" because of its corporate connotations), the rejection of funding that isn't community based, the accessibility of archival tools to volunteers of all abilities, and the

training of volunteer staff without archival experience (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1979a; Thistlethwaite 1998).

These are the kinds of feminist commitments at the LHA that complicate the digitization process, interrupting normative imperatives that can accompany digitization practices. The feminist mandates, histories, organizational structures, and intergenerational conflicts of the archives act as the guiding, often acrimonious political frame within which the organization makes practical, technological, ethical, and above all, *everyday* choices about its form and function. Digital media is not a neutral site exempt from the archives' feminist politics, and so this chapter examines the development of various "feminist digitization practices" that critique the imperative to digitize and also reveal some of the political investments marginalized publics make in digitization. Feminist digitization practices are a present-day manifestation of information activism, where choices about interface design, hardware and software, selection of materials to digitize, and classification schemes re-mediate the purposeful and always political design of information infrastructures made by newsletter publishers and indexers generations ago. In these chapters, this project's larger focus on the development of feminist publics in relationship to media infrastructures and the circulation of information turns to a tension between the identity-laden category of Lesbian and the apparently more mobile figure of the digital queer (O'Riordan 2007). As lesbian-feminist information moves online it circulates amongst a networked public on a new scale, finding an invisible audience (boyd 2007) whose encounters with lesbian feminism in the present engender collisions or attachment-formations that cannot be fully anticipated or traced.

Guided by a lesbian-feminist mandate, and drawing upon a long history of DIY, feminist appropriations of consumer media technologies such as videotape and index cards, the LHA balances a desire to digitize in order to better serve its public with commitments to ideals such as self-funding of the archives from within the community, and a willful embrace of amateurism that demands the accessibility of archival tools to volunteers of all ages and abilities. The archives are currently digitizing their spoken word tapes, photography collection, and upgrading their catalogue to move online, using a variety of cobbled-together tools, blocks of irregular volunteer hours, and varied levels of expertise. Emerging out of this ongoing negotiation are thoughtful digital archiving tactics through which the community archives re-imagines ideals such as acquisition, access, and the lifespan of ephemeral documents.

This chapter asks how improvised feminist digitization practices—those applications of digital media that mold their use, often on the fly, toward a larger set of feminist ideas about the archives and its public—present challenging critical perspectives on values such as access, usability, engagement, and preservation. The women working on digitization at the archives move with great care, forethought, and caution in designing and implementing digitization projects, and so digitizing the archives' holdings is a process that extends beyond the act of scanning an image. This extension is of course temporal: the process goes backwards in time to decisions that happen before the scanner lid is lifted, such as discussing what it would mean to offer access to “private” snapshots online, allocating volunteer hours to the project, or choosing which scanner to buy. After the act, there are choices about how to describe the image, which affects its retrievability through search, and more existential

considerations, such as how to decide when the project is “finished.” Digitization at the LHA is an expansive process that is not conceptually limited to the creation of digital files from “analog” sources; digitizing also encompasses online user-interface design and implementation, descriptive metadata assignment, and the selection of which materials to offer online.

The LHA views its lesbian feminist stance as necessary for providing the kind of digital archival system that can accommodate the unusual, messy, emotional, queer cultural “material” that the archives must house. And yet, the sometimes strident identity politics of the archives can also act as a regulatory system that imposes norms of its own, organizing materials and the lives they index through its own set of evolving subject headings that emerge out of larger, political and philosophical conversations about the kinds of gendered subjects and bodies that come to matter as “lesbian.” Like the Circle of Lesbian Indexers’ always-in-process approach to their subject thesaurus, taxonomy at the LHA remains open to revision as much as possible. For example, the archives grapples on an ongoing basis with how to describe the special collections of trans donors who have varied, complex relations to the category “lesbian,” a matter upon which members of the coordinating committee sometimes disagree. This concern for how the form of the archive reflects the trans-ed narratives and evolving political operation of the collection extends to a series of questions *about media*, as do the “queering” of “lesbian” and of archival standards that happens through other practices. Queer cultural politics and aesthetics shape how online media are used and gathered in historical, archival, and commemorative contexts.

Here it is useful to turn briefly to what delineates queer from lesbian feminist in this analysis of the LHA. While lesbian feminism is clearly a historical manifestation of an identity-based claim against both patriarchy and the mainstreaming of women's liberation-era feminism, as it is also an ongoing position that generates attachments to the past that exceed mere nostalgia and pull upon queer politics in the present (Freeman 2010: 62). Lesbian feminist politics are also practiced in earnest by many of the LHA's staff without much of any asterix; these women readily identify themselves as lesbians and the archives as an institution whose ongoing responsibility is to a lesbian public. Queerness weaves its way through the LHA through such threads as the work of younger volunteers. This generation arrives at the archives steeped in understandings of queerness as a shifting signifier that might be anti-identitarian or even anti-relational (Edelman 2004: 3), performative (Sedgwick 2003: 61–65), or thought as a potentially productive affective relation to the world that happens when we fail to reproduce norms (Ahmed 2004: 146). These are three very different definitions of queer that nonetheless have in common the concept's legacy as an analytic that troubles the status quo, even as insisting on its oppositional status might have the perverse effect of dulling its critical potential (Halley and Parker 2007). This is the "queer" I sit with in this chapter in relation to lesbian feminism, setting up an oppositional relationship between the terms precisely to trouble its ground.

These chapters question the temporal logics that bracket lesbian feminism to the past (Freeman 2010) and place queerness ever in the future (Muñoz 2009), asking to what extent was/is lesbian feminism queer when queer is thought as an intervention with archival norms. Here I am in debt to Ann Cvetkovich's study of the LHA (2003).

Cvetkovich manages to hold lesbian feminism's identitarian commitments in productive tension with the queer archival impulses at work in the space (11) documenting the "queer collections and strategies" at work in the grassroots lesbian archives (245). Cvetkovich explores the archives as a site where past, present and future meet through the rubric of feeling; such is the encounter staged by what she calls "queer lesbian archives" (14). Further shaping my approach to the archives as a space of encounter between lesbian feminist and queer, José Muñoz's work on futurity theorizes queerness as a future orientation that is perhaps unrealizable in any concrete form. He writes, "queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present" (2009: 1). Though Muñoz writes of the future, his words provide a brilliant take on archives as sites of temporal rupture; queerness becomes an educated mode of desiring history in order to desire a future, managed as a "quagmire of the present" in the form of the archives and its media infrastructure.

Debates over the appropriateness and scale of the archives' digitization projects are conversations situated in larger, emotionally and politically charged generational relationships between volunteers with diverse commitments to different kinds of feminism. Young volunteers orient to the space of the archives following forms of socialization and affective interpellation to a history of lesbianism in an erotics of mentorship that transcends the normative expectations of skills-development and resume-lines associated with internships. Any archiving project imagines a future subject for whom what is archived has value and relevance. To some extent this feminist subject will inadvertently and perhaps productively fail this project, because they might not use what is archived to the ends for which it was intended. As Robyn Wiegman

(2012) argues, feminist “objects can resist what we try to make of them” because “objects of study are bound to multiple relationships, such that the conscious attempt to refuse an identification is in no way a guarantee that one can, let alone that one has done so” (30). The multivalent relationship between lesbian, queer, ascendancy and refusal negotiated at the archives is further complicated in the face of trans. What is perceived as “queer” can quickly become essentialist gay/lesbian politics the moment trans bodies are introduced into the archives, calling into question the extent to which the archives has found ways to accommodate queerness in its ongoing investment in a lesbian future.

Digitization’s Improvisational Forms

As a hegemonic operation, the “digital imperative” relies on the construction of norms of practice in archives. A perception of what institutional archives are doing with digitization becomes a standard against which other institutions measure themselves, and a professional standard against which community archives are set in order to articulate what it is that makes them “community” archives in the first place. But there is a significant gap between the perceptions publics have about what deep-pocketed institutions are doing, or ought to be doing, to digitize their collections, and the actual standards of practice in these archives. Paper and microfilm are thought to be more stable and cost effective preservation formats than the creation of digital files and so institutions prioritize this kind of duplication (Ritzenhaler 2010). Erin O’Meara (2012) warns that due to budget constraints and staffing issues, large institutions often take temporary, stop-gap measures with materials as they are acquired, instead of digitizing them as part of an initial processing procedure. This can include the “disk in a box” approach to managing

born-digital acquisitions, which literally means placing a disc in an acid-free box amongst the stacks, a procedure that “can result in easy media degradation and format obsolescence when the media ages out of sight and out of mind” (O’Meara 2012: 118). The perception that digitization is the One True Light for 21st-century archives is thus out of step with actual practices in archives.

And yet the assumption that large-scale digitization is the rightful domain of deep-pocketed institutions persists and seems to discourage LGBT community archives from taking on these kinds of projects. Other community-based gay and lesbian archives such as the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives have hesitated to undertake even partial digitization of their collections, partly because of a perception that these projects, any way you imagine them, are beyond the capacity of the organization in terms of labour hours, expertise and cost.³⁹ Talking about my research at conferences or on visits to other LGBT archives, I often tell volunteers and professional archivists at both other LGBT archives and large institutions about digitization at the LHA and am consistently greeted with surprise at the kinds of projects they have dared to imagine and carry out without outside institutional support.

The LHA’s ambitious pursuit of digitization initiatives is unexpected given the organization’s limited financial resources. In general, digitization’s high cost combined with limited staff hours and related lack of adequate cataloguing present common challenges to digitization for community archives (Luckenbill 2002: 99). Paradoxically, the danger of deterioration given the rarity of gay and lesbian archival materials means that digitization and online dissemination seem more vital to these archives (Chernier 2009). The ongoing accessibility of small collections depends on archives having the

means to provide materials with long-term custody, and not having this means usually leads to the accidental neglect or destruction of the material in question (Spense 2005: 367).

Digitization *can* be expensive, prohibitively so for a community archive. Archives must consider the staff resources and tools required to initially digitize material, as well bandwidth and server space costs, ongoing staff costs, and “migration” costs, which means transferring digital files from one format to another as technology changes (Astle and Muir 2002: 70).⁴⁰ Outsourcing this work to a third-party vendor is beyond the means of a grassroots organization. The LHA would like to digitize its collection of DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists) tapes, the video-documenting affinity group of ACT UP. These tapes are recorded on large-format, U-matic videocassettes which were the archival standard amongst broadcasters beginning from the mid 1970s through the early 1990s. During my time at the archives, an intern tasked with researching and writing grants to digitize this collection explained that the archives had been quoted a rate of \$1,000 per tape. This intern, a library-science student specializing in moving-image preservation who spoke with confidence and expertise on the topic, explains the crux of the problem to me; once a broadcast standard, this particular format is no longer in use and the machines that can play the tapes are not manufactured or serviced. There are no parts to repair a broken U-matic player. The grant she’s writing pitches the digitization of the tapes as a critical step in preserving what she calls “cultural history”; DIVA TV is an important record of how AIDS activists communicated mainstream media discourses, and took advantage of the ready accessibility of video equipment and cable-access television. In addition to the problem of preservation for these tapes, there is the issue of access

provision; a researcher could not play the tapes at the archives and thus “access” their content. Media archaeological approaches in the digital humanities have sought to build working labs in which old hardware is restored and maintained so that obsolete formats such as U-matic tape can be played (Emerson 2014; Ernst 2013), however these kinds of labs are beyond the technical and financial resources of community archives. Moreover, they provide preservation via access to the original means of display—the systematic reproduction of digital files runs counter to media archaeology’s emphasis on original hardware: “the utterly unique material specificity” of particular interfaces and platforms (Emerson 2014: xvi).

If the sixty-seven U-matic tapes in the collection are digitized, the archives will receive an uncompressed master file, large pieces of data that must be stored securely in order to actually provide the “preservation” digitization promises. Sixty-seven uncompressed masters are a problem for an archives without a Trustworthy Digital Repository (TDR) to store digital versions of audio-visual materials. TDRs are a pipe-dream, even for most medium-sized institutional libraries and archives. The intern seems hopeful about the project but admits that the archives might have to accept partial funding and prioritize which tapes to digitize, in which case she speculates that the archives might pull out a theme such as footage from Pride marches, or take a triage approach that converts the oldest tapes first. U-matic tapes are an example of a format that cannot really be digitized without outside-expert input and the significant cost attached to that expertise. Other formats at the archives present the possibility of digitization by volunteers using consumer-grade equipment, a practice through which this archives’ unique feminist approach to media and technology is built. Undertaking the work of

digitization in-house can be just as daunting as figuring out what to do with tapes of an unfamiliar size: equipment such as hard drives, computers, high-quality scanners, audio digitizers, and software can cost a great deal, and needs to be replaced as they become obsolete.

Talking with the volunteers at the archives about their digitization projects, and about the work of the archives more generally, gives a clear picture of the rootedness of this archives in a long history of feminist organizing in pursuit of what *seems like* too much to take on. When the archives moved into its Park Slope home in 1991, volunteers began the process of cataloguing the unruly, 10,000-volume book collection, setting up an accessible protocol for creating catalogue records and meeting once a week as a working group. Book-by-book, they processed the collection, completing the task over five years. A working-group model structures most long-term projects at the archives. During my time there I became a part of the Special Collections Working Group. My assigned volunteer work involved working mostly alone, one day a week, “processing” special collections by organizing material into folders and creating a detailed catalogue record. This work can be interesting when it requires critical decisions about organizing a collection in ways that inevitably mediate access and shape usability for researchers. But more often it can be isolating, even painstaking; to learn how collections at the archives are processed, I rolled up my sleeves and spent two days organizing a box filled with hundreds of party flyers from Shescapes, a for-profit New York-based lesbian promoter popular in the 1990s. Most of the flyers were duplicates, which needed to be identified and removed from the collection, turning the task into an unending children’s memory game steeped in a cringey, “lesbian-chic” aesthetic. I learned quickly that running an

archives that actively takes in new collections generates work that isn't always glamorous or fun.

The small tasks required to steward these collections are what make the archives' larger political project possible, just as this larger political project makes the everyday work feel tenable. Feminism is critical of the present and oriented towards an alternative future, running on what Sara Ahmed calls "strange and perverse mixtures of hope and despair, optimism and pessimism" (2010: 163). As an affect-modality, feminism turns on a complex temporality in which investments in a particular vision of the past from which "we" have come and the future to which "we" aspire motivate action in the present. This temporal formation is particularly salient in an archives; establishing a lesbian history takes on utopian status: an imagined alternative future aspired towards despite the possibility that this future might not be fully realizable. As Robin Wiegman has explored, it is precisely failure, loss, and impossibility that motivates the ongoing regeneration of feminism in the present (2010: 82). This "pedagogy of failure," in which feminism is always chasing after the materialization of the desires we invest in it, "is the constitutive condition of feminism's futurity" (82).

Feminist activism is often motivated by utopian visions, ideas of a world without patriarchy, racism, pay inequity, or the violence of historical omission. In this respect, feminism as an ideal operates in the realm of fantasy, where, as Joan Scott describes, we owe some of feminism's political manifestations to "the operations of fantasies that can never fully satisfy the desire, or secure the representation, they seek to provide" (Scott 2011:19). Grand ideals and fantastic visions manifest in more modest feminist collectives, events, or spaces that attempt to produce conditions denied elsewhere. Case

in point: feminist archives develop supportive structures for the kind of historical research that is devalued by other institutions. In micro-moments such as creating a finding aid or sorting out duplicate documents, the larger vision is emulated and glimpsed; it is precisely the oscillation between the idealization and an everyday practice of living—what *I can do*—that motivates feminists to carry on with their work, however modest it may seem.

Victoria Hesford (2013) has described this oscillation in the context of the early 1970s women's liberation movement out of which the LHA was formed. Hesford identifies a divide between the "world-making intentions of women's liberation" and the "micropolitics of vacuuming and sexual intercourse as sites for feminist resistance," charged political sites that can be written off as unimportant because of their everyday character (178–79). Situated in this realm of the micropolitical, small, everyday dents in substantial projects take on a significance that makes the larger project seem feasible. This is less a "pedagogy of failure" in Scott's terms, and more a "pedagogy of always catching up": hope mitigated by frustration and despair produces a gap that is measured by each small attempt to fill it, in a collision of feelings, investments, and visions of what is to come that motivate the ongoing, banal practices of working in feminist spaces. The everyday work of running the LHA, the cataloguing of one book amongst thousands, is a modest, singular act in the present driven by hope about what the archives could be.

Maxine Wolfe, long-time coordinator and leader of the audio digitization project, suggests that part of the LHA's readiness to take on what seem like massive digitization projects is this history of balancing what she calls a "vision of the world" with the smaller tasks required to get there (Wolfe 2013). A history of direct action guides this approach;

though a single action is motivated by a larger politic, it is designed to achieve one small, attainable change. Referencing her own biography, Maxine likens what motivated her work with ACT UP—“a vision of a world without AIDS”—to the archives’ campaign to purchase a building in the late 1980s: “We had no money in the bank, no guaranteed income, and figured out a way to get a bank to lend us a mortgage. You can only do that if you have a vision. You have to believe you can do it” (Wolfe 2013). Turning an idealistic vision of what the archives could be into a realistic, step-by-step plan, the archives solicited donations and loans from individual women in the community to make a down-payment and qualify for a mortgage on the Park Slope property, which opened to the public in 1993.

The grandiose is quickly translated into the mundane, everyday tasks needed to get there. Says Maxine, “You have to believe that you can do something. I think that’s how we enter into everything. Ok, so the books are going to take us six years. Where are we going? We’re not going anywhere, we’re just going to be here. And if we develop a system... it was a whole system developed that made it possible to do it over time” (Wolfe 2013). These kinds of projects take work; work that is inevitably gendered, both because of the lesbian scope of the archives, and more generally because of the ways in which volunteerism and behind-the-scenes, glamourless tasks are often the domain of women’s work. Describing the kind of volunteerism that makes years of labouring at a seemingly insurmountable task seem reasonable, Maxine uses the phrase “woman-power,” evoking the language and iconography of the women’s liberation movement. “It’s a kind of belief in the women who come here. That they’re coming here to help the archives, to help make this place be. And be available” (Wolfe 2013). Much of the actual,

everyday work that gets done at the archives is carried out by interns and volunteers in their early 20s, many of whom are library or archival science students receiving course credit for their work. Library and information science are gendered professions, as is internship's political economy. Skills in digital-archives management are sought after by the LHA when they recruit interns from the library and information schools in the New York City area. The "woman-hours" that keep the archives operational are part of a feminist practice of being both willing and available to do the hard, often-thankless work required to affect change, a readiness that likewise informs the archives' approach to digitization.

There is something quite brave yet totally unassuming in the way Maxine and other archives volunteers I spoke to describe what motivates their engagement with digitization projects at the archives. This technological bravery is exemplified by audio digitization project's willingness to make-do with available resources. Though wary of institutional partnerships, the archives accepted the offer of Dr. Anthony Cociollo, a Pratt university library science professor who works with students in his Projects and Digital archives course each semester to digitize a selection of the archives' tapes, which are then offered online as streaming audio (Cociollo 2013). Modeling their in-house system on the ongoing Pratt-led project, the LHA has begun its own small-scale digitization of the rest of the collection. Maxine and Colette work on this project, listening to each tape to create a catalogue record, interpreting donor agreement forms to confirm that audio may be circulated online, and creating uncompressed, preservation quality masters and compressed, noise-reduced, streaming-ready MP3 versions of each tape. When Maxine began to research the costs associated with having the tapes sent out and digitized—far

beyond the means of the archives—she learned that the expense associated with this process is mostly due to labour hours: audio digitization must be completed in real time, regardless of whether it is done “professionally” by a third-party vendor, or in house.



Figure 8: The LHA's audio digitizing system at work.

Colette shows me the digitization system she researched and designed, which includes a physical digitizer that connects a basic tape player to a laptop via USB, the free and open-source audio software Audacity, two hard-drives for storing digital files, and a CD folder where the compressed versions of each tape are catalogued for visiting researchers who would like to listen. The archives modeled its system on the Pratt project, using the same software but cobbling together a less expensive hardware solution, including portable hard drives in lieu of the stable online repository the archives would love to have but cannot afford. Colette researched, designed, purchased, and operates this system, and talks with pride of her ability to come up with something in

budget that works just as well as professional equipment. The system is, above all, good enough—the audio quality is remarkable, actually. A commercial-grade Beringer analog-to-digital converter does not quite replicate the “pro-tools” standard 98,000 hz sample rate but the difference represented by 48,000 hz is negligible when dealing with the kinds of sounds these tapes record.

These choices practice an aesthetics of access (Hilderbrand 2009) that interrogates what it means to preserve records. Lucas Hilderbrand (2009) develops the concept of “aesthetics of access” in relation to videotape and the queer bootlegging cultures of pornography, art, and the video chain letter. Access forces a confrontation with what we mean when we talk about preservation, the kinds of “degradations” we avoid, and what is lost in this avoidance. To celebrate access means to privilege reproducibility and circulation; in the context of the LHA, this can mean streaming access to an oral history tape, or search-retrieval provided by the OPAC. An aesthetics of access describes the ways in which investments in accessibility are distilled in certain formal qualities of media, such as the “technical faults” of stretched taped, distortion, or tracking problems, all of which become “indexical evidence of use and duration through time” (15). Despite its frequent articulation to preservation, digitization is one mode of reproduction that exchanges aura for access (12–15), where Colette’s “good enough” technological decisions enact and celebrate formal qualities of affordability and compression, such as a less dynamic frequency range or cleaned-up files that offer easier listening but become less “authentically noisy” in the process.

Colette showed me how to set up the digitization station, how to watch for and eliminate clipping, and how to noise-reduce files, all of which she learned through a

process of “trial and error” made possible by a willingness at this archives to try something at which one is not an expert, to be wrong, even to fail. This system’s pace is a striking example of deceleration due to limited resources and collective models of deliberation and processing that contrast with the ever-faster speeds often articulated to digital capitalism (LiPuma and Lee 2004). Technology is neither fetishized nor promised to fantasies about digital mediation; rather, the slow pace required to operate a cumbersome but entirely functional digitization interface configures the archives’ larger digitization strategy to what is possible in the now. This pace is unlike the fast feminisms practiced in other areas of digital life, such as in online meme culture, which Samantha Thrift and Carrie Rentschler (2014) argue is above all a celebration of response-speed and the emergent feminist media event’s temporality (Thrift and Rentschler 2014). Memes such as “Binders full of Women” form fast feminist archives that are nothing like the slow pace of digitizing tapes in real-time, though both practices seek a digital future for feminism.

The LHA works with limited resources, literally in some cases rigging affordable technological solutions together like a lesbian-MacGyver, or making do with an accessible software solution that isn’t perfect for the job. Colette researched and designed the system with guidance from Anthony and a clerk at B&H, a large audiovisual store in New York City, where Colette “realized we could do it on the cheap because this thing [pointing to the digitizer] cost like ten dollars and we get the same quality” (Montoya 2013).⁴¹ When I ask Maxine about the equipment and the system she resists my framing of the LHA’s as a system apart from values of “professionalism.” “Yeah, but that *is* professional... When Anthony did it [began digitizing the tapes] I said

to him, “What can we do here? How are you doing this?” And once I found out that it’s all being done in real time and it doesn’t matter if you have the most sophisticated lab in the world... The stuff that we’re doing is archival quality. Audacity is an open-source program that anybody can get and it’s archival quality. It’s not shoddy, unprofessional stuff. And then we’re backing it up on a hard drive. There’s no such thing as an ‘archival hard drive’” (Wolfe 2013).

Maxine’s quip—which turns on the ridiculousness of an “archival” hard drive—is funny precisely because the existence of such a device is plausible but fundamentally absurd; data is data, just as labor hours are labor hours, two aspects of digitization demystified by the LHA’s feminist critique of digital technology’s accessibility. There are all kinds of resource-related reasons why the archives aren’t ready to take on a large-scale digitization project like this one. The task might be impossible as Colette, handcuffed by the “realness” of time, gets through two or three tapes a week, and there are 3,000. But the LHA is doing it anyway. “I think that’s how we enter into everything,” Maxine told me (Wolfe 2013). “Ok, so the books are going to take us six years. Where are we going? We’re not going anywhere, we’re just going to be here.” (Wolfe 2013) Digitization is daunting in the cost, strategic planning, labor and technological expertise it seems to require; but something about a scrappy, feminist work ethic makes endeavoring towards the “impossible” seem reasonable.

As the impetus and model for the LHA’s in-house spoken word digitization project, the partnership with Pratt’s digital projects course is an example of how the knowledge exchange between institutional archival contexts and gay and lesbian community archives extends to digital media. As O’Meara points out (2012), feminist

archivists and librarians working on the digital preservation of feminist materials in institutional settings also develop critical media praxis. The mutual exchange between feminist practitioners at all kinds of archives is also described by Angela L. DiVeglia (2012), who documents how queer and feminist archivists act as benevolent infiltrators at their institutional jobs; they subvert the “uneven power dynamics inherent in the structure of archives” by drawing upon the institutions substantial resources (72–73). DiVeglia is skeptical of the feasibility of wholesale calls to “queer” the archive, reminding critical archives scholars that, “once we exit the theoretical realm, all people have some affiliation with institutions like nation-states, and that sometimes compromises are necessary” (73). Riot Girl Archivists need day jobs too. By engaging with community archives outside their professional lives, feminist information workers bring subcultural and activist knowledge to their institutional contexts. Many, though not all, of the LHA’s volunteer staff have library or archives training, or are in information school, including at Pratt. Like the feminist indexers of chapter two, the LHA chooses to embrace a spirit of capable amateurism, inviting untrained volunteers like me to help process collections. This willfull amateurism is rooted in the appropriation and adaptation of professional skills.

In their encounters with the LHA, Pratt students learn the intricacies of working with marginalized archival materials and subjects, grappling with the ways in which the political urgencies and eccentricities of these materials manifest through attempts to mediate access to them online (Cociollo 2013). The Pratt project is aimed at preservation—Anthony explains that the fragility of magnetic tape is a significant issue in archival circles, and the ability to preserve this tape by creating digital copies is an

important technical competency for students to develop (Cociollo 2013). Students are also exposed to the desires marginalized archival publics are perceived to have for materials whose online availability is constructed as vital because of its scarcity, and because of the ways in which its circulation is articulated to ideals of resiliency and survival. One Pratt student interning at the LHA took a leadership role in relating the stakes of the materials to her peers. While the class was working on the *Boots of Leather* tapes, she explained concepts such as “stone butch” in its historical context and in terms of the fraught relationship this categorization can have to transgender when mapped onto the present (Cociollo 2013). These exchanges leave students with a sense of the unique concerns of archival materials and publics marginalized because of gender and sexuality. Says Anthony, “This was hugely radical what these women were doing, subversive and anti-establishment. These days it’s not very radical at all. But people get it. They see that folks being interviewed on the oral histories were doing something very radical” (Cociollo 2013). Students are eager to complete their professional degree and get any kind of institutional job they can scrounge up within an austerity economy. A critical engagement with the exclusions practiced by cultural institutions such as archives is gained through a lesson on the National Endowment for the Humanities’ history of defunding gay and lesbian cultural projects. Anthony’s students are generally “shocked” when they learn that the LHA will not accept government funding to support any of its work beyond small municipal grants, including the state-sponsored digitization grants that are becoming more readily available to small-scale cultural organizations. “But then you start getting into it with them and the history... eventually they start to get the fact of why the U.S. government is not a trusted source... You could very well have a

Congressperson say ‘please de-accession that.’ It’s basically not a safe space. You still need community archives” (Cociollo 2013).

This small-scale institutional partnership shows how large archives and libraries and community archives are always engaged in mutual exchanges of knowledge, which extend to the minutia of digitizing these materials. Anthony explains how his students began tagging each audio file with library of congress subheadings, but found them inadequate to the materials (Cociollo 2013). When every tape gets tagged with the subject heading “lesbian,” the sorting and search functions mediated by an online database become inoperable. Confronted with the ways in which marginalized materials quite literally do not fit within the epistemological frames of the institutional information contexts for which they are being trained, students began to use the LHA’s own eccentric subject heading system, which has been generated and maintained by scores of volunteers since the 1970s (Cociollo 2013). Emerging out of the gay and lesbian information activist movement of the 1970s, specifically Sanford Berman’s “radical cataloguing” work, the American Libraries Association, and community-generated subject thesauri such as Potter’s, these subject headings represent the LHA’s attempt to replace pejorative and misleading Library of Congress standards with language used by the archives’ lesbian public (Johnson 2008: 20), right from the beginnings of their database design. A sample tape from the *Boots of Leather* collection includes the subject tags “Lesbian Conduct of Life,” “Roles: Butch and Femme,” and “Gay bars,” amongst other non-standard classifications, all of which render the files searchable through the Omeka collections management software that forms the website’s infrastructure. The application of these subject headings as metadata fields through which content can be tagged is not just about

representing the subjects of the tapes using the language with which they might describe themselves, but about purposefully organizing the digital interface that mediates access to archival materials; in order for these audio files to be “found” by interested researchers, they must be labeled using descriptive terms that make sense to those who search them out, otherwise they are just data, lost in the Deep Web.

The Eventfulness of Technological Decisions

The subject headings database was one of the first applications of computing at the LHA. How and why this database was built the way that it was, and how it informed the archive’s investments in the political possibilities of computing during the early 1980s, is an important historical context for contextualizing how the archives approaches digitization today. Early in my documentary research at the archives, I pulled a small, seaweed-green, cloth-bound notebook out of a vertical file called “archive of the archives”—the cabinet that stores the LHA’s administration and operations records. The title page reads “Computer Log, Begins July 25, 1985” and the first entry describes the process of setting up training on the archives’ new computer for “all interested women” (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1985). It details the arrangement of meetings for designing a bibliographic format, subject headings vocabulary, and the ongoing project of creating a contacts database for the archive’s mailing list in order to facilitate easier distribution of the newsletter. Entries are infrequent and span a two-year period between 1985–86, eventually dropping off after about fifteen pages; the notebook is thus mostly empty, an incomplete record. The log that is there documents an emerging computing politics at the archives: (1) There is a sense of willingness to experiment, record what is learned for

others, and share knowledge; (2) accessible systems design and training are prioritized; (3) concern for how existing text records do not translate to a standard set of database fields is expressed, as is hesitation about the politics of shaping these fields *to* the database. All of these concerns continue to press upon the archives' technological approach in the present.



Figure 9: LHA Computer Log, 25 July 1985, Archive of the Archives collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives.

The archives' engagement with online media begins long before the development of its first website in 1997; what follows is a brief history of computing, database creation, and the use of communication technologies at the archives from its founding, emphasizing *decision-making* practices. Working at the level of decisions asks how online media function as discursive operations situated in a larger cultural formation, amongst a specific public whose shifting desires and expectations of what the archive means and how they would like to encounter it shape understandings of media over time.

Media historical approaches within cultural studies are influential in this area: Lisa Gitelman writes: "The introduction of new media is never entirely revolutionary:

new media are less points of epistemic rupture than they are socially embedded sites for the ongoing negotiation of meaning as such” (2006: 6). Focusing on decisions, decision-making, and also not-decisions or decisions that never get made, is one method of attending to this “ongoing negotiation of meaning.” Decisions about media matter, even when they are arbitrary. They are culturally and historically specific choices that have material effects palpable at a technological level, where the choice of, let’s say, one database program over another is the beginning of a framework or system that functions as what Alexander Galloway (2004) might call a “protocol,” a control mechanism that exerts pressure at the level of code.

These decisions are rarely monolithic; rather they take place in an everyday kind of way. A mixed method of interviews, ethnographic observation—actually hanging out with archive volunteers while they digitize—and documentary research in the “archive of the archive”—meeting minutes, internal and external print communications such as emails and newsletters—, helps me find my way through these quotidian practices. Rentschler’s approach to studying social movements at the “midlevel scale of their communication” (2011: 17) has been helpful for finding my way. Following Rentschler, I consider documents, interviews, and observation as pathways to tracing how social-movement discourse is formed, what it says and how and why it has meaning, but also *what it does*. This is to insist that decisions about media and technology in these organizations are neither, as Rentschler puts it “mysterious nor magical” (18) but rather everyday facets of larger discursive formations that have effects through the way they orient organizations and their publics, in this case, the archives itself.

Even at an archives self-conscious of itself as a social-movement organization that ought to keep good records of its own operation, the everyday practice of documenting administrative tasks can get abandoned as attention is devoted to more immediate concerns. The incomplete computer log, with its smattering of entries, is one such example. Documentary research in this archive becomes a practice of working with what is available, reading across the documents that do remain, and looking for modest articulations of bigger ideals in complex relation to one another across time. Recent work in feminist historiography that theorizes “eventfulness” helps explain the stakes and commitments of this approach. Hesford describes the “complex eventfulness” (2013: 14) needed to understand feminist histories, not as monolithic, singular stories constructed in unacknowledged retrospect, but as unsettled, unfinished, and surprising in the twists and turns, steps forward and backward, that they take. Eventfulness looks at diverse proliferations, micro-moments, conflicts, antagonisms, contradictions, attachments and detachments.

Eventfulness ultimately implies a method set apart from “event,” where feminism’s often-unspectacular politics requires different methods for studying its history. Samantha Thrift connects eventfulness to the specificities of documentary research in the paper remainders feminist organizing leaves behind (2011). “The parallel history delineated by the archived minutiae” of feminist organizing ultimately challenges normative temporal logics of eruption or revolution (416). Writes Thrift, “A feminist approach to eventfulness means adopting a more flexible and attentive vantage point from which to view history in order to discern that which is unexpectedly transformative and significant” (416). At the LHA, this becomes a process of cobbling

together nuggets of information about technological decisions gathered here and there, whether from a log book on database creation, an instruction manual that shows volunteers how to create a catalog record, or a story remembered in casual conversation with a long-time volunteer.

The history of media and technology at the archives begins by understanding the explicit aims of the organization, gathered from documents such as the statement of principals and early newsletters; though written in the early 1970s, before anyone imagined how database software, networked communication, the world wide web, and other digital technologies would shape the community archives movement, the principals related in these documents echo the archives digitization projects in the present. “Funding shall be sought from within the communities the Archives serves, rather than from outside sources” (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1979a) informs the archives’ skepticism about state-related digitization grants, and makes necessary the design of affordable, DIY digitization solutions such as the audio digitizer. “Archival skills shall be taught, one generation of Lesbians to another, breaking the elitism of traditional archives” (Ibid) fosters an emphasis on ease-of-use and accessibility for this system, and is a value Anthony used when he explained the Pratt project’s selection of Omeka: “wordpress for collections; it’s super simple” (Cociollo 2013). To accompany the system, Colette has produced what she calls a “protocol,” a step-by-step text and image-based guide to using that audio digitizer that is accessible to volunteers who “know how to use a mouse and how to use a computer” but otherwise could have “zero” knowledge of the system (Montoya 2013). Colette’s protocol is part of a longer legacy of accessible instruction guides to new media that accompany archiving work at the

LHA: a set of manuals from the 1980s show new volunteers how to catalog a book, process a special collection, or add an image to the photo collection.

While these high-level policy and protocol documents are important, the records of everyday communication are also invaluable. Documents such as the computer log, multiple drafts of the subject heading database, meeting minutes, and the newsletter are vital because conversations about technology go on for so long—sometimes years, as in the case of the planning, design and implementation of the archives' first website. I follow these processes as best as I can through the minutes, often alerted to when a decision has actually been made and implemented by a public announcement in the newsletter. Beginning in 1995, the coordinating committee begins to discuss whether the archives should “be on the World Wide Web,” because it would provide for greater outreach to lesbians who cannot visit the archives in person or do not receive the newsletter (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1995a).

Meeting minutes document discussion of every aspect of the archives' developing website, including the formation of a committee to deal with this process in 1996, the year the archives' also installed a modem so that Internet access would be available inside the building. Between 1996–98, as the website is being developed, the committee discusses a range of issues that illuminate how online communication might follow the LHA's existing archival politics: issues of cost, privacy, and the arrangement of server space with a politically sympathetic hosting company are all discussed (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1995b, 1997). The LHA's website goes live at the end of 1997, after a printed draft is circulated, modified, and approved by the committee, in a

demonstration of how a consensus model extends to the web project and to interface design (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1997).

Social movement mandates are discursive, and even when they stay formally the same, what they mean changes over time. Decisions around media are one way in which the meaning of the archives' principals come up for discussion—the archives' ongoing discussion about the place of transgender materials, volunteers and visitors is another pressing example. Digitization invites a reckoning with commitments to particular modes of financing and approaches to expertise because it has required the archives to accept financial and technical assistance from large primary source clearing houses such as GALE. Also, the pressure to put catalogue records and finding aids online has forced the archives to deal with questions of privacy, consent and copyright in its special collections—the papers of individual donors—not as legal issues but as feminist ethics.

What these negotiation processes show is that the archives is always-already in flux, as is its relation to feminism. The LHA is often described using the short-hand of “lesbian-feminist archives,” but the reality is far more complex, where what feminism means and how it is practiced as an approach to archiving varies from volunteer to volunteer. Moreover, most of the long-term volunteers I’ve interviewed describe their understandings of feminism in relation to media changing over time, and their evolving understandings of online communications. For example, what does it mean to list the contents of a donor’s collection on a public-facing website when this involves an interpretation of donor forms completed in the 1970s, by a donor who has given over copyright but penciled in “for lesbian eyes only” in the margins. During my volunteers hours at the archives I was assigned the task of sorting through these donor forms to

make exactly this kind of assessment, in order to create a spreadsheet that would guide future planning about putting special collections material online. As I sorted through hundreds of forms, I found myself confronted with temporally complex questions about media at the archives: Did these donors imagine every encounter with their materials taking place in the domestic space of the archives and what does the bequest of “for lesbian eyes online” mean anyway now that the archives welcomes visitors and researchers of any sexual or gendered identification? Donor forms are often missing altogether. The archives has checked in with donors over the years to explicitly relate how changes in media map on to their original bequests, such as with the website agreement form, sent out in 1999 with the archives’ newsletter after a lengthy discussion by coordinators about the ethics of offering descriptions of special collections online.

Interpreting this donor agreement and this form has a complex temporality bound up with the archives as a constantly changing site of mediation. It is also inseparable from the coordinators’ interpretive archival work and stewardship. These decision-making processes are often acrimonious and generationally complex. Rachel, who at 28 at the time I interviewed her is the youngest active coordinator, just finished librarian science school to begin a PhD in gender and women’s studies and is responsible for special collections, to which she would like to improve online access. Rachel says, “I’m very upset about the resistance [of other coordinators] even though I understand it. It feels like I have to strategize things and it makes me uncomfortable. I just really don’t understand the point of creating such detailed finding aids and having this information if we’re not going to have it on the internet” (Corbman 2013). Mediated by these shifting feminist politics, digitization is above all improvisational. In her own

words, Rachel must “strategize” (Corbman 2013). There is no master plan; rather these kinds of projects are taken on, as the photography collection coordinator Saskia told me, by, “whoever does it. Whoever knows about it. Whoever is available to work with it. Whoever has some expertise or some resources. It’s whatever you know most about and where you’re most helpful” (Scheffer 2013). Decisions are made after a consensus-building process that often involves careful navigation of intergenerational relationships and varied levels of understanding about technology.

Another coordinator, who is an information librarian by day explained to me: One of the benefits of being here is that you have women who are actively engaged and want to know. There’s two people who don’t really care about technology and that’s okay... But for the people who do want to know, they’re willing to stretch themselves to meet me where I can explain. In that respect, we’ve been able to overcome the differences. I’m pretty good at being able to figure out what is meaningful for you and then explaining whatever it is in a way that’s meaningful for you. There’s still times when people’s lack of patience or personalities make it difficult and then I just work around. That’s something that IT people do all the time. And so you do a lot of that too, because I can’t expect that everybody at the archives will be as excited about URL linking as I am. (OPAC Coordinator 2013).

While these intergenerational encounters are exciting, there are also moments of frustration. Rachel’s use of “strategize” and the OPAC Coordinator’s explanation that she “work(s) around” “people’s lack of patience of personalities” point to decisions about media and technology as loaded sites where established protocols for working at this archives are quietly usurped. Rachel tells me that decisions at the archives are made through “consensus, but because it’s consensus and it’s horizontally run it actually has a very complex internal workings of who has informal power and who doesn’t” (Corbman 2013).

Feeling encounters with technology and with others tend to come up through the consensus-building process. I asked all of the coordinators I interviewed to describe how the archives makes decisions about technology. It can be difficult for the coordinators to remember practicalities but they often describe what it felt like to make a decision, or how they subtly infiltrated established practices, recalling the work of building consensus, the tone in the room, the feelings of others to which they worked to be sensitive. This is one place where documentary research methods become crucial supplements to interviews and observation as the practical aspects of decision making recorded in meeting minutes supplement the more affective accounts gathered from interviews.

An Aesthetics of Access

The mandates of LGBT archives tend to have in common the preservation of a history deemed of little value to mainstream libraries and archives, as well as a project of political emancipation sought through the establishment and circulation of a legible history (Luckenbill 2002: 96). Grassroots, community-based archives documenting marginal social groups emerged in the late 1960s following the British New Left idea that historical research could be used against class oppression (Chernier 2009: 251). E.P. Thompson's (1963) well known history of working class British culture was foundational for developing methods through which "forgotten" histories of socially marginalized groups might be recovered and made to matter. From the outset, community archives are set against the institutional archives that ignored their history, and the establishment of a community archives is contextualized as a form of activism to redress this abjection from

the historical record (Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd 2009: 74). The utter invisibility of marginal sexuality in most pre-war cultural artifacts, the idea that a concealed sexual minority history might be read between the lines of these artifacts, and the emergence of an organized, post-Stonewall, gay liberation movement, all lend specificity to the goals of gay and lesbian community archives. Writing in 1991 near the peak of the AIDS crisis, social historian Steven Maynard's words give a sense of the ways in which community archives operate as vital technologies for survival and political organization: "Lesbian and gay history was born of a political movement; those of us working in it have long recognized how important a knowledge of our history is to building strong communities and effective politics. In these days when our existence is increasingly under attack, further exacerbated by AIDS, a knowledge of our history is vital not only for the parallels or lessons, but also because it is evidence that we have and shall again survive" (Maynard 1991: 200).

The LHA responds to an additional concern for the under-representation of women and lesbians, with a statement of purpose that makes explicit the ways in which lesbian history, like all women's experience, is underrepresented: "The process of gathering this material will uncover and collect our herstory denied to us previously by patriarchal historians in the interests of the culture which they serve" (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1979a). The LHA's lesbian-feminist goals emphasize the need to provide safekeeping for, but moreover, *access to* lesbian materials, and the vitality of this access is disarticulated from instrumental research goals through its association with the emotional relations to objects ignored by conventional archives. In her 1990 *Feminist Review* article about the LHA, Nestle describes the archives' goals of satisfying a lesbian

public's goals, rather than any single research agenda. Writes Nestle, "We had to clarify that our archives, our family album, our library, was not primarily for academic scholars but for any lesbian woman who needed an image or a word to survive the day" (Nestle 1990: 88). Here Nestle describes access as the guiding principal through which the lesbian feminist archives is founded and continues to operate, where access is crucial to the politics of the archives and its function as technology of affective labour; what is being built, through this labour and the access to history it provides, is also fundamentally ideological in its association with an identity-based politics of visibility.

The LHA's commitment to access in the present is clearest in the creation of an online catalogue, which ultimately seeks to make materials held at the archives easy to find. The development of this online public access catalogue, or OPAC, is one of the most strategically significant digitization projects at the archives; the coordinator responsible for the project expects that putting the catalogue online will reduce the volume of questions the archives fields from researchers, raise the profile of the archives, perform outreach to potential visitors who cannot come to New York, and create connections to other LGBT archival holdings by making the LHA's collection searchable through Google scholar and WorldCat (OPAC Coordinator 2013). OPAC is a library science term for the front-end, public facing part of a library or archives' database, in other words, the way in which the public can access the archives, and the mechanism through which the archives makes materials findable by researchers. The roll-out of the OPAC requires a series of decisions about technology and the database that shape the archives ontologically by structuring the public's future encounters with the collection.

The main obstacle in the way of moving the archives' existing computer-based catalogue online is the messiness of the data, which needs to be "cleaned up" in order to migrate these records to the OPAC. The coordinator facilitating this project described this "clean up" as "going through each record and confirming that everything's spelled correctly and everything's in the right field" (OPAC Coordinator 2013).⁴² She went on to explain how this process is ultimately aimed at the efficiency of search and the ability of databases such as Google scholar to "read" and index the archives' catalogue to set it in relation to feminist primary source materials stored at other archives. Resisting aspects of this sanitizing gesture, the coordinator has designed the process in such a way as to preserve the archives' idiosyncratic record of how materials have been catalogued differently at the archives *over time* (OPAC Coordinator 2013). This means implementing new, standardized subject headings while maintaining a field for existing headings, to preserve what DiVeglia describes as the "a political act" of DIY categorization emerging from a "desire for self-determination" (2012: 78). The coordinator of the OPAC told me:

We are a volunteer organization and over the last forty years many lesbian hands have touched the catalogue. Well-meaning, well-intentioned hands. Whatever lesbian created that record and how she catalogued it, it's there for posterity. Each one of those records is an archival document in itself. Some lesbian who knew nothing about library science or nothing about cataloguing came in. Completely useless for the actual catalogue, but so wonderful in terms of looking at what some lesbian just sat down and did for like three years. She just wrote stuff about each video she watched. The numbers are all wrong, but it doesn't matter... that little document she created is wonderful. (OPAC Coordinator 2013)

What might be viewed as data contamination in a standards sense is considered added value by this archives; the records that re-classify materials become part of that materials' status as lesbian history. Maintaining these records also has the effects of preserving

whatever burdens of past historical context these documents might carry in their classification, for example, it preserves terms from identity politics that might be considered outdated or offensive today. This process echoes the scratched-out handwriting and records of revision that are key to The Circle of Lesbian Indexers' approach to process, revision, and re-indexing.

Improved access and preservation, the goals most often attributed to digitization, exist in complex relation to one another; they are at times symbiotic, and at other times, one must be prioritized over the other. For example, archives feel justified in restricting access to original artifacts of which they have a digital copy to reduce the handling these artifacts receive (Astle and Muir 2002: 69). To the chagrin of many researchers, high-tech (and high-cost) three-dimensional scans are offered as substitutes for the "real thing," and provide the additional preservation measure of constituting a high-fidelity replica that will not deteriorate along with the original. Access to the aura of the thing may decrease in pursuit of preservation, however access becomes less fraught when it does not detract from the longevity of the archives' holding. The online circulation of digitized material helps to ensure the modernization and survival of the archives itself by making a select group of high-demand materials readily accessible to online users.

While the overall goals of digital archives and lesbian-feminist archives include the provision of access, it is necessary to expand this concern for access to a larger question of accessibility and the democratization of archival materials. Many digitization projects aim to improve ease of use for non-professional researchers and distribute select archival materials to those without institutional credentials using online communications tools (Bolick 2006: 122). The stated goals of this improved accessibility do conceal an implicit

mandate of finding long-term financial synergies by deskilling information workers and reducing the obligation to provide in-person access to community members; but despite these concerns, digitization is thought to have a democratizing function overall. Education scholar C.M. Bolick aligns these provisions for digital accessibility with the democratizing function of history more generally, evoking the political beginnings of community archives (2006). Bolick argues that online accessibility has the potential to shift who finds historiographic representation by making primary sources available to marginalized researchers (130).

Accessibility is a major concern for the lesbian-feminist archive and informs every level of decision making about the function of the LHA. The archives' statement of principals connects the values of accessibility to the collection and admission policies, physical location, training of volunteer staff without previous archival experience, and anti-institutional position (Lesbian Herstory Archives 1979a; Thistlethwaite 1998). Illustrative of this approach to access is the first principal: "All Lesbian women must have access to the Archives; no academic, political, or sexual credentials will be required for use of the collection; race and class must be no barrier for use or inclusion" (Ibid). What I have called an improvisational approach to digitization, where good-enough solutions guide a fearlessness about taking on large projects, is partly about a willingness to take risks or roll out projects imperfectly in pursuit of improved access. Giving the archives' public greater opportunity to engage with the collection justifies a scrappy design of these projects; this is digitization guided by an aesthetics of access.

Even as it offers preservation, digitization at the LHA exchanges the aura of a perfectly reproduced digital version for access (Hilderbrand 2009: 12–15). This exchange

manifests in all kinds of access-oriented digital interface qualities: the paradoxical messiness of the catalogue record data, which must be both “cleaned up” to function and maintained for posterity’s sake; or the provisional metadata standards that guide the description of photographs on the online photo sampler. The choice to noise-reduce the spoken word audio files—a process of compression that ultimately sacrifices fidelity for usability—is described by Maxine in ways that contextualize these formal and aesthetic digitization choices in relation to broader ideals of access. Maxine describes being surprised that anyone in archival circles would oppose noise reduction aimed at making audio easier to understand (Wolfe 2013). To balance preservation with usability and access, the LHA decided to supplement the uncompressed masters with a noise-reduced CD, “so that somebody who came here to listen to Audre Lorde’s speech could hear her despite the fact that it was at the March on Washington and there were 9,000 sounds in the background,” says Maxine (Wolfe 2013). She explains, “a lot of preservation and conservation is sort of like the people who are into the wilderness as a place that nobody can go to. It’s like ‘you’re preserving this for whom?’ If nobody can listen to it, then what’s the point?” (Wolfe 2013). Maxine sets this emphasis on preservation apart from the LHA’s goals for serving its public: “The point for us is that we have a right to our history. And people have a right to hear this. The point isn’t just to conserve it, preserve it, the point is to make it accessible. So you try to do both those things at once. You don’t just say, ‘okay we’re going to conserve this and no one’s going to touch it.’ What’s the point? For us, there’s no point because the whole reason for the Lesbian Herstory Archives is a belief that people have a right to their own history. And it’s not just about

putting it into a drawer and a hundred years from now somebody will know it was put into a drawer” (Wolfe 2013).

Maxine relates this aesthetics of access to the oral history movement out of which the spoken word collection originally developed; the increased accessibility and affordability of consumer-grade recording equipment was the technological condition of possibility for the women’s liberation movement’s investment in documenting the history of feminism through sound. Maxine also articulates this formal, aesthetic decision to the archives’ legacy of prioritizing access. The archives’ administration is guided by the question, “Can people find it and can they get here? People always say, ‘oh you’re not open that many hours,’ but if you come from out of town you can come here all the time. We’ve had people sleep here. And Joan’s apartment too when it was at her apartment. I guess that’s the major thing is just making sure that people can get it and that it’s kept in decent condition and that we know what we have” (Wolfe 2013). For Maxine, these are “the basics” (Wolfe 2013).

The LHA’s investment in digitization as being primarily about improved access does not come at the cost of preservation, but rather points to the ways in which digitization *never* promises preservation. An archives does not just “digitize” a document one time; technological changes require ongoing format migration to avoid obsolescence, one of the reasons why paper is actually one of the most “stable” formats for preservation. So while “digital networks have enabled the acceleration of access by reducing text to data,” “digitization is not preservation,” or at least, not the kind of preservation we hope it to be (Hilderband 2009: 21). With audiovisual materials such as the spoken word collection, analog formats outlast digital ones, which can become

corrupted in the case of a scratched CD or failed hard drive, or obsolete and un-operable. I experience the latter case first hand in my volunteer work at the archives. The Shescapes collection included a number of zip discs, which I was unable to open without access to a zip drive, or, for that matter, a computer capable of operating a zip drive. I never learned what is on those zip discs and so the finding aid I created to accompany the collection is incomplete; for that matter, *incomplete-able*. While certain analogue materials do get digitized at the archives, there is a very limited capacity for dealing with born-digital documents. Says Rachel of this problem at the LHA, “We don’t really know how to handle it at this point. I don’t really know how to handle it, more specifically. We got floppy discs from this one poet. They basically just sit in the box because what are we going to do with a floppy disc? I think there is going to be a time in the not too distant future where we’re going to start getting people’s computers or hard drives. Same thing: it’s probably going to sit in a box. But that’s not a problem that’s unique to us,” says Rachel (Corbman 2013), touching on the lack of capacity for born-digital acquisitions that is widespread amongst community archives and smaller institutions (O’Meara 2012: 112).

Conclusion

Access guides the LHA’s willingness to take on digitization projects in the first place. An investment in access supports the improvisational approach to digitization that guides decisions about technology and, ultimately, the future of this archives. But while access is in many ways improved by digitization, the process of choosing what to put online, and the cultural and ideological effects of how materials are described in the archives’ online

databases also has the effect of restricting access. Digitization means making choices about what materials end up being accessible, which shapes the ontology of the 21st-century archives as it becomes a space of primarily digital encounter. Processes of selection and description made on an improvisational or ad-hoc basis might seem insignificant in their singularity but add up to chains of decisions with profound effects on the archives' direction. The next chapter turns to a close examination of the LHA's photography collection as it moves online, focusing in particular on images of sexuality that pose a problem for the sense-making operations of online databases. Building upon this chapter's theorizing of access as a feminist aesthetic that guides choices about technology and media practices, this next chapter emphasizes description and selection as mediated access-points to historical sexualities.

Chapter Four

Body, Sex, Interface: Reckoning with Porn in the Digital Archives

On a high shelf, in a small closet on the main floor of the LHA, sits a Hollinger document case hand-labeled “Unprocessed ‘porn’?” and several snapshots.” Available for any visitor to take down and browse, the box is full of photographs that remain “unprocessed,” awaiting interpretation by volunteers. Processing an archival acquisition involves several steps towards making materials accessible, including selection, appraisal, and creating a finding aid, means of description and narration that are core sense-making epistemologies of archival science, with its rational roots in modernity. Processing materials is labour-intensive, resource-heavy, and time-consuming, more so in the digital era. Between acquisition and access provision, the interpretive act waits to be written; photographs are not-yet mediated by a database form that attempts to pin down the stories they capture. But while processing a photograph of a well-known lesbian or event suggests a straightforward routine of identification and classification, the often-anonymous, amateur images of sexuality in the collection are more difficult to consider. As the LHA’s photo collection moves online, volunteers must grapple with materials that have been waiting patiently in their boxes, and questions such as “how do you ‘process’ porn?” take on a renewed urgency.

The archives’ photography collection contains roughly 10,000 images, loosely catalogued according to volunteer-generated subject headings. Emphasizing the late-20th century, the collection includes portraits, snapshots, documentation of nightlife and activism, porn, and scores of images that defy easy categorization under any of these terms. Images of sexuality are prevalent in the collection and range from elaborate S/M

scenes, to the most willfully amateur self-portraits and snapshots of lovers, to work by professionals such as Del LaGrace Volcano and Tee Corinne. The scope of the collection is simply defined as any image that has been “relevant to the lives and experiences of lesbians” (Statement of Purpose 1975). A “National Lesbian Photography Drive” announced in the LHA’s 1979 newsletter sought to build the foundation for the collection, asking “Lesbians all across the country to send photographs of themselves, friends, children, homes, pets, activities,” so that “our future sisters will be able to see us” (Announcing the Start 1979). Lesbian visibility in its historical iterations guides the growth of this collection, and yet this is a category that many images seem to exceed; case in point, the recently digitized work of transgender and intersex activist Volcano, who identified as a lesbian at the time of acquisition. Digitization of this collection began in 2010, the first self-directed project to offer extensive online access to the archives.

Preparing this collection for an online database is a complex process of selection and description, in keeping with attention to digitization at the archives as a process that extends beyond the simple creation of digital files from analog sources. Complex images of sexuality present opportunities for reflecting on the cultural politics of this process, including the accessibility of sexual materials in LGBT archives as they move online. An archives’ responsibility to provide access to images of sexuality is balanced with questions of legality, ethics, and propriety, creating a tension informed by the growing pressure of “queer liberalism” on these archives as they move further into public-facing roles mediated by the web (Eng 2010). This chapter examines the process through which volunteer coordinators designed and began to carry out digitization of the LHA’s photography collection. The design of this project has generated moments of reckoning

with various political contexts in which the archives moves, such as intergenerational feminism(s). Attending to these negotiations, I argue that the archives' approach to digitization is improvisational, open to revision and critique, and willfully imperfect in its management of considerations such as metadata. Digitization presents the archives with the opportunity to consider the ways in which the historical representations of sexuality it houses challenge the normative imperatives that can accompany digital media practices, including the ways in which all kinds of sex practices and gendered ways of being scramble the categorical logics of structured databases.

The photo collection is managed by Saskia Scheffer, who works in special formats processing at the New York Public Library and has been a volunteer coordinator at the archives since 1987. Saskia identifies the heterogeneous origins of the collection as one of its strengths. The subjects and photographers in many of the photos are unknown, their provenance of these archival records lost; donated by friends of the archives, the stories behind these images have been forgotten or were never known. Unlike large institutions, the archives accommodates all kinds of donors as part of its inclusive politics of accessibility. Says Saskia, "we didn't have minimum requirements and I don't mean for that to sound negative at all. If people had stuff, we took it. Still do. Not like if you don't give us a complete description with names and birthdates of everybody in the photo we won't have it. We'll take it. We'll figure it out" (Scheffer 2013). Though many of the photos resist attribution, the collection has been organized into subject files to facilitate browsing, in an interpretive practice aimed at access-provision more familiar to libraries than archives. Digitization ultimately remediates categorizations already made by many volunteers. Most subject files are just the names of events or individuals, some famous,

others just regular folks. More general, descriptive subject headings are designed on an ongoing basis by volunteers when they seem like a logical addition to the taxonomy: these include “military” and “children of lesbians.” Many layers of “folksonomic” classification are at play here; rather than working with a standardized, controlled vocabulary of terms, as a librarian would in an institutional setting, the LHA allows the content of the materials and the judgment of volunteers to guide an evolving vocabulary.

Though subject headings offer a framework, what is contained in the folders often continues to perplex, especially the vernacular photographs of non-famous lesbians engaged in everyday contexts. A fairly typical folder labeled with a first and last name contains undated snapshots, circa the 1980s, that depict an often-naked woman in all kinds of poses in the grass and in front of her motorcycle. What kind of record do these images offer when they make archival sense only because of their foggy relationship to the always-provisional identity category of lesbian?

The practical work of digitizing the photos is deceptively simple: Ronika McClain, a 21-year-old volunteer (at the time of interview) working with Saskia systematically sorts through the collection, creating a Google spreadsheet that describes each folder and indicates whether there is donor permission to place the images online. Saskia chooses images to scan using borrowed time on a high-quality scanner to which she has found access off-site. She uploads them to a server hosted by the Metropolitan New York Library Council’s low-cost Digital Collection Hosting Service, where they are accessed via CONTENTdm, digital collections management software which she trained herself to use. The “online photo sampler” currently includes nearly 650 images, to which Saskia assigns metadata fields for size, title, creator, and descriptive tags to make the

photo searchable for research queries. There is no existing searchable catalogue besides an offline word document; this project will produce the first robust, searchable database. Digitization responds to a desire for access that is as much about sorting and sense-making as it is about offering scans through an online interface.

Toward an Ontology of the Unprocessed Porn Box

Saskia explained why it is difficult to sort the collection to prepare it for digitization using the example of the peculiar box of porn that she didn't know what to do with. This container is so emblematic of the challenge some photographs pose for the sense-making practice of digitization that another title for this chapter could be "An Ontology of the Unprocessed 'Porn' Box." With a bias to the 1980s, the nearly 500 photographs stuffed into this box are from many eras, feature many subjects, and were likely taken by dozens of photographers. But this is all speculation; there is no provenance or donor agreement forms for these images. Saskia has no idea how they got to the archives, their stories lost to fading institutional memory.

The dominant genre in the box is the self-portrait, an analogue version of the selfies one might text to a lover today. I sift through dozens of blurry prints of women masturbating, sometimes inscribed to a lover on the back, and many photos of couples and groups engaged in a range of acts; generally they're blurry and composed haphazardly. Some photos have an artfulness that extends the generic conventions of amateur porn: I'm brought in by a series depicting a thin, white woman lying naked on the floor of a garden shed, her head outside the frame, torso arranged alongside plants waiting to be potted, a plastic gallon-jug, and a shop vac. Inscribed on the back with a

first name and the date “June 2 1985,” these are vernacular photographs that most archives would not collect; they lack a clear subject or occasion, formally they’re not very “good,” and they don’t make sense to the modernist, epistemological desires of archives. The box contents evoke art historian Geoffrey Batchen’s (2001: 57) description of vernacular photography as an “abject” genre, in the sense of being liminal, ambiguous, and difficult to categorize. Yet the strangeness of these images, their very ambiguity, is part of what makes them compelling records of sexual subcultural style and its place in the archive.



Figure 10: Anonymous photos from the unprocessed porn box, image courtesy of the Lesbian Herstory Archives photo collection.

Saskia tells me that the unprocessed porn box will likely never “see the light of day” that is the Internet (Scheffer 2013). Deselection—the process through which some materials are digitized and/or offered online, while others are not—has political implications for the evolution of LGBT archival collections, particularly in terms of the scope of an archive’s online “holdings” in relation to its collection mandate. LGBT archives have a long history of collecting porn and other images of sexuality. Though some university collections acquire porn today and have done so in the past, in a historical context, prioritizing porn has distinguished LGBT community archives from institutions.⁴³ The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives, another community archive similar in scope and age to the LHA, has a mandate of collecting gay male porn and erotica, and has built an extensive collection (Barriault 2009: 222).⁴⁴ Archives scholar Marcel Barriault describes collecting porn as a political act that challenges, deconstructs, and redefines what an archival institution can and should be (226). Porn reflects more than the desires it portrays; as porn studies has show, porn provides research “value” by illuminating the wider cultural frameworks in which it is produced and consumed (Atwood 2002). The porn at the LHA provides a critical record of lesbian subcultural moments in which power and pleasure have collided, such as the feminist S/M and porn debates—or “sex wars”— of the 1980s and 90s. Despite the importance of porn for constructing histories of LGBT subculture, sexual images tend to be preserved by these archives without necessarily being made more accessible, a trend made more acute by the deselection of digitization.⁴⁵ As Marcel Barriault argues, there is a need for community archives “to ensure that archives as bodies of knowledge also reflect knowledge of the

body” (2009: 225). As online interfaces become the primary mode of encounter between archives and publics, this means ensuring the body gets digitized, as it were.

Given the limitations of labour hours and server space, deselection at the LHA is inevitable: the archives can’t scan or pay to host all of its photos. A common misperception about digitization is that it ameliorates the problem of deselection by helping a physical archives manage its storage capacities through compression. While the primary purpose of digitization in public libraries and archives is access, any technological intervention aimed at improved access, including through earlier “analog” models such as microfilm, is always a process of selection and prioritization (Astle and Muir 2002: 68). Selections made in the name of digitization have a further effect of shifting the ways in which the authenticity of the archival fond as a fulsome representation of its subjects is established (Adam 2010). The archive is no longer a repository that must be sifted through and granted worth or intelligibility by the archivist or researcher. Rather it becomes instantly imbued with worth at the moment it is digitized (Kolton 1999: 119). A digital archivist must think about what should constitute the fond before it is made, rather than after it is left (120). Spense summarizes the challenges of deselection well when she argues that aside from the case of the largest national archives, “major de-selection of material will be inevitable and the characteristics of the technology will force a diminution of service, when it should be enabling improvements, because of the cost, time and skill base required to guarantee access and preservation” (2005: 375).

Practicalities aside, the politicized effects of deselection are far from inexorable and critical attention should be paid to the conditions of possibility that shape the

decision-making process of digitization. The first reason the unprocessed porn is easier left in the box relates to copyright, ethics, and permission to circulate, all guided by a lesbian-feminist understanding of consent and privacy. It is difficult to acquire publication permissions and visitors to the archives are asked not to take photographs of images. The photo files greet users with a notice: “Much of what was given to us came from women who simply wanted their images saved, their lives remembered. They neither offered permission for publication, nor did we request it.... We are sorry that the collection is so inaccessible to publication use. As explained above, it came out of a different time and focus.” Many photos were acquired during the sex wars and reflect the conflicting politics of representing sex held by this archives’ intergenerational public. For anti-porn feminist such as Catherine MacKinnon, the problem was precisely the mechanical reproduction of images, rather than acts themselves (MacKinnon 1993). As a compressed form designed to be sent and received, the digitally reproduced image is constructed to circulate, formally biased toward a media politics far different from the sex wars prohibition on distribution. Ultimately, consent to digitize from donors and subjects is sought, but as information studies scholar Jean Dryden has shown, cultural heritage archives choose images for digitization that are uncontroversial in their provenance to avoid complex, labour intensive searches for permission (Dryden 2008). Deselection is critical as decisions about what to put online shape what the archives becomes: images of sexuality can require discussions for which an archives run on a consensus model by volunteers has limited capacity.

Many depictions of sexuality in the LHA’s photo collection are simply indescribable, another reason why these images stay in their box. Batchen’s argument is

ultimately a suggestion that vernacular photographs do not articulate easily as evidence; they are the digital cataloguer's "worst nightmare" as they evade attempts to render them searchable. Vernacular images of sexuality can be particularly perplexing. I asked Ronika for an image that was difficult to add to the database and she thought of one of her favourites: "There's a woman who had a bunch of pictures of herself. She was naked and she had a bondage harness on. We pulled that out, looked at it, and we weren't really sure what we could say. We said something like playful photographs, nude photographs, like worked around the information," eventually settling on the description, "tough and topless" (McClain 2013). Listening to Ronika describe this process as one of careful interpretive work is exemplary of the archives' improvisational digitization tactics. Anti-expertise, the accessibility of archival tools, and an ethos of finding solutions that are good enough guide the project. This good-enough approach to description and metadata is not a disadvantage of the community archives; rather, as librarian-scholar Jen Wolfe has argued, even in large institutional archives, when it comes to metadata, "sometimes 'good enough' is good enough" (Wolfe 2008: 71). In the interest of getting materials online, cataloguers must accept the provisionality of these standards.

Saskia describes the temporality of this approach as a practice of addressing issues when they arise, rather than waiting to have everything worked out in advance. She relates moving mindfully between the professional context of her day job and working at the archives using the metaphor of a cook who prepares the same meal in a professional kitchen and on a camp stove: "I'm realizing that I have to really give us the credit that what we do is actually really good. So what if it isn't perfect... It is absolutely usable" (Scheffer 2013).

Ronika's uncertainty about the image of the woman in the harness relates to an absence of contextual information about the subject's sexuality and relationship to being photographed, and represents a moment when ethical concerns become intertwined with the challenge of description: "a lot of the times it's really difficult to categorize what people are doing in these photos and there are a lot of instances where we open things and go, what do you say about this?... she's clearly expressing this part of her sexuality that may be sort of hidden... that's representative of a lot of the things that are in this collection, that sort of tentativeness to make this representation of yourself, especially in the sexual images" (McClain 2013).

The images offered online have all been cleared to circulate in public, either through donor agreements or through careful judgment by Saskia and Ronika. Without a donor agreement, volunteers weigh the risk posed by publishing an image, asking whether there are recognizable women in the photograph, whether the image is donated or "found," and whether the subject matter of the photographs seems at all private or controversial, such as with images of sexuality. These are ongoing, case-by-case decisions and there is no overarching policy to follow. The LHA has made many efforts over the years to contact pre-Internet donors to request permission to list their materials online, but communication is often difficult to initiate. What gets put online reflects the subjective feminist engagements volunteers have with photography, the archives, and online media. Perceptions of the time in which a photograph was donated are weighed in relation to the mediated time of the present (Amparo Lasén and Gómez-Cruz 2009). In an archives that describes itself as primarily by, about, and for "lesbians," the context of lesbian visibility and equal rights discourse is also critical. Art Historian Carol Payne

argues that photographic archives in cultural heritage organizations are technologies for constructing visual representations of imagined communities, at this archives, the imagined community of “lesbian,” a category that cannot encapsulate the complexities of the collection (Payne 2006).

Sex in the Counterarchive

The archives’ approach to images of sexuality touches upon a larger tension between archive theory and the actual, everyday practices of archivists. While Cvetkovich (2003; 2011), Halberstam (2011) and others have theorized LGBT archives as “counterarchival” spaces that house the eccentric materials other archives might not value, these archives are also caught up in the larger liberal pressures of gay and lesbian visibility. In its focus on desiring attachments to history, the queer archival turn in the humanities has downplayed the implication of archives in cultural “regimes of normalization” (Hesford 13); critical archivists, archives scholars, and archive users are quite aware of this effect. The *counter-ness* of a photographic archive is always bound up with a politics of visibility that associates being seen with being welcomed into the fold of liberalism. The LGBT archives can be called upon to act as a worlding technology in support of homonational regimes, in which the visual recognition of gay and lesbian citizen-subjects in the historical record is tied to broader political agendas of gendered and racialized violence, exclusion, and empire in the present.⁴⁶ Online media is also a pedagogical interface for queer liberalism; for example, the resiliency rhetoric of the It Gets Better project, in which Internet access rescues youth into a normative developmental narrative by modeling how to “come out.” This is the normalizing effect of what Alexandra Juhasz

(2006) has called “queer archive activism,” where the archives does not just collect and preserve objects, but also performs public-facing outreach and intervention.

Information science scholar Tim Schlak has argued that postmodern critiques of photographic archives approach photos as “very difficult objects to talk about, let alone classify, describe, and essentially ‘own’ as archival evidence” (2009: 85); however, archivists often lack the time or resources to build digital interfaces in such a way as to accommodate the complexity of materials, especially at a volunteer archives. I asked Saskia if she foresees a time when any of the images from the unprocessed porn box might go online and her response reveals a nuanced understanding of these theoretical implications: “The only thing that I can imagine we would do with something like that is a little sampler of things we don’t understand and then have a page with ten photographs and then say these are ten samples of a box that came to us from an unknown source... But I have other things to do” (Scheffer 2013). I ask her to explain what this unknown sampler would demonstrate about the collection. “It would show something about the sources of the material. It would show how we have organically grown. How we don’t discriminate. That there’s very interesting things [laughs] here to be seen. Just the fact that we have that and we didn’t throw it away.... That at some point in time somebody thought this might be appropriate here” (Scheffer 2013).

Though rhetorical, Saskia’s online mini-exhibition of unprocessed porn would digitize this material for access online while holding off on “processing” the images. The hypothetical act of description proposed here is one of refusing to describe, of leaving open the ambiguity that can characterize an archival encounter with historical images of sexuality. The uncertainties, edges, provocations, and discomforts Ronika attributes to the

image of the woman in the bondage harness are perhaps what give an otherwise innocuous portrait some of its charge in the first place. Though Saskia's idea is an intriguing thought experiment, she has "other things to do" (Scheffer 2013), a reminder that resource-strapped community archives must prioritize the needs users have for finding and accessing materials more easily through online interfaces. What Saskia and the LHA do practice is self-reflexivity about their responsibility in shaping how the archives is encountered, and openness to revising how images are classified.

Information studies scholar Margaret Hedstrom calls the "archival interface" a "critical node in the representation of archives," through which archivists negotiate their role as intermediaries with the past (2002: 22). Online interfaces are increasingly the most common mode of user engagement, forcing archivists to confront the interpretive nature of their role vis a vis digitization in the wide sense of the term. Saskia describes creating the online catalogue as a process of making sense of a thing that sometimes does not make that much sense—an opportunity to organize, classify, and render searchable. But how do you make sense of dozens of undated photographs of a naked woman with a perhaps tenuous relationship to the category lesbian, posed in front of her motorcycle? As Librarian-scholar Marlene Manoff explains, "however much one refines one's tagging, one is still forced to impose a level of specificity and explicitness on texts that, in the humanities at least, defy such clear-cut distinctions" (Mannoff 2010: 394). The textual desires we have of archives are often exceeded by the "multiplicity of [LGBT] donors' identities," and the elusiveness of photographs as media (DiVeglia 2012: 85). Pulling a "what do you say about this?" image out of the photo drawer evokes wonder, but the

ways in which these photos do not make sense can be difficult to capture through the searchable database form.

From Tagging to Interface Design: A Willfully Provisional Approach

The digitization process creates an interface with palpable effects on user experience, the construction of which is evident in what is chosen for digitization, a practice Saskia describes as “completely subjective” (Scheffer 2013). Often images are digitized because of researcher request, creating an emphasis on “research value.” Selection can also be serendipitous, where Ronika flags compelling discoveries for Saskia; both women describe the intergenerational encounter of working together as personally fulfilling, and a significant influence on the digital collection as it takes shape. With what time she has left, Saskia chooses images that evidence aspects of lesbian subculture she views as under-represented. Images that make immediate visual sense take precedent; says Saskia: “I also want it to look good... things have to be recognizable. Something non descript, out of focus, in the distance, isn’t going to be very helpful” (Scheffer 2013). The garden shed portraits, for instance, do not “look good” in any conventional sense. Schlak describes the emphasis on clarity as a textual paradigm, where photos obtain archival legitimacy once they can be described clearly as texts (Schlak 2009: 88–89).

The photo sampler greets visitors with a graphic interface, the user-friendly “front-end” of a “back-end” database experiences that together mediate access and determine our connection to history (Mannoff 2010: 386). These complex virtual environments exert intellectual control over encounters once left open to more unstructured forms of in-person browsing; as Emily Drabinski warns, they can all but

eliminate the queer browsing practices that resist and transform these classifications (2009/2010: 16–18). The photo sampler is pleasant to look at and reasonably easy to search, but is ultimately a structured database that creates culturally determined pathways to content. CONTENTdm is also designed for the creation of digital *collections*, which are necessarily partial and organized to cohere around an intelligible theme. The folksonomic naming of images through the assignment of descriptive metadata is another subjective process that shapes the interface. While fields for “date” and “creator” can be simple to complete, the field for “description” requires Saskia to summarize the subject of an image in one short phrase, just as The Circle of Lesbian Indexers assigned subject headings to each entry in their index. The descriptive tags she assigns to each photo in the “keywords” field are a familiar process for anyone who has uploaded a photo to a site like Flickr. Though she does not work from a controlled vocabulary, Saskia associates the goal of precision with her choice of tags, and is well aware of the ways in which good tagging is what makes effective information retrieval possible in online photo-sharing interfaces (Kwan and Chan 2009).

Tagging photos, Saskia practices a careful, improvisational self-awareness. For example, the archives has many of the papers of lesbian-feminist artist Tee Corinne, including source photographs for her *Cunt Coloring Book* (1975). Saskia put six of Corinne’s less explicit images online after she found them in a small, hand-made exhibit catalogue from the mid-1980s. She assigned the tags “art, erotica, labia.” I ask her to describe how she chose these particular images and why she labeled them as she did.

I had absolutely no problem with this because there are no recognizable women in it. Those images are well-known.... we have her permission to use them, nobody’s going to make a big deal out of it. And yes it’s art. You know, I called it “erotica” why didn’t I call it sexuality? At some

point I just need to get stuff up and I can't spend more time waiting for inspiration. If changes need to be made, that will happen. I think that discussion will come, clearly we're having one now. And maybe you will make me aware of something or I will make you aware of something and something changes in the metadata. I have no problem going in the system and adding or taking something away in terms of description. The more I work with it, the more that actually happens because I realize that I can be more exact, I can be more precise. It will be better, it will be easier to use, more informative. (Scheffer 2013)

A work-in-progress approach to metadata description is an advantage of the feminist community archives' DIY approach, evoking the "libratory descriptive standard" favored by information studies scholars Wendy Duff and Verne Harris. This database model "seek(s) ways of troubling its own status and its *de facto* functioning as a medium of metanarrative," to "push the capacity of description to accommodate partial or multiple rather than complete closure" (Duff and Harris 2002: 285).



Figure 11: Tee A. Corinne, Untitled image tagged with the terms "art," "erotica," and "labia," courtesy LHA photo collection.

The discussion of Corinne's work was a moment in my interviews with Saskia where my investments in the collection became explicit, as I relayed searching for "sexuality" without any results, and searching for "porn" only to find images of mostly anti-porn protests during the 1980s. My frustrated search was a moment of disidentification with the archives' digital records as they shape the historiographic encounter; where were the proud S/M dykes whose leather and words I have admired in books such as *Coming to Power* (Samois 1981)? Where were the kinky folks whose willful self-representations I had found while browsing through the photo file-cabinet?

Where were the possibly trans or gender-queer bodies whose thoughts about being in a “lesbian” archives I had wondered about while gazing at their printed images? The digital interface seemed partly responsible for effacing the encounters with sexuality that I had imagined my search would provide. Lesbian feminist history is complex, acrimonious, and multivalent, rooted in affective histories where sex, gender, race, and class meet in ways that have often been explosive but have just as often been stifled, swallowed like bitter pills. “Good” digital interfaces resolve tensions by providing search-retrieval and navigability that works so well, the interface virtually disappears (Emerson 2014; Friedberg 2009). The LHA’s digital interface must struggle to find ways to represent the acrimony, ambivalence, and tension critical to the feminist histories the archives produces. The digitization process might find ways to carry forward some of the controversy and affective attachments that shaped these difficult images to begin with. Perhaps my frustrated search was one such tactic; in other words, in failing to find what I was looking for, I became ever-more aware of the interface *as an interface*, and lesbian-feminist history as an unstable collection of events the archives actively constructs.⁴⁷

Walter Kendrick argues that “erotica” lends images of sex a “specious aura of antiquity” (1996 [1987]: 244). Writing long before the archival turn in the humanities, Kendrick is nevertheless engaged with questions of how classification and the archives define what is pornographic and what is fit for public consumption. To archive is to shape access in ways that delineate material as one thing or another. Linda Williams’ notion of “on/scenity” extends the naming and classifying effects of prohibitive gestures to the contemporary ubiquity of sexual images online, where once-unspeakable acts are increasingly represented in public as diverse forms of sexuality (Williams 2004). The

online interface, as a site of mediation, marks some material for public consumption while porn must stay, quite literally in this case, in the drawer. Returning to Barriault's (2009) concern that LGBT archives go beyond preserving images of sexuality to improving access, the names given to images of sexuality matter for mediating access to that material, but naming can also have the effect of pinning down meaning in ways that images will always transcend.

Trans bodies and identities, often in their very intersection with the identifying impulse that can accompany images of sexuality in a lesbian archive, pose their own problems for the sense-making impetus that accompanies digitization. Writings on trans subjects in the archives and the challenge of metadata, K.R. Roberto (2011) begins from Bobby Noble's (2006) theorization of trans as resistance to a categorizing epistemology. This resistance is temporal in its openness to various levels of permanence in relation to transition. Roberto argues that classification schemes, which are hierarchical by nature, don't do well with the unfixedness of transition. Roberto writes "If library of congress subject headings should represent people's identities, it also should acknowledge that identities can be complex and temporal" (2011: 60). Roberto identifies a larger question about archives in transition; in the case of the LHA, this manifests in an unmooring of the structures of archiving, where trans becomes a force unsettling strategies that seek to maintain a lesbian-feminist status-quo. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore's (2008) discuss trans' relation to feminism as one of productive motion. They write, "[T]he lines implied by the very concept of 'trans-' are moving targets, simultaneously composed of multiple determinants. 'Transing,' in short, is a practice that takes place within, as well as across or between, gendered spaces. It is a practice that

assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly” (2008: 13). Trans puts lesbian bodies and the Lesbian Body constituted through the archives in motion in a way that queer archival practices do not. Where efforts to queer the archives affectionately maintain lesbian but with an asterix—we’re too queer to really be that thing, but we love it anyway—trans might shake up the signifier of lesbian by emphasizing its need for ongoing movement and actual groundlessness in practice. Perhaps trans even shares with the digital an emphasis on movement, motion, revision, and process, and shares with digitization an ontological willingness to sit with incompleteness or excess.

I was brought to these questions about trans and the digital archives after finding an index card inserted into the folder labeled “Della Grace,” which contains work by the photographer that documents the queer punk and S/M scenes in 1980s London. The handwritten card read simply, “Del La Grace Volcano (2010)” as if to suggest that a straightforward categorical rupture could be traced to a singular moment in Del’s willfully trans-ed chronology. I asked Saskia why these photos haven’t been digitized, and she told me quite practically that she would “love to put up those images” (Scheffer 2013) but would need to ask Del how to catalogue the material, something that she hasn’t gotten around to yet. Saskia then told me about several examples of similar materials in the collection. We then had a long conversation about trans people and politics at the LHA, through which Saskia explained some of the archives’ ongoing engagements with these questions as they extend to the archives’ emerging digital systems. At this point in our conversation it was clear that I had wanted and expected both the porn and trans images I enjoyed in the file-cabinet to be accessible online, and had been surprised not to

find them. Saskia's response felt measured in the sense that she seemed to be measuring me, just as I was measuring myself. What was my relationship to "lesbian" and "trans" as a masculine-presenting "woman" who doesn't totally feel like a woman most of the time but isn't "trans" either? While I might have once found a home at this archives, the edges of this kind of masculine identification move too close to trans in the present, threatening the Butch Lesbian subject the LHA seeks to secure for the future.⁴⁸ I was also aware of myself appearing like the sort of academic-type in her early 30s who often comes to the archives with a list of complaints communicated in overly theoretical terms. All these feelings were perhaps caused by my own ambivalence working in a Lesbian space while feeling both attached to but not quite as if I fit within that concept.

Perhaps oblivious to these thoughts or more likely asking her own set of questions in the background, Saskia began:

...the term "what is a lesbian?" and "how do we include every lesbian?" and how do you have the discussion about who is a lesbian or who was and what do you do with that is incredibly relevant, certainly for an organization like ours. It's a very emotional issue. It's a very political issue. It's very complicated issue. Not just for the photo collection. The whole trans discussion, I think we really need to have it, I really want to have it, I want to have that, I think that should be totally part of the archives but I think that it also, it's complicated. It's really complicated.... I think at the moment the question is really who calls themselves a lesbian and who calls themselves a woman and do you include people in your organization who reject the concept of them being female and why would they even want to be here? This is about women. What is a woman? It's complicated as hell. (Scheffer 2013)

Ronika told me about finding the same folder and feeling excited about how the archives has to figure out how to deal with these materials, reflecting what is perhaps a generational difference, as well her newer relationship to this archives, which is less steeped in an acrimonious history of exclusion. A month after my interview with Saskia,


she emailed to say that she had gotten in touch with Del who was excited about having the photographs put online. The digitized collection of Del's work offers an unusual, artful pictorial record of lesbian kink, and the metadata description of the images leaves open the gap between the photographer's shifting gendered identifications over time: The "creator" of the images is Della DisGrace while the rights are held by "Del LaGrace Volcano," with the further addition of a "Notes" field that reads, "Del LaGrace Volcano, previously known as Della Grace and Della Disgrace" (Fig. 11). While this metadata description opens space for a subject in transition, other silences creep in, such as through the lack of racialized description for "dyke in leather with sunglasses," which has the effect of securing all historically visible queer S/M subcultures as white.

Home » Lesbian Herstory Archives » Jane, Jane, Queen of Pain

Reference URL Share Add tags Comment Rate ★★★★★

Jane, Jane, Queen of Pain

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▼ Description

Rating	★★★★★ Based on 0 rating(s)
Title	Jane, Jane, Queen of Pain
Description	dyke in leather with sunglasses
Creator	Della DisGrace
Publisher	LHEF
Date	1988
Type	B&W print
Format	8 x 10
Source	LHA Photo files, Del LaGrace Volcano folders
Coverage	London
Rights	Del LaGrace Volcano
Key words	dykes; leather; SM
Notes	Del LaGrace Volcano, previously known as Della Grace and Della Disgrace
Identifier	dellagrace_08.tif

▸ Tags (0)

▸ Comments (0)

Figure 12: Screenshot of Jane, Jane, Queen of Pain by Della DisGrace / Del LaGrace Volcano, Lesbian Herstory Archives Online Photo Sampler.

Images of sexuality, like images that intersect with trans or that trans the collection, become urgent questions for the archives in relation to digitization and are thus inseparable from media in transition. Art Historian Tom Normand has argued that to not classify images in vernacular photography collections is to “honor their variety and diversity” to allow these outlaw forms to be liminal, to occupy the “threshold between or in the margins of categories” (2012: 325). The theoretical and practical question becomes, how do outlaw archives with an investment in finding mediated forms that attend to the complexity of their collections, design online interfaces that leave open the ambiguity of materials without falling back on the ease of deselection? Certainly the desire for images that are as visually and historically legible as possible has implications for the future mediated form of this collection, whose drawers contain many “illegible” images. But what is critical in Saskia’s words is the way she describes her process of “trying,” of being “helpful,” and of acknowledging and thinking through the subjectivity of this whole process, her own investments and their effects on the interface (Scheffer 2013). Moving with care, doing it yourself, deciding together, and thinking about the intersecting values of multiple archives publics, past and present, are digitization practices and forms of affective labour that constitute a feminist politics of getting by in relation to digital media. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, with its willfully provisional, improvisational, and self-critical approach to digitization, is well-equipped to engage with the urgent questions images of sexuality pose in relation to digitization; questions that are inseparable from the archive as a mediated space in transition.

Conclusion

This chapter has followed up a general history of digitization at the LHA with a close examination of the archives' photography collection in transition, considering the selection (and deselection) of images for digitization, interface design, metadata assignment and other forms of description. Looking closely at one collection as it confronts a moment of digital transition zeroes in on the many technical, conceptual, and political choices involved in this process. This analysis foregrounds digitization as a process oriented towards the archives' future. Digitizing a photograph involves looking, thinking, and categorizing with multiple time periods in mind, reading an image with an eye to the milieu of its production, as well as an anticipated future public with needs, expectations and political orientations that can only be imagined today. Straddling this past and future is a present moment in which the LHA finds its way through a pivotal stage in its development; choices about media, technology, and information management form a digital legacy that will inevitably shape ongoing encounters with lesbian history at the archives.

Conclusion

Doing Feminism in an Age of Information Abundance

A single image comes up over and over again when information activists write about their work: it's an image of being overwhelmed by too much paper met by attempts to stay on top of the influx. Clare Potter describes this feeling in her *Guide to Indexing in the Circle of Lesbian Indexers*: "... I suddenly realized that I had accumulated overnight—or so it seemed—hundreds of 3X5 cards. Although they sat quietly in the file drawers in front of me, I began to get this very distinct feeling that they were surreptitiously plotting to disrupt my best laid plans and would in a pique come raining down on me in gleeful anarchy. What I'm intimating here is that the numbers of cards we can safely manage without the help of machines seems finite" (Potter 1979a: 9). Potter gives life to her paper database of lesbian periodicals. The cards become a guerilla army, stalking their master from the drawers as they grow their ranks in anticipation of just the right moment to sabotage the system Potter has put in place to order them.

The "very distinct feeling" Potter tries to describe through this image is one of precarity: an existence of "radical contingency," without predictability, security, or guarantees (Hardt and Negri 2000: 60–61). As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri explain, precarity has a certain temporality experienced when a sequence of events is set in motion over which singular agents do not seem to have any control (61). Try as Potter might to keep her collection of cards within the limits of what "we can safely manage" by hand, the collection continued to grow; such is the paradoxical sequence of events that seems to come along with committing to any information-management project, particularly ones carried out within existing marginal conditions. What seems like so

much possibility at the project's outset—a usable subject-guide to all lesbian periodicals literature—quickly becomes precisely the project's undoing as information accumulates in unmanageable ways; the political success of feminist archives is their cruel optimism. Lauren Berlant describes “cruel optimism” as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object” (2011: 24). In this brief conclusion, I consider feminist information as one such problematic object, and the digital's promise of newer and ever-greater methods of management, preservation, and access as an optimistic site of attachment.

Like Hardt and Negri, Berlant theorizes living in conditions of precarity but does so by thinking through affective attachments to “good life” fantasies as they motivate ways of being in the present (Berlant 2011: 27). Good-life fantasies can be individual—love, happiness, a comfortable middle-class life—or they can be collective: about family, a political scene, or dreams of a reciprocal world (21). The projects I have examined straddle the singular/private and the collective/public, imagining information to serve both kinds of good-life fantasies: the figure of the well-informed “lesbian” is used to imagine a political collective with organized demands, but also to shore-up liveable lives for individual women. This collective/singular tension is expressed in LHA founder Joan Nestle's assertion that the archives exists “for any lesbian woman who needed an image or a word to survive the day” (Nestle 1990: 88), or in JR Roberts's hope that her black lesbian bibliography “will lead to a better understanding of Black lesbian life and that this knowledge will help us all as we attempt to revolutionize our relationships with one another” (Roberts 1981: xii). Nestle and Roberts both posit an active stance, evoking struggle and revolution. Their familiar activist terms are far from the sense of trying not

to get too overwhelmed that Potter expresses towards her drawer of index cards. Potter's words are closer to the register of "styles, active habits, and modes of responsivity" (Berlant 2011: 20) that add up to a politics of getting by. These forms of adjustment and improvisation guide what I have argued is a feminist practice of carrying on with the routine and repetitive tasks required to achieve a greater "good-life" vision of what information might achieve.

Potter describes having too much of the thing she sought in the first place: cards. The tyranny of abundance is a common complaint amongst information activists who face growing pressure exerted by too much stuff and too little time. These conditions shape information activists' everyday approaches to their work processes. Saskia at the LHA describes her willingness to assign less-than-perfect metadata to a digital image this way: "At some point I just need to get stuff up [online] and I can't spend more time waiting for inspiration" (Scheffer 2013). As I have argued, the acceptance of provisionality and welcoming of revision that this approach brings also puts into practice a feminist critique of categorical description's inherent inadequacies to complex forms of life; here, the limitations of time and space have productive effects for the project. Saskia, Potter, and other information activists navigate a careful balance between abundance and scarcity, always catching up to the information they work to wrangle. *Matrices'* network made countless connections possible, but they outgrew the pages of the newsletter, becoming impossible to document. The network's success became an obstacle for its very status as a publication. As Berlant explains, optimism is cruel when the "very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place"

(2011: 24–25). Here the object/scene of desire—the newsletter, the cards or the archives—continues to produce information in need of management.

Feminist archives bring their own scenes of cruel optimism and of carrying on in the face of tasks that seems endless. Writers who set the scene of encountering the Lesbian Herstory Archives often try to get across a sense of being overwhelmed by stuff through descriptions of “piles” and “overflow” that become genre-writing about the space. The LHA’s vertical subject files are “bulging” (Schwartz 1978: 20), the collections are “overwhelming” and “confusing” (Rachel Street, qtd. in Corbman 2014: 2), the special collections are “piled to the ceiling” and “crammed into every available corner” (Corbman 2014: 13–14), the basement is filled with “hundreds of paper documents” (Eichhorn 2013: 47). I made this turn myself in the introduction, describing a basement “overcrowded” with “stuff.” The feeling of being overwhelmed comes up over and over again, but attempts to address this problem through media practices can end up creating more paper, as with Potter’s cards.

The LHA’s collection mandate to preserve and provide access to any records of lesbian lives that would otherwise be lost presents the irony that these lives, once collected, might get lost in the archives’ piles. A pivotal scene in Leslie Feinberg’s landmark, semi-autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) imagines the protagonist Jess leaving a letter for a long-lost lover Theresa at an archives that is probably the LHA. Jess writes, “Since I can’t mail you this letter, I’ll send it to a place where they keep women’s memories safe. Maybe someday, passing through this big city, you will stop and read it. Maybe you won’t” (12). Cvetkovich reads this scene as emblematic of the LHA’s role in making trauma and “erotic feelings the subject of

archival history” (2003: 78). Re-reading *Stone Butch Blues* around the time of Feinberg’s death in 2014 while finishing this dissertation, I came to this passage and felt stressed out. Would Jess/Feinberg’s letter get accessioned properly? Might it get lost in the piles of materials waiting to be processed? Would Jess remember to sign the donor agreement form that will allow future online access to the letter? Would the letter get scanned? How would a finding aid describe Jess’ complex trans embodiment? These technical worries about a moving work of fiction are irrational thoughts furnished by dissertation writing, but there is also something to them about the impossible temporalities of attachment. An imagined future subject who might shore up or challenge the status quo guides information activists, and the work of archiving a past is about attachment to this subject in the future. The ongoing management of information about the past generates more and more materials for this future subject who is always in the process of arriving. Put simply, the archives by its very nature can never catch up to what it seeks.

Describing the LHA’s overwhelming abundance of stuff is to take up Cvetkovich’s argument that “The history of any archive is a history of space, which becomes the material measure and foundation of the archive’s power and visibility as a form of public culture” (2003: 245). But these descriptions also set a scene in which lesbian history is always being made and we are always catching up to its making. As Barbara Godard (2013) has argued, the challenge of archives in the 21st century is that their once black-boxed processes are being put on display. This dissertation’s work has been precisely to put the archives’ digital media practices on display and to situate these practices in an ongoing, perpetual state of information abundance that digital media cannot exactly solve despite promises that it will do so. All kinds of “digital” media

promise mastery over information: the newsletter through its network; the index cards through their nearly computational ability to store and sort; the digital archives with its promise of access and preservation. The interventions with media I have explored in these chapters probe the limits of the digital using resourceful feminist practices that contribute to a gendered history of emergent media: digitization as strategizing and working around constraints.

I have argued that a “digital imperative” shapes the direction of archives in the present, becoming a normative trajectory or standard with the potential to solve the too-much stuff crisis. This is the same digital imperative that led Potter to consider abandoning her cards for a computer program. As Jonathan Sterne (2012) argues, compression is a potent fantasy of digital formats, guiding the development of media infrastructures and technical standards as they encounter users. Compression’s potential is a factor when an organization like the LHA thinks about digitizing the special collections that are “piled to the ceiling” and “crammed into every available corner” (Corbman 2014: 13–14). Digital collections “compress” the space that materials take up in a number of ways: digitized materials are easier to re-locate to offsite storage; fewer visitors need to take up space in the physical archives if they can get what they want online; and finally the “fidelity” of original formats are compressed, as in the case of the noise-reduced, streaming-ready MP3s of cassette-tapes the archives offers.⁴⁹ But compression does little to address the ongoing precarious conditions of information abundance feminists must navigate. Digitization creates an abundance of data that must be managed, kept-track of, stored, and sorted, all processes with which information activists must catch-up and stay afloat. To think through the cruel optimism of

digitization takes up part of a larger turn in media studies towards more modest rubrics. Sterne's work on compression considers "relations built around limits and contingencies rather than ideals of immersion and plenitude" (2012: 4–7). Similar are Steven J. Jackson's approach to media through repair and "broken world thinking" (221) and Lori Emerson's (2014) study of digital literature and computer interfaces through attention to glitches and tinkering. These media scholars, all of them doing historical work, theorize the digital in ways that think beyond progressive or teleological stories of where media have been and where they are going.

Rather than a rupture or solution to the archives' problem of stuff, digital media in practice can often seem quite banal: the LHA continues to digitize tape-after-tape just as they continued to catalogue book-after-book thirty years ago. To be sure, the differences between forms of media matter, but situating digitization at the 21st-century archives in a longer genealogy of activist informational media practices emphasizes continuities and discontinuities between styles of media practice over technologically determined changes.

Following a common approach to information management through feminist media practices from the early 1970s to the present, I have argued that feminists have long thought carefully and intentionally about their work with media, whether with paper or an online interface. To be more modest about the digital is not to dismiss or diminish the work information activists do; quite the opposite. Through media practices, feminist activists take on a familiar killjoy role, supplanting fantasies of the digital with attention to everyday operations and uses that matter. In refusing to share the same orientation to "good" digital objects, they make room for other possible encounters with digital media

(Ahmed 2010: 20).⁵⁰ Through the systems they design and the everyday decisions they make, their work brings into relief such vital questions as what access really means given its often-forgotten gendered dimensions, or what subject-classification and metadata do to perpetuate damaging categorizations. This work, organized around ongoing negotiations about “lesbian’s” relevance and leverage in the past and present, is critical but also puts forward its own versions of joy—motivated by good-life fantasies about collectivity, the erotics of taking part in a sexual public, and the idea that more liveable lives in the present might be built out of loving attention paid to the past. Feminist information activism intervenes with fantasies of digital mastery and abundance but does so in order to make room for its own fantasies of keeping up under the precarious weight of information; that there will continue to be more and more paper to do something with assures a past that matters, a present animated by such vital technologies as newsletter networks, and a future with value in it.

Notes

Notes to Introduction

¹ Information is a slippery term. What do we really mean when we ask for information about a particular topic? This is not always a request for a book or document because information does not necessarily take the form of printed matter. Nor is information quite as raw a thing as “Data”; we expect information to be parsed to some extent before it presents itself as being of use. One thing that is certain about information is that its essential properties are elusive; it is perhaps best characterized through its forms and processes of transmission. Information must be “capable of being stored in, transmitted by, and communicated to inanimate things” (“information, n.”). For example, genetic information becomes information, as it were, when it is transmitted through biological matter.

² Brenton J. Malin (2014) argues that the 19th-century telegraph was thought to incite emotional response that might harm recipients, where telegraph operators (Malin mentions the “telegraph boy” who delivers telegrams on the run) provide emotional mediation between senders, receivers, and technology (35–36). Malin also discusses the effects of Taylorism on communications workers; the prevailing idea during the time of the telegraph was that “emotionally controlled workers could create more efficient industries” (78).

³ “Affect” and “emotion” are slippery terms in critical theory, and while I am interested in holding open some of the ways that they can be confounded, I use emotion to describe feelings when they are articulated as cultural and ascribed to subjects. Affect, following Sarah Ahmed (2004) or Teresa Brennan (2004), describes the force of emotions as they circulate and move either between individuals and groups, or in my case, through media practices, alongside or “as” information.

⁴ See Accardi 2013; Bly and Wooten 2012; Keilty and Dean 2013; Kumbier 2014; Nectoux 2011

⁵ Victoria Hesford performs her own feminist historiography carefully, warning against an “overly schematic presentation” of feminist history in which branches of feminist are thought as discrete splinters (2012: 8–9).

⁶ “Do No Evil” is the “core value” of Google Inc.

⁷ Susan Leigh Star was a sociologist of information systems whose influential work on infrastructure (1996) has helped me to think about the broader integrated media operations of social movements.

Notes to Chapter One

⁸ At the LHA, the creation of a mailing list database to circulate the annual newsletter was the task through which women at the archives learned how to use a personal computer, a precursor to the development of a computerized catalogue of the archives’ holdings.

⁹ Julia Penelope was expelled from two universities as a graduate student and fired from one academic job because she was a lesbian (Brownworth, 2013). The pages of *Matrices* often featured stories and questions about workplace discrimination experienced by lesbian researchers working in institutions. It goes without saying that doing feminist research in universities during this period was risky business for feminist scholars, with or without tenure, and *Matrices* served as survival literature in this context.

¹⁰ SUNY Buffalo was the site of one of the first Women’s Studies departments in the U.S., founded in 1969, thanks in part to the work of Elizabeth Kennedy, co-author of *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (Kennedy 2000).

¹¹ The LHA still maintains subject files of clippings collected by coordinators and also mailed in to the archives in this way.

¹² Jonathan Sterne’s turn to “format” in *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (2013) makes a similar gesture for media historical methods.

¹³ See, for example, the Leather Archives and Museum in Chicago, which has made notable use of social media through its Tumblr page, updated a few times each day: <http://leatherarchives.tumblr.com/>.

¹⁴ See Herstories a Digital Collection, <http://herstories.prattsils.org/omeka/>.

Notes to Chapter Two

¹⁵ Roberts is a pseudonym, and though I have been in touch with JR Roberts, she does not wish to have her real name associated with *Black Lesbians* or the Circle of Lesbian Indexers.

¹⁶ “Desire Lines” does not appear in *Queer Phenomenology*’s index.

¹⁷ All quotes from Potter are from an interview I did with her by telephone on November 16, 2014.

¹⁸ In my interview with Potter she related struggling with the decision of whether or not to “convert” the index to management by computer, which would have involved a lengthy process of inputting already complete cards. She ultimately decided to finish the project by hand.

¹⁹ Amongst Gittings’s papers I found a handwritten note from 1976 in which Gittings’ evaluates the Lesbian Herstory Archives based on a report from a contact who had visited the archives. She writes, “Best described as haphazard except effort at periodicals ♀.” See Gittings 1976.

²⁰ *Paperwork Explosion* (1967), a short film by Jim Henson commissioned by the IBM corporation to advertise their MT/ST word processor, also uses a crisis tone to describe this proliferation of documents, which could be ameliorated through bureaucratic management strategies, especially computing (Henson 1967).

²¹ It is not insignificant that Gittings had to start cutting materials from the general bibliography in the early 1980s because it grew too long. She began to create specialist bibliographies on subtopics that reflected the most popular requests of readers.

²² For a definitive history of RAND, see Ware 2008.

²³ See Reports, RAND Corporation, <http://www.RAND.org/pubs/reports.html>.

²⁴ The late 1970s and early 1980s saw the publication of many instructional manuals for information workers who wanted to learn how to use databases. See Convey 1989 [1977]; Judge and Gerrie 1986; Wilks 1982.

²⁵ Robert Ridinger, who created a complete index to *The Advocate* during his tenure at Northern Illinois University Library, describes sending out a survey to all sixty-seven member collections of the International Association of Lesbian and Gay Archives and Libraries in 1986, when he was a member of the Task Force steering committee. In response, the Task Force learned that ten distinct indexes of gay and lesbian periodicals were being produced at various archives and libraries. The Task Force merged the listings into a common indexing thesaurus, which was then redistributed to each contributing institution (see Marks Ridinger 1997: 95).

²⁶ I am grateful to Kate Eichhorn for this insight on index cards via a discussion we had about her current research on the recipe box as a paper database.

²⁷ The construction of library work as easy because women can do it is a frequent discursive tactic in the history of the political economy of libraries, explored by Garrison. She argues that the feminization of library work had the effect of diminishing the status of public libraries: “Above all, female dominance of librarianship did much to shape the inferior and precarious status of the public library as an important cultural resource and to cause it to evolve into a marginal kind of public amusement service” (Garrison 1972/73: 132).

²⁸ Matt Johnson (2008) identifies *A Women’s Thesaurus* by Mary Ellen Capek (1987) as a “unique project which resulted in a list of descriptors novel in both form and content” that was “tested in many libraries and other information retrieval settings” (22–23).

²⁹ Gittings’s archive includes a great of documentation about the subject heading debate, mostly recorded through her correspondence with the radical library Sandford Berman, a leader in the subject-heading advocacy movement. Gittings and Berman referred to each other as “Sister B” and “Brother S” in these letters. For Berman’s own account of subject heading reform see his introduction to *Radical Cataloging* (Berman 2008).

³⁰ Marga Gomez’s childhood memory of watching lesbians on a David Susskind show features prominently in the introduction to Jose’ Muñoz’s *Disidentifications* (1999: 3–4, 33).

³¹ I cite the letters by date only because of the NYPL’s access restrictions: “No names may be published unless individuals are publicly known to be gay or lesbian, their permission has been obtained, or they are deceased” (Karas and Malsbury 2011/2014: i). All letters are from Box 30, Folder 1, Barbara Gittings and Kay Tobin Lahusen gay history papers and photographs 1855–2009, The New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division.

³² It is tempting to historicize the gay liberation movement and the women’s liberation movement as entirely distinct political projects operating, to some extent, at cross-purposes. The gay liberation movement was, by design, a single-issue politics that sought to diminish differences between people as a rhetorical strategy: homosexuals are “just like everyone else” and so are entitled to the same rights as others. However, as Hesford notes, these two movements were united in their alienation from “heterosexist macho posturing” perpetuated by the male leadership of the New Left and the Black Panther movement. At

various coalition-building conferences organized across these movements in the early 1970s, the commonality of this alienation became apparent (Hessford 2013: n.82 p 284). Gittings herself acted as one of several figures who crossed over between the contexts of feminism and gay liberation, though it was important to her to distinguish between these movements and identify their incommensurability (see Gittings 1980).

³³ Lisa Sloniowski considers the gendered affective labour of library work in contemporary institutional library contexts. She describes library work as a form of care (Sloniowski 2014).

³⁴ Throughout her papers, Gittings never used the word “lesbian” to describe herself, preferring “gay” instead. Yet her appearance on *David Suskind* made her into a figurehead for lesbianism in mainstream contexts despite her resistance to lesbian feminism’s terms.

Notes to Chapter Three

³⁵ Working away at a potentially incompletionable task is not without precedent in the history of libraries, where historical book collections have tended to expand faster than they could be catalogued with paper. This is notable in the legend of the Great Library at Alexandria, which could never catch up though its custodians continued to try. It also was a common work pace during the introduction of card catalogues in the U.S. in the early 19th-century, as Marcus Krajewski documents (Krajewski 2011). New card catalog systems struggled to input existing collections and catch up to the influx of new books libraries acquired.

³⁶ On the cultural politics of microfilm see Baker 2001

³⁷ The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives was also a major contributor to this project. See Gay Rights Movement, Primary Source Media, http://www.cengage.com/search/productOverview.do?Ntt=gay+rights+movement&N=13997921101205114491794788212002924970&N=197&Ntk=APG%7C%7CP_EPI&Ntx=mode%2Bmatchallpartial.

³⁸ The LHA’s annual budget varies from year to year but is generally about \$60,000 (Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation 2013), most of which is spent on basic upkeep such as utility bills, folders, and acid-free boxes. The archives runs many modest fundraising events throughout the year, including a speed-dating event at which I volunteered to sell raffle tickets during my research period. There are also book sales, services auctions, and a commemorative tote-bag drive. A semi-annual art auction that features donated works by notable lesbian artists including Carrie Moyer and Allyson Mitchell.

³⁹ Don McLeod at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives explained that these were the main reasons the organization had not undertaken any kind of digitization program. Conversation with the author, August 27 2013, CLGA, Toronto. Since my initial conversation with McLeod in 2013, the CLGA has partnered with a SSHRC-funded digital collaboratory project run out of the University of Toronto, which will digitize a selection of the archives audio tapes and support their development of a digitization infrastructure. I am a project assistant on this work and have helped to develop the audio digitization system based on my research at the LHA.

⁴⁰ The library science literature on digital archives always makes a point of reminding readers that digitization does not present a permanent solution for the preservation of material. In addition to the ongoing issue of migration, digital records “are easier to destroy than their paper equivalents or they are considered ephemeral anyway” (Spense 2005: 368).

⁴¹ The converter actually costs about \$40 U.S.

⁴² This LHA coordinator wished to provide their interview anonymously and so I have chosen to protect their identity using the substitute name of “OPAC Coordinator,” which describes one of their responsibilities at the archives.

Notes to Chapter Four

⁴³ *Playboy* magazine, for example, has been collected widely by university libraries. Institutions tend to focus on more specious forms of porn; for example, while I could find access to print copies of *Playboy* at Toronto university libraries, the copy of *Penthouse* (raunchier and more working-class in its connotations) I needed for research on this chapter had to be ordered from eBay.

⁴⁴ Many LGBT archives collect or have collected porn including the Archives gaies du Québec in Montreal and the One Archives in Los Angeles, who have a notable Tom of Finland collection.

⁴⁵ On the challenges collecting porn poses for libraries and archives, see Sloniowski 2012.

⁴⁶ See Payne 2006; Stoler 2010; Puar 2007.

⁴⁷ Emerson (2014) has discussed how digital interfaces become most visible when they fail. She writes of productive attempts to “bring the interface back into view again via failure, discomfort, and dissonance” (3). Writing specifically on the interface and marginalized users, Nakamura documents how critiques of the racialization of interfaces might render the interface visible as such (2008: 27).

⁴⁸ LHA founder Nestle’s edited collection *The Persistent Desire: A Femme-Butch Reader* (1992) explores female masculinity. It was recently paid homage by the collection *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme* (Cayote and Sharman 2011) which works to locate the persistent figure of the butch in the present. This new text does consider, though only to a small extent, butch’s relationship to other forms of gender queer, trans, and non-white masculine embodiment.

Notes to Conclusion

⁴⁹ MP3s as a format designed for compression is Sterne’s specific subject (Sterne 2012).

⁵⁰ As Ahmed writes, “to kill joy...is to open a life, to make room for life, to make room for possibility, for chance” (2010: 20).

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