

# Introduction

## *“An Inevitably Political Craft”*

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Addressing a gathering of archival professionals in 1970, Howard Zinn asserted that “[archives are] biased towards the important and powerful people of the society, tending to ignore the impotent and obscure: we learn most about the rich, not the poor; the successful, not the failures; the old, not the young; the politically active, not the politically alienated; men, not women; white, not black; free people rather than prisoners; civilians rather than soldiers; officers rather than enlisted men” (Zinn 1977: 21). While these observations may have been received as an indictment when he delivered this speech, our growing awareness of archival biases has catalyzed a great deal of archival activism. Indeed, those of us who champion archives of oppressed communities can rightfully claim that things have certainly improved in the decades since Zinn’s address. Yet his overarching point remains no less profound: leveraging the power of archives is not “the politicization of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft” (20).

The humanization of the archival craft is particularly compelling for transgender-related archives and archiving. As attention to transgender phenomena continues to increase, the need for thoughtfully conceived and ethically executed trans archival practices becomes all the more pressing. Yet the very basis of this undertaking relies on a daunting definitional and epistemological challenge: in the context of archives, what counts as transgender?

The crux of this challenge resides in the complexity of the word *transgender* itself. While *transgender* is now widely used in contemporary US and Canadian culture, the term is only several decades old, coming into widespread usage in the late 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> In the context of historical research, this very recent and geographically specific emergence of *transgender* means that we must always be mindful of how we are imposing an identity category onto pasts in

which that identity is anachronistic and onto places where that identity is foreign. We can certainly employ other terminology that is more historically and culturally specific, such as *eonist*, *hijra*, *invert*, *travesti*, and so forth. But, problematic as it may be, *transgender* appears to be the most efficient and effective mechanism available for us to cohere these transhistorical and transcultural practices under the same banner. Transgender archiving therefore requires a constant balance of bringing together trans-related materials while also staying attuned to the contexts of their production and to the ways that archives have a tremendous power to shape understandings of those materials.

Readers will quickly notice that the contributors to this issue use a range of constructions of the term, predominantly *transgender*, *trans*, and *trans\**, which we haven't made any attempts to standardize. As coeditors, Aaron Devor and I used *trans\** extensively in the call for papers, following the logic that Avery Brooks Tompkins explains in the first issue of *TSQ*: "In relation to transgender phenomena, the asterisk is used . . . to open up *transgender* or *trans* to a greater range of meanings" (2014: 26). The use of the asterisk as a wildcard operator for a search seems to have inspired this construction, but it is only logical in a textual and theoretical sense—not only is *trans\** difficult to convey in speech, but in an archival context it is also impractical, since search results for *trans\** would cast far too wide of a net (e.g., translation, transformer) and would also fail to include many of the identities (e.g., genderqueer, gender fluid) that it was meant to include. Interestingly, some of the initial supporters of *trans\** are now critical of the term because they believe that the asterisk has been "applied in inaccessible, binarist, and transmisogynist ways" (Trans Student Educational Resources 2015), whereas others have suggested that since "trans (or transgender) is the umbrella term" (Gabriel 2014), no additional broadening term is necessary. Beyond the specific arguments about which term is preferable, what this debate illustrates is the ongoing instability of terminology, which will continue to vex archives. This debate also hints at the challenges of archival praxis—just as *trans\** is not a practically useful search term, archives often need to reconcile what is theoretically ideal with what is practically possible.

A similar challenge presents itself with another tension of terminology in this issue—the use of *archive* versus *archives*. Archival professionals have passionately argued that the only viable use of *archives* is in the plural, referring to an established professionalized practice (Theimer 2012). Such defenses of *archives* seem to have been precipitated by the archival turn in the academy, which inspired scholars to use *archives* to loosely refer to any collection of materials, and even more concerning for some, scholars simultaneously started to use *archive* in the singular as a theoretical construct. The use of *archive* has been critiqued for homogenizing archives and distancing scholars from the actual places where

historical materials are maintained and accessed (Hawhee and Olson 2013). While I understand the desire to keep *archives* professionalized and to guard against the abstraction of *archive*, several articles in this issue show how *archive* as a theoretical concept can be tremendously helpful when broadly referring to the historical record (beyond any particular archives) and the mechanisms for recording and accessing that record.

As the eleven articles in this issue help to demonstrate, the archiving of transgender materials is happening in a range of contexts—from major university collections, to grassroots community archives, to personal collections. At times, *transgender* is used as the central collection principle for an archive, as is the case for the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria, directed by coeditor Aaron Devor, and the online repository that I am in the process of developing, the Digital Transgender Archive.<sup>2</sup> More commonly, transgender materials find their way into archives with broader collection scopes, often with varying degrees of intentionality on the part of archivists. Even more commonly, and quite troublingly, the majority of transgender materials never find their way into archives at all.

When transgender materials are archived, there are a number of challenges that these materials present: What types of materials should be archived to document transgender experiences, people, and communities? What terminology should be used to describe these materials, particularly when the term *transgender* isn't fitting? When there are too many materials, how do we decide what to prioritize and who gets to decide? When there are gaps in particular areas, what strategies can we use to address those gaps? What are the privacy concerns that are specific to transgender materials, and how should archivists navigate those concerns? What interpretive frameworks would provide researchers with a richer context for transgender materials? Do transgender materials elicit different sorts of researcher engagement and affective responses?

This special issue offers the first collective attempt to think through some of these questions and some of the specific considerations that energize transgender archives and archiving. While I have solo-authored this introduction, it is important to note that the editing of this special issue has been a thoroughly collaborative venture between me and Aaron Devor. The finished product of this volume demonstrates not only the success of our particular editorial collaboration but also the incredible benefits of bringing together practical and theoretical treatments of archives.

### Emerging Archives

How do we confront archival gaps? Many archival efforts are initiated by this very question as they attempt to respond to what Harrison Apple demonstrates is a

politics of absence. In some cases, absence is a result of misreadings of existing materials, while in other cases, there is a complete vacancy in the historical record. The four articles that begin this special issue seek to address archival gaps with a variety of different strategies—using narrative to correct misinterpretations, animating historical memory through dance, and, in two cases, building grassroots collections from the ground up. Three out of the four articles discuss oral history as a strategy for confronting archival absences, which makes sense—it involves dynamic participation by both interviewers and interviewees, it provides an on-the-ground way to create historical record(ing)s (especially when other types of records are not available), and it can be made accessible fairly easily.

The issue opens with Harrison Apple's "The \$10,000 Woman: Trans Artifacts in the Pittsburgh Queer History Project Archive," which touches upon several critical challenges of determining what constitutes transgender history. In 2014, when the Pittsburgh Queer History Project hosted an exhibit of photographs and ephemera from working-class after-hours gay clubs, the exhibit incited additional historical contextualization that shifted the entire framework for understanding those materials. In effect, the visitors "reanimate[d]" and "remap[ped]" the images, ultimately revealing "trans history previously illegible in the photographs." Apple explains that the donor, who had initially categorized these materials as "drag show," "flattened a rich history of transsexuality, [by] situating TS representation as a product of gay entertainment." Apple uses this specific case to show that archival materials should be a starting point, arguing that "the archive must continue to be narrated beyond the visible record."

Throughout his career, choreographer and dancer Sean Dorsey has developed a range of archival practices that similarly push beyond traditional forms of the historical record. In "Moving Transgender Histories: Sean Dorsey's Trans Archival Practice," Maxe Crandall and Selby Wynn Schwartz show how the stage becomes a "place [for Dorsey] to reveal what has been hidden from history," in terms of absent materials and the absence of the body. Crandall and Schwartz describe Dorsey's project as "an embodied public practice of danced historiography," which relies upon Dorsey's body "as an active site for historical transmission" through various methodologies such as handwritten transcription and conducting oral histories. Ultimately, "[Dorsey's] archival practice . . . emerges from questions about how the body encounters the archive, how the body moves in the archive, and how the archive moves the body." This emphasis on the body is particularly salient for transgender archives, which revolve around deeply embodied experiences.

As with the alternative archival historiographies that are detailed in the first two articles, Liesl Theron and Tshepo Ricki Kgositau stake out new archival territory in their article "The Emergence of a Grassroots African Trans Archive."

As part of their work with Gender DynamiX, Theron and Kgositau have helped to facilitate the archivization of important trans materials in Africa. Meant to be read in conjunction with the African Trans Timeline posted on the Digital Transgender Archive ([www.digitaltransarchive.net](http://www.digitaltransarchive.net)), the authors position this article as “a first contribution from the African continent.” Their purpose is to provide some critical contextualization of the trans-related archival efforts in English-speaking countries of sub-Saharan Africa, particularly by discussing the common conflation of gender identity and sexual orientation, and the depiction of “homosexuality and (by default in [the] implication) transgender people [as] ‘un-African,’ ‘an abomination,’ ‘sinful,’ ‘against nature,’ ‘against culture,’ and a ‘Western import.’” Such contextual information shows that emerging archives can have truly revolutionary power.

Joshua Trey Barnett and Brandon J. Hill are engaging in similar work of building a collection from the ground up in order to instigate social change, as they describe in “Covert Operation: Archiving the Experiences of Transgender Service Members in the US Military.” Barnett and Hill mobilize oral histories alongside statistical information and visual images to come as close as they can to a complete picture of transgender military experiences. They pursue three questions: “First, why create a transgender military archive? Second, what constitutes an archive of transgender military experience? And, third, what are the political stakes of developing this archive?” The function of the collection they are developing is unapologetically activist in aim; they explain, “we have constructed our archive in order to . . . disrupt or have a direct effect on . . . exclusionary military policies.” Because it is not possible to serve openly as transgender in the US military, their collection faces a different sort of absence and erasure, which also provides political exigency for the project. Such archives can be transformative, not just for the political change that is catalyzed by their recording of history but for the transformative power they offer participants who are collectively creating emerging archives.

### **Established Archives**

While the first four articles of this issue showcase the purpose and process of creating new and alternative archives, the three articles that follow illustrate that established archives face their own series of challenges as well. In all three articles, the authors consider archival collections that include transgender materials as one portion of a broader collecting scope. Such contexts for trans materials incite questions of visibility, ethics, and accessibility—how do you effectively direct researcher attention to trans materials, particularly when *transgender* isn’t used to describe those materials? In what ways can collections solicit or create more trans

materials? What concerns of privacy, confidentiality, and access are involved with archiving trans materials?

Nicholas Matte's "Without a Minority/Identity Framework: Highlighting Trans Archival Materials at the University of Toronto's Sexual Representation Collection" opens this section by exploring an archival collection that doesn't use identity as its organizing logic. As he explains, "One of the advantages of the fact that the Sexual Representation Collection is not explicitly trans-centric is that it facilitates connections with issues, materials, and communities that relate directly to its core theme of sexual representation without excluding materials that are neither trans nor LGBTQ." The trade-off is that trans materials are often not easily found, and researchers may need to rely on archivists to direct them to those materials. Despite this risk of invisibility, Matte argues that "it isn't always necessary to adopt a trans-centric or trans identity framework to show that trans people have played significant roles in niche and minority communities as well as mainstream sexual cultures." Indeed, it can be quite powerful to have trans materials dispersed throughout many different types of collections.

The two articles that round out this section—"The Tretter Collection: What We Have, What's Missing, and the Challenges of Trans History" by Lisa Vecoli and "Trans\* Collecting at the Schlesinger Library: Privacy Protection and the Challenges of Description and Access" by Laura Peimer—both grapple with the "challenges" that trans materials present for their collections. Vecoli's article offers a critical reflection on why the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota Libraries has large gaps in transgender materials, which she explains is a result of not only the specific focus of the original collectors but also the smaller amount of materials produced by trans communities. To counteract this dearth, Vecoli works hard to develop the transgender collections—she has purchased materials, solicited donations from other archives, built relationships with local contacts to secure future donations, highlighted trans materials in other University of Minnesota library collections, and started creating new materials with a multiyear oral history project. Resonating with Matte's position, Vecoli suggests that "it is important to balance centralization and dispersal of trans materials in specialized archives, general GLBT archives, and even into mainstream collections."

Peimer's article on the trans\* holdings at the Schlesinger Library takes a more specific approach. As she describes key trans collections, Peimer explains how the library responded to issues of privacy, access, and description that these materials presented. With the Mark Ethan Smith Papers, for example, they had to carefully select subject headings appropriate for a person who self-identified not as transgender but as a "biological female who lives as a person without regard to sex." Ultimately, as Peimer shows, "balancing access to collections with privacy

concerns and applying appropriate description to a collection involves navigating the rights of donors, third parties, and the needs of users.” This perpetual negotiation is perhaps the central challenge facing established archives that collect transgender materials.

### **Engaging Archives**

How are researchers drawn into archives to work with transgender materials, and what do we do when we are there? While the first two sections of this special issue focus on emerging and established archives, the final section delves into the archives and shows how researchers engage with specific archival materials. These four articles offer discussions of specific archival objects that provided the authors with research challenges, opportunities for affective engagements, or points of departure for theorizing trans archiving and notions of the archive more broadly. The authors are particularly engaged by elusive historical subjects, figures around whom archival materials are amassed, yet somehow they remain mysterious, just out of reach.

Ms. Bob Davis opens this section with the article, “Using Archives to Identify the Trans\* Women of Casa Susanna.” Offering an archival research method for photographic identification, Davis explains how codes in early trans\* publications, which were initially used for anonymity, can now be used to connect archival materials. In discussing the circulation and collection of photographs during the Casa Susanna era (roughly the late 1950s through the mid-1970s), Davis suggests that these images not only facilitated community formation but also functioned to affirm and preserve female identities. Davis explains how it was that, throughout this thriving photographic exchange, many individuals used multiple names to navigate their lives as cross-dressers and to protect themselves from discrimination. Davis prompts us to consider “what is ethical to reveal about these people who may have literally led two lives.” This article offers advice on not only how to gather helpful identifying information but also what we should do with it once we have it.

The archival materials of Robert J. Stoller, an influential researcher, some of whose trans-related work overlapped with the last few years of the Casa Susanna era, serve as the catalyst for the dialogue between Chase Joynt and Kristen Schilt in their article “Anxiety at the Archive.” The authors offer a series of thoughtful reflections on particular historical objects, which they present as if we are in the archives alongside them. By foregrounding their own responses to these materials, the authors pursue the question: “How can we engage historical objects while accounting for our contemporary vantage points, structural locations, professional investments, and affective attachments?” Their dialogue serves as a

partial answer to that question, as they reflect on their positions, contexts, and emotional responses to the materials they find.

Similarly animated by a deeply personal and emotional archival encounter, Marika Cifor's article, "Presence, Absence, and Victoria's Hair: Examining Affect and Embodiment in Trans Archives," focuses on a strange archival object: a piece of hair stuck in Victoria Schneider's lipstick. This becomes an "identificatory object" for Cifor and inspires a thoughtful meditation on the location of the trans body in the archival record. "Victoria's hair is detritus matter that matters," Cifor argues, because it "challenges the notion that the body can be seen only in its necessary absence." By taking seriously her own embodied and affective response to this object, Cifor also quietly invites us to indulge in the theoretical possibilities of our own identificatory objects.

For Rebekah Edwards, one such object seems to be the 1917 image of Geraldine Portica, a mysterious figure who we only know through a single image. This image was included in the personal scrapbook of San Francisco police chief Jesse Brown Cook, with a detailed inscription asserting, "This is not a girl," which Edwards also uses for the title of this article, "'This Is Not a Girl': A Trans\* Archival Reading." Edwards explores what it means to include such an image in a trans\* archive and how such a process might conjure trans\* archival praxis. Edwards works through the multiple significations of Portica's body from an intersectional perspective; "noting that Portica was a 'native of Mexico,' someone whose English and, by extension, masculinity were marked by a foreign accent, allowed Cook to situate Portica's gender presentation as 'foreign.'" Using negation as a point of entry into trans\* archival praxis, Edwards explores how "trans\* archival methodologies that seek to recuperate or resignify documents produced in the service of regulatory/judicial/medical archives are engaged with reading the negation animating these artifacts as the very sign of their (now) trans\* signification." The challenge of this approach is that the subject of this image, Portica herself, remains utterly elusive. To navigate such a significant limitation, Edwards suggests that we "turn our analysis to the structures that produced the Portica/Cook document, the historic moment of its production, and the epistemic limitations through which this current project has formulated her."

With Apple's opening article and Edwards's concluding one, we have bookended this special issue with two pieces that make similar moves—they use images to explore far-reaching questions about archival erasures, historical subjectivity, and the political power of archiving. Unlike Apple's fortuitous opportunity to bring to light narratives from transgender people by teasing their stories out of a history that was misrepresenting them, Edwards's subject, Portica, is completely silent, which is far too often the case with those few transgender historical figures about whom we even have records. With Portica, and with so



many like her who populate our trans archives, we are entrusted with scant remnants of their lives, yet also with plentiful practical and theoretical challenges. We hope this issue will mark the beginning of a sustained and energetic exploration of these challenges.

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### Notes

1. For a more detailed discussion of this term's emergence, see Rawson and Williams 2014 and the corresponding time line posted on my homepage (Rawson 2015).
2. For more information, please see [transgenderarchives.uvic.ca](http://transgenderarchives.uvic.ca) and [www.digitaltransarchive.net](http://www.digitaltransarchive.net).

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