

**LGBTQ2+ Libraries and Archives Post-Stonewall:  
How LGBTQ2+ People Have Preserved and Shared Information**

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## Introduction

The Stonewall riots of 1969 not only marked a significant turning point in the LGBTQ2+ liberation movement but also catalyzed a profound transformation in the preservation and dissemination of LGBTQ2+ history, community, and culture. This pivotal event sparked the adaptation of existing libraries and the establishment of new archives, amplifying the visibility of the LGBTQ2+ community, enhancing information accessibility, and celebrating the resilience and diversity of its members. This paper aims to explore the post-Stonewall rise of LGBTQ2+ libraries and archives through the lenses of history and activism. It examines the evolution from mere collections to vibrant community hubs, revealing the progress achieved in overcoming challenges and highlights the profound impact of preserving and sharing LGBTQ2+ information. Ultimately, this exploration accentuates the pivotal role of these institutions as catalysts for education, research, community empowerment, and societal change. Through this examination, it becomes evident that these repositories not only preserve history but actively shape a more equitable and empathetic future for LGBTQ2+ individuals and their allies.

## The Evolution of Inclusive Collections

While today it is still relatively easy to find libraries where LGBTQ2+ materials have been excluded due to the current focus on book challenges and bans, libraries are trying hard to keep LGBTQ2+ materials accessible to their communities. In the history of libraries and archives there was a time where many, if not most institutions were intentionally avoiding, hiding, or even destroying LGBTQ2+ materials. If you were an important enough man, an archive might have preserved your personal letters, but would have regarded your relationship as one of “close

friends” or perhaps “roommates”.<sup>1</sup> Of course, for as long as there have been LGBTQ2+ people, there have also been people who tried their hardest to preserve their history - to pass it on to the next generation of LGBTQ2+ people, to have their culture and community made visible, to share with the world beyond their lifetime that they existed and always have. However, in North America the 1970’s marked an upswing in the number of intentionally LGBTQ2+ programs, collections, and archives, in part due to the extensive fight for LGBTQ2+ liberation marked by the Stonewall riots.<sup>2</sup>

The Stonewall riots were a turning point in the LGBTQ2+ history of the United States. Perhaps more accurately, they were a breaking point for those with LGBTQ2+ identities, sparking a fight for LGBTQ2+ liberation that had been simmering for a long time. When LGBTQ2+ communities needed spaces to come together, as they both searched for and made history, and as they tried to make their culture visible, libraries and archives reacted: they made space, they began to collect LGBTQ2+ artifacts to preserve information about this unique point in time, and they shared LGBTQ2+ materials with those who needed it. It became abundantly clear how important it was to collect, preserve, and share LGBTQ2+ works.<sup>3</sup> Often, the libraries and archives that created spaces for LGBTQ2+ culture and history did so because of LGBTQ2+ staff and volunteers, with many LGBTQ2+ archives founded at the time having been created solely by LGBTQ2+ people themselves.<sup>4</sup> One of the most significant impacts was the emergence of community-based archives and libraries, of which there are now about thirty in the US and five in Canada.<sup>5</sup> These acts to preserve LGBTQ2+ culture and history were also in defiance of

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<sup>1</sup> Greenblatt, “Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users” 121–45

<sup>2</sup> Baumann, “Love and Resistance: Out of the Closet into the Stonewall Era”

<sup>3</sup> Greenblatt, “Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users”

<sup>4</sup> Hollingsworth, “The Role the LGBTQ+ Community Plays in Preserving Their Own History: The Rise of LGBTQIA+ Grassroots Archives”

<sup>5</sup> Stein, “Lgbt, Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History in America: Race to Zulma, appendix, index”

the organizations that would refuse to acquire and maintain LGBTQ2+ material, or that would have otherwise hidden or destroyed artifacts of LGBTQ2+ history.<sup>6</sup>

The creation of more LGBTQ2+ libraries and archives has not only helped to improve the preservation and sharing of LGBTQ2+ history - it has increased opportunities for and supported academic research, furthered awareness, and provided educational opportunities for LGBTQ2+ people and allies alike.<sup>7</sup> In the 21st century, an increase in the digitization of these materials has compounded the positive effects of LGBTQ2+ libraries and archives by making them more broadly accessible and searchable, thus increasing awareness, preservation, engagement, and community involvement.<sup>8</sup>

One example of a digitized LGBTQ2+ archive is the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA), which can be found at the URL “[www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net](http://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net)”. Founded by K.J. Rawson and Nick Matte, the idea for the DTA occurred in 2008, after the pair realized they shared challenges while trying to research transgender history, often finding their research delayed or entirely prevented by physical and economic barriers, as well as language barriers created by the way language changes over time and the way materials are labeled across institutions. While the word “transgender” or “trans” is commonly used now, this word has developed over time and other words have fallen out of favor - but are often represented in historic material. Materials for the collection began to be more broadly acquired starting in 2013, and the archive was ready to be made public in 2016.<sup>9</sup>

The intention of the archive is for materials to be widely accessible over the internet, as explained by their mission statement: “The purpose of the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA) is

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<sup>6</sup> Greenblatt, “Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users”

<sup>7</sup> Lukenbill, “Modern gay and lesbian libraries and archives in North America: a study in community identity and affirmation”

<sup>8</sup> Cociolo, “Community Archives in the Digital Era: A Case from the LGBT Community”

<sup>9</sup> Digital Transgender Archive, “Overview”

to increase the accessibility of transgender history by providing an online hub for digitized historical materials, born-digital materials, and information on archival holdings throughout the world.”<sup>10</sup> While the DTA is based out of Boston, Massachusetts, it does not house all of the physical materials itself.<sup>11</sup> Rather, it digitizes and centralizes digitized materials from about 121 collections across the globe, allowing them to be easily searchable while still providing information on where the physical materials are housed when applicable. All together, the DTA includes over 11,000 items. An interesting feature of their website is the inclusion of a map that shows where materials are housed across the globe, though they also include a list of collaborating institutions housing these materials, as well as a list of collections the materials are part of.

With the barrier of changing language over time, and a desire to make these digitized materials accessible and easily searchable, it is important to note the different ways one can interact with and search the DTA. Their website has a standard search bar, with some advanced features, though it cannot parse boolean terms. Notably though, if a user does not want to use the search bar and would prefer to browse to find materials, there are two ways of doing so: by “topic” and by “genre”. Topic refers to what a given material is about, with some examples of topics being “Transgender People”, “Clothing”, or “Support Groups”. Genre on the other hand, refers to the type of material itself. Some genres present in the DTA are “Photographs”, “Ephemera”, or “Correspondence”. Regardless of how one chooses to search or browse the DTA, there are many options for refining your search, making it easy to find material related to interest or research.

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<sup>10</sup> Digital Transgender Archive, “Policies”

<sup>11</sup> Digital Transgender Archive, “Overview”

## Community Engagement

The landscape of contemporary libraries and archives has undergone a transformative journey since the Stonewall era, evolving beyond the mere accumulation of historical materials to actively engage with and empower the LGBTQ2+ community. This section delves into the transformative initiatives reshaping these archives, spotlighting targeted outreach programs, the intersection of activist and community archives, and the ongoing discourse surrounding community engagement within these invaluable repositories of LGBTQ2+ history. By bridging institutional boundaries and embracing community driven initiatives, these ventures reflect a fundamental shift in the role of libraries and archives, transforming them into vibrant hubs that not only archive but actively engage with and empower the multifaceted LGBTQ+ experiences and narratives.

Elsbeth H. Brown's article, "Annihilation, and the LGBTQ2+ Community Archive," published in the journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists in 2020, presents a thought provoking exploration into the challenges faced by LGBTQ2+ community archives in fostering inclusivity and representing marginalized voices within their collections.<sup>12</sup> Brown, a historian and board member at the ArQuives, an LGBTQ2+ community archive in Canada, and director of the LGBTQ2+ Oral History Digital Collaboratory, offers a critical analysis of the historical underrepresentation of Trans and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) histories within the archive's narratives.<sup>13</sup> The article delves into Brown's personal journey as a volunteer at the ArQuives, reflecting on the archive's origins as a white, gay-liberation-focused institution and the subsequent efforts to bring an intersectional, trans-inclusive framework to its collections.

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<sup>12</sup> Elspeth H. Brown, "Archival Activism, Symbolic Annihilation, and the LGBTQ2+ Community Archive"

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

Through this introspective narrative, Brown emphasizes the necessity of reimagining and actively reshaping LGBTQ2+ community archives to better represent and engage with diverse identities.

Brown sheds light on pivotal aspects crucial for a more representative LGBTQ2+ archive, influencing how libraries, archives, and museums engage with communities through outreach and programs.<sup>14</sup> Her focus on the Collaboratory's efforts in crafting the trans collections guide underlines the pressing need for visibility of LGBTQ2+ narratives beyond the dominant white, cis, settler colonial norm. This imperative to diversify collections without reproducing colonial relations resonates deeply within the realm of community engagement. Brown's propositions, such as adopting a post custodial approach, offer transformative possibilities by empowering record custodians and maintaining narratives in their authentic context. These strategies not only shape archival activism practices within historically white, cis-centric LGBTQ2+ community archives but also exemplify a larger movement in libraries, archives, and museums towards anti-racist and trans-positive practices. By collaboratively engaging with marginalized communities, especially in initiatives like Toronto's Black Queer Archival Project, these institutions forge vital connections and render visible structural histories within their collections.<sup>15</sup> The multifaceted approaches mark a significant stride in how these institutions actively engage with communities, combatting symbolic annihilation, and paving the way for more inclusive, representative archives that resonate with diverse narratives.

Another pivotal facet of LGBTQ2+ community archives' evolution involves the implementation of targeted outreach programs geared towards engaging marginalized communities within the spectrum. Initiatives like the "Narrating Our Own Stories," as detailed

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<sup>14</sup> Elspeth H. Brown, "Archival Activism, Symbolic Annihilation, and the LGBTQ2+ Community Archive"

<sup>15</sup> Courtney MacFarlane, "Legacies in Motion: Black Queer Toronto Archival Project," Myseum of Toronto, 2019, <https://www.myseumoftoronto.com/>.



by the Queering the Museum Project, actively invites queer individuals, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to participate in digital storytelling workshops.<sup>16</sup> These workshops not only provide a safe space for expression but also serve as a means to archive and amplify the voices of LGBTQ2+ whose narratives might otherwise remain unheard. By centering on oral history collection and documentation, this initiative not only preserves vital histories but also fosters intergenerational connections within the LGBTQ2+ community. These programs, emphasizing storytelling and oral histories, aim to bridge generational and cultural divides, ensuring that marginalized voices are not only heard but also archived and celebrated within the rich tapestry of LGBTQ2+ histories.

The intersection of activist archives and community archives, exemplified by institutions like the ArQuives, provides a nuanced perspective on the role of archivists in shaping narratives and preserving marginalized histories. Andrew Flinn's characterization of the activist archivist emphasizes a departure from traditional notions of neutrality, acknowledging the archivist's active role in record creation and stewardship within social justice movements.<sup>17</sup> This concept aligns with the essence of community archives, which, as articulated by Susan Pell, serve as crucial spaces of empowerment and self determination for marginalized groups, intervening in dominant discourses about power and knowledge production.<sup>18</sup> However, the dichotomy often drawn between mainstream and community archives portrays community archives as oppositional to mainstream repositories, challenging erasure. Yet, this dichotomy might not comprehensively apply to all LGBTQ2+ archives, particularly in defining what constitutes 'the

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<sup>16</sup>“Narrating Our Own Stories: A Queer Digital Storytelling Project,” Queering the Museum Project, April 17, 2016, <https://queeringthemuseum.org/previous-projects/narrating-our-own-stories-a-queer-digital-storytelling-project/>.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Flinn, “Archival Activism: Independent and Community-Led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions,” *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, May 31, 2011, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9pt2490x>.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Pell, “Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive: An Ethnographic Reading of an Activist Archive,” *Archivaria*, accessed December 11, 2023, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13543>.

mainstream'.<sup>19</sup> Despite their roots as outsider archives sustained by volunteer labor and driven by specific communities, these archives, exemplified by the ArQuives, transcend rigid categorizations. They engage in radical history making endeavors, preserving artifacts and narratives often overlooked by conventional archives. For instance, the ArQuives curates diverse materials, including items related to performances by transgender sex workers, emphasizing the haptic, material history of radical social movements. This dynamic approach to archiving aligns with the premise of this section, showcasing how activist archives, functioning as community driven initiatives, expand the scope of LGBTQ2+ histories, challenging traditional archival practices to create a more inclusive and multifaceted representation of marginalized experiences.

The discourse surrounding community archives grapples extensively with defining the term "community" and despite varied attempts to delineate it, a prevalent definition suggests a group united by shared interests or identities, often juxtaposed against normative, mainstream formations.<sup>20</sup> However, within LGBTQ2+ libraries, archives and museums, the critique of the term "community" emerges, revealing a notable absence of intersectional lenses in discussing LGBTQ2+ or queer archives.<sup>21</sup> This critique unveils a tendency to homogenize diverse identities under the LGBTQ2+ umbrella, inadvertently perpetuating structural inequalities by neglecting differences within the acronym. For instance, a study on queer archives in California, while using "queer" as an overarching term, neglects to examine how other factors like race, gender, or embodied history shape these spaces, inadvertently centering cisgender gay and lesbian experiences.<sup>22</sup> This observation urgently illuminates the need for an intersectional approach in

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<sup>19</sup> Susan Pell, "Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive: An Ethnographic Reading of an Activist Archive"

<sup>20</sup> Ellen Greenblatt, "Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service, Collections and Access"

<sup>21</sup> Elspeth H. Brown, "Archival Activism, Symbolic Annihilation, and the LGBTQ2+ Community Archive"

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

discussing and curating LGBTQ2+ archives to avoid reproducing normative formations and acknowledging the complexity of identities within these archival spaces.

## Challenges and Progress in Archiving LGBTQ2+ History

Attempting to capture the entire history of LGBTQ2+ history would be an impossible task, as would an attempt to capture the entire history of any community or culture. However, as many community activists and academic researchers have noted, the LGBTQ2+ community has been largely silenced, ignored, or otherwise absent from the collecting practices of libraries, archives, museums (LAMS).<sup>23</sup>

As David Bindle alluded to in discussing the provenance of much of the University of Saskatchewan's collections on sexual and gender diversity, there is a long history of queer communities emphasizing personal collection and preservation since the early 20th century.<sup>24</sup> These pioneers of queer life and those who followed laid the groundwork for preserving much of the early history of the Gay Liberation Movement during a time when homosexuality was illegal in many areas of the United States.<sup>25</sup> While the Gay Liberation Movement was gaining momentum, and with it a sense of growing pride in collecting LGBTQ2+ materials, the AIDS/HIV epidemic was quick to bring a sense of urgency as many in the queer community were impacted by the virus. As with many grassroots archives driven by passion over professional understanding, errors in cataloging, appropriate storage, and volunteers overwhelmed at the sheer volume of materials were common issues that Abigail Hollingsworth

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<sup>23</sup> Barry Loveland and Malinda Triller Doran, "Out of the Closet and into the Archives: A Partnership Model for Community-Based Collection and Preservation of LGBTQ History," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 83, no. 3 (July 1, 2016): 418–24, <https://doi.org/10.5325/pennhistory.83.3.0418>.

<sup>24</sup> Munro and Bindle, 2023; Abigail Hollingsworth, "The Role the LGBTQ2+ Community Plays in Preserving Their Own History: The Rise of LGBTQIA+ Grassroots Archives," *SLIS Connecting* 11, no. 2 (January 1, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.18785/slis.1102.05>.

<sup>25</sup> Danielle Cooper, "House Proud: An Ethnography of the BC Gay and Lesbian Archives," *Archival Science* 16, no. 3 (July 16, 2015): 261–88, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9250-8>.

points out in the 2022 analysis of the Lesbian Herstory Archives, June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, The ArQuives, Stonewall National Museum and Archives, and Jon J. Wilcox Jr. Archives (Way Gay Archives).

As Rachel Wexelbaum notes in *Queers Online* a historically common way for school and public libraries to avoid dealing with controversy has been through self-censorship: choosing to not purchase, hide, or otherwise not promote LGBTQ2+ materials.<sup>26</sup> While censorship of print materials covering LGBTQ2+ topics, including queer characters, queer creators, and queer-friendly publishers has come into the limelight again as the American Library Association's (ALA) preliminary data on 2023 book challenges indicates an uptick in overall book challenges with a particular focus on LGBTQ2+ materials in public library collections, the response of county boards and public library staff is shifting towards upholding LGBTQ2+ rights and defending Intellectual Freedom (Freedom to Read) rights.<sup>27</sup> Recent studies examining the inclusivity of Library, Archive, and Museum Systems (LAMS) reveal a significant silence and inadequacy in providing accessibility to queer materials. This sentiment is echoed in Elliot Freeman's observation that the absence of comprehensive and explicit descriptive metadata significantly influences the "(in)visibility and (in)accessibility of queer records within institutional archives".<sup>28</sup> This prevalent issue is encountered across numerous LAMS and is frequently amplified during digitization initiatives. However, several LGBTQ2+ digital archives, including the Digital Trans Archive already discussed, are making progress on this front.

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<sup>26</sup> Rachel Wexelbaum, ed., *Censorship of Online LGBTIQ Content in Libraries, Queers Online: LGBTQ Digital Practices in Libraries, Archives, and Museums* (Litwin Books, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Raymond Garcia, "American Library Association Releases Preliminary Data on 2023 Book," News and Press Center, September 20, 2023, accessed December 11, 2023, <https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2023/09/american-library-association-releases-preliminary-data-2023-book-challenges>.

<sup>28</sup> Elliot Freeman, "Defying Description: Searching for Queer History in Institutional Archives," *Archival Science* 23, no. 3 (April 20, 2023): 447–70, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-023-09415-9>.

The Neil Richards Collection of Gender and Sexual Diversity, housed in the University of Saskatchewan's (USask) Special Collections department, stands out as a recently updated university library collection dedicated to enhancing accessibility in the electronic search process, while concurrently striving to make its physical items readily available for both personal and academic research. In the years following the Stonewall riots and rise of the Gay Liberation Movement across Saskatchewan and Canada, the University of Saskatchewan Library naturally included titles by queer authors and researchers in the general collection stacks, but did not have a dedicated home or collection policy for materials of interest or pertaining to the LGBTQ2+ community until well-known community activist and university librarian Neil Richards slowly convinced colleagues at the library of the importance of bringing the materials together in what would eventually become the Neil Richards Collection of Gender and Sexual Diversity.<sup>29</sup> Published in 2010, the Neil Richards Collection is one of the earliest and largest collections of LGBTQ2+ interest to be acquired by a Canadian public archive.<sup>30</sup> This collection contains over 8,500 items and distinguishes itself by prioritizing uniqueness rather than duplicating materials present in other LGBTQ2+ focused collections. Its primary focus revolves around the queer communities of Saskatchewan, drawing contributions from local, national, and international donors. Additionally, it has established three subseries titles to emphasize the collection's strengths: Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Pulp Literature, Canadian Gay and Lesbian Collection, and Queer Mystery and Detective Fiction.<sup>31</sup>

David Bindle, the USask Special Collections Librarian, highlights the presence of the Neil Richards archive fonds at the University of Saskatchewan. Alongside this collection are the

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<sup>29</sup> Desirae Munro conversation with David Bindle, USask Special Collections Librarian, December 7, 2023

<sup>30</sup> Leslie-Ann Schlosser, "Remembering Neil Richards," *Alumni and Friends*, April 26, 2018, <https://alumni.usask.ca/news/2018/remembering-neil-richards.php>

<sup>31</sup> "USask Library and Archival Resources: Sexual and Gender Diversity," University of Saskatchewan, accessed December 1, 2023 <https://libguides.usask.ca/c.php?g=710538&p=5062974>

Doug Wilson fonds, a sessional lecturer at USask's College of Education whose supervision of student teachers was prohibited due to his sexuality—a human rights case barred from court hearing by a Court of Queen's Bench decision in 1976. Also included is the Peter McGhee fonds, pertaining to an American novelist known for works like 'Boys Like Us' and recognized as Doug Wilson's partner. David Brindle commented on reports from the 1980s, following the high-profile Doug Wilson Affair, of books and other materials in the general stacks of the University Library being vandalized, stolen, or otherwise made inaccessible due to their "queer nature". However, since the Neil Richards Collection of Gender and Sexual Diversity was established there have been no further incidents.<sup>32</sup> At least once a year, the USask Special Collections prioritizes a showcase of the published Neil Richards Collection of Gender and Sexual Diversity. In 2023, 'Queeries - A Curation of LGBTQI+ Themes' highlighted materials chosen by a collective of USask campus members, encompassing students, professors, as well as library staff and faculty. The display cabinets were themed based on the curators' preferences.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

Following the Stonewall riots of 1969, the establishment of archives, libraries, and collections dedicated to LGBTQ2+ history and culture has profoundly augmented the visibility of the community. This increased visibility, in turn, has facilitated broader access to information, fostering social transformation and driving the organic evolution of community-driven initiatives within cultural heritage institutions. The showcased collections and initiatives in this paper represent merely a glimpse into the extensive efforts undertaken by LGBTQ2+ individuals in preserving and disseminating information. They stand as emblematic representations of a broader

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<sup>32</sup> Munro and Bindle, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> "Queeries - A curation of LGBTQI+ Themes2023," University of Saskatchewan, accessed November 28, 2023 <https://library.usask.ca/uasc/exhibitions/2023/queeries-2023.php>

movement dedicated to perpetuating the vibrant tapestry of LGBTQ2+ heritage and identity.

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