
Collective Effort: Archiving LGBT Moving Images



by Lynne Kirste

Queer moving image materials, to paraphrase the old gay rights slogan, are everywhere. Three kinds of archives collect them: LGBT¹ archives, non-LGBT mixed media archives, and moving image archives. These repositories collectively hold thousands of films and tapes with queer content, made by queer filmmakers, and/or perceived as queer by audiences. In addition, studio libraries hold many of the original elements of LGBT theatrical releases and television programs. A new model for queer audiovisual archiving is the Outfest Legacy Collection at the UCLA Film and Television Archive, founded in 2005, which brings together the complementary resources of a major LGBT film organization and a premiere moving image repository.

Being “everywhere” creates both opportunities and challenges for preservation and access. In one respect, queer films and tapes are too scattered for their own good: LGBT independent and amateur productions are typically stored in media-unfriendly conditions in filmmakers’ homes rather than in archives. For decades LGBT people have shot and appeared in home movies and home videos, documented the activities of queer organizations, and filmed queer events; the surge of independent queer filmmaking that began in the 1980s has increased in subsequent years. Since mainstream cinema and television have consistently marginalized LGBT people, a large percentage of all queer moving images are found in independent and amateur works. These films and tapes contain the great majority of moving images that have a queer point of view, portray LGBT people as complex individuals rather than stereotypes, offer a diversity of race, age, ethnic background, politics, gender identification, and other qualities, and show LGBT people in the context of our relationships, families, and communities. Because amateur and independent productions are rarely widely distributed, typically only a few elements exist of each title. If these elements remain in filmmakers’ closets and basements, they will eventually deteriorate, suffer damage, or be discarded or lost. In the meantime, usually only the filmmaker has access to the materials. To make these images viewable now and in the future, archival outreach is essential.

Archives house LGBT moving images dating from the very early days of cinema to the most recent releases. Queer archival holdings include features and short subjects; fiction, documentary, experimental, animated, and educational films; newsreels, screen tests, outtakes, trailers, behind-the-scenes footage, home movies, and interviews; and broadcast, cable, and public access television programs. Elements range from original negatives and video masters to DVDs.

Most archival repositories share the same mission: to gather materials that fall within their collecting mandate; protect their holdings from harm and damage; identify, organize, and catalogue materials; preserve deteriorated items; and make their collections publicly accessible. Achieving these goals with queer moving image materials requires sufficient staff, climate-controlled storage, specialized equipment, expertise in film and tape handling and care, knowledge and appreciation of moving image history and LGBT culture, and money.

LGBT archives came into being through the remarkable efforts of queer people who took action to safeguard queer cultural heritage from being ignored, misrepresented, censored, lost, and destroyed. During the twentieth century, LGBT individuals and groups around the globe collected books, periodicals, newsletters, organizational records, correspondence, diaries, photographs, films, videotapes, audiotapes, and artifacts relating to the queer experience. These passionate, mostly amateur, archivists gathered and shared an impressive amount of LGBT material. Some of the private collections eventually became the basis for public LGBT archives; others later formed distinct LGBT collections within archives with more general collecting policies; and many of the collections created after the rise of the gay rights movement were founded as public collections.² While most LGBT archives focus on paper materials, the majority also hold some moving image materials, usually home movies, amateur documentation of queer organizations and events, cable access television shows, homemade compilations of clips from TV programs with queer content, and/or VHS tapes and DVDs of television shows and theatrical films. LGBT archives can deal fairly easily with most access media, which enrich their collections and do not require the special care that one-of-a-kind materials need. However, unique films and tapes are often at risk of deterioration or damage.

Most LGBT archives struggle with small budgets, few resources, cramped quarters, and little or no paid staff. Dedicated volunteers usually do the bulk of material processing and cataloging.³ Climate-controlled storage, necessary to prevent deterioration of films and tapes, is typically out of reach financially, as are viewing equipment for more than one or two media formats, preservation projects, and the copying of unique materials to access media. Processors untrained in moving image archiving may overlook the importance of one-of-a-kind items, such as a home video of a commitment ceremony.

Some LGBT archives have found ways to address the challenges of caring for their moving image materials. The GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco received a National Film Preservation Foundation grant that enabled the archive to hire an outside consultant with film expertise to work with the Harold O'Neal home movie collection. Several films were preserved and made accessible through this grant, later becoming the basis for the documentary *Harold's Home Movies* (2004).⁴ The Brooklyn-based Lesbian Herstory Archives receives income earmarked for the preservation of unique videotapes made in the mid-1970s by a lesbian collective.⁵ Some LGBT archives that cannot provide adequate storage conditions for, or access

to, their films or older video formats are talking to moving image archives about placing these materials on deposit (ownership to remain with the LGBT archives). The moving image archives would store the materials free of charge in climate-controlled vaults and make access copies of some items for the queer archives.

LGBT archives possess important strengths as repositories for queer moving images. They contextualize film and tape holdings through related materials such as filmmakers' papers, queer organizational records, still photographs, flyers, movie posters, clipping files, books, and periodicals. For example, an archive that holds amateur documentation of a gay motorcycle club will often hold the same organization's paper records. An individual might donate her diaries as well as her home movies. Researchers at LGBT archives begin searches knowing that every film or tape in the institution is queer-related, whether or not other cataloging details exist in the archive's database. People may view materials in a queer environment that they might not feel comfortable requesting in another repository. LGBT archives have community ties and are often perceived by potential donors as politically safe, appreciative places for personal and organizational materials that the donor would hesitate to entrust to a nonqueer institution. This puts LGBT archives in an ideal position to reach out to the queer community for donations of amateur moving images and related materials.

Like their LGBT counterparts, most non-LGBT mixed media archives focus on collecting paper materials rather than moving images, so they tend to have paper rather than audiovisual expertise. Many non-LGBT mixed media archives work with the same tight budgets and small staffs that are the norm for LGBT archives, while others are better off in this regard; some have climate-controlled storage facilities for their moving image materials, own audiovisual viewing equipment, and employ moving image specialists, while others do not. By definition, non-LGBT archives have holdings relating to nonqueer subjects or people. Their LGBT collections may or may not be a priority for detailed cataloging, preservation projects, and access, and staff members may or may not be knowledgeable about queer culture. Many mixed media archives with LGBT collections are university archives, are government-funded archives, or are affiliated with public libraries.

Mixed media archives can serve the important functions of making LGBT-related materials accessible to a wide audience and contextualizing them within the larger society. While any researcher may access most LGBT archives' collections, queer archives generally are not familiar to people outside the LGBT community and frequently are not well known even within this community. The New York Public Library was chosen to house the Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Collection, which many people would overlook if it were held at a less visible institution. The tapes complement and expand the library's collection of AIDS-related materials, while NYPL holdings such as the organizational records of ACT UP give context to the tapes. Archiving the videotapes in an LGBT-specific repository could limit both physical viewing of the tapes and the way in which the collection is perceived: housing the tapes at NYPL acknowledges that AIDS issues

include and affect people beyond the queer community.⁶ Similarly, the Fales Library, whose Downtown Collection documents the New York downtown arts scene, is in the process of integrating a large collection of festival submission tapes and paper records from MIX, the New York lesbian and gay experimental film festival, into its holdings.⁷

Moving image archives often have extensive LGBT holdings. Though few moving image archives look to acquire queer materials, they frequently fall within the archives' collecting mandates by virtue of being, for example, documentaries or films of regional importance. Moving image archives usually provide cool storage for their holdings; in the best-case scenarios, they have climate-controlled vaults and equipment for viewing and repairing materials, employ staffs that include trained preservationists, processors, curators, and catalogers, and provide public access through viewing appointments, screenings, and archival loans. While materials are generally well cared for, the preservation and cataloging staffs do not focus on issues of queer culture as do the staffs of LGBT archives.

Many queer titles that are extremely significant to the LGBT community are barely known outside this community; thus these productions are not likely to be preservation priorities. A number of LGBT films have been preserved by moving image archives—examples in recent years include *Lilith* (1964), *Lianna* (1983), and films by Mike and George Kuchar⁸—and, while they were probably chosen because they were deemed important for reasons other than their queer content or makers, it is noteworthy that the archives did not shy away from working on these films. Still, it does not appear to be common practice at moving image archives to research and select titles for preservation specifically because of their significance to the queer community.

A second issue for LGBT materials held by moving image archives is the descriptive cataloging necessary to make queer holdings easy to find. Detailed cataloging is time consuming; determining appropriate subject headings, especially for obscure materials, can mean hours of viewing time and bring up questions about subjectivity, appropriate terminology, filmmakers' self-identities, and other cataloging concerns. Since almost all moving image archives have backlogs and ongoing data cleanup projects, descriptive cataloging of materials relating to marginalized groups is frequently left off their agendas.

Without a subject heading or descriptive word to search on, a researcher or archive staff member must resort to searching film titles or the names of filmmakers, actors, or personalities, one by one. Because their existence is known only to a handful of people, many LGBT items, such as student films, amateur documentation, and home movies, typically cannot be found using this method. Some moving image archives describe queer materials by writing brief synopses or choosing from among the over 400 LGBT-related Library of Congress subject headings;⁹ some find a shortcut, such as adding the general term "LGBT" to the records of items that the cataloger knows to be queer-related; and others do not describe the material at all, frequently rendering the work inaccessible for LGBT research.

Inquiries from scholars who wish to view queer materials can influence cataloging practices by demonstrating the need for LGBT finding aids.

Collaborative efforts involving the three types of archives, archival organizations, and LGBT organizations are on the rise and look to be instrumental in preserving LGBT moving image heritage. The partnership of Outfest and the UCLA Film and Television Archive on the Legacy Project for LGBT Film Preservation and the Legacy Collection of LGBT moving image materials will create an enormous, publicly accessible, queer-identified collection stored in climate-controlled vaults, cared for by moving image professionals, and assigned a preservation budget. The 3,000 festival submission tapes that originated the Legacy Collection have been cataloged and are accessible for viewing; selected titles are described in a study guide. Outreach by Legacy to LGBT independent filmmakers and film collectors has begun to bring additional titles into the collection, and outreach to LGBT archives will likely result in deposits from some of these institutions. Legacy announced their first slate of queer preservation projects in the summer of 2006.¹⁰

Archival organizations that are reaching out to mixed media archives with information about audiovisual care include AMIA and the Society of American Archivists (SAA), which hold workshops in film and tape archiving basics. The University of Washington Libraries, NFPF, and other groups have created excellent online resources,¹¹ and, in an effort specifically directed toward LGBT archives, the Lesbian and Gay Roundtable (LAGAR) of the SAA is at work on Web pages that will include guidelines and links for archiving LGBT audiovisual media.¹² LGBT film festivals have started to deposit submission tapes with archives, supply independent filmmakers with information about media care and storage, and present panels on archiving. In April 2006, the "Out of the Closet, Into the Vaults" symposium brought together LGBT archivists, moving image archivists, archival and LGBT studies students, filmmakers, programmers, and scholars to discuss preservation and access issues facing LGBT moving images; the Persistent Vision conference in June 2006 included a session on archiving and preservation.¹³ At both events, the resistance to archiving their work expressed by independent filmmakers caught many archivists by surprise; a major challenge over the coming years will be to overcome this resistance. The number of LGBT, mixed media, and moving image archives with searchable online databases increases constantly, allowing archivists from other institutions, researchers, and the public to search for holdings. Information-sharing projects include the LAGAR survey of North American LGBT archives; online lists of LGBT archives around the globe; and the Moving Image Collections (MIC) database.¹⁴ The LGBT Interest Group of AMIA is working to compile a union catalog of archived LGBT holdings, and the Legacy Project has begun to create a database of queer moving images, including locations of materials and preservation status.

Currently the LGBT community, like society at large, rarely gives a thought to film and tape preservation or access beyond wondering when a favorite title will come out on DVD. Drawing the queer community into archival efforts will be

necessary in order for LGBT archives to receive better financial support. We will also look to the queer community to donate amateur materials and to share in the fruits of archival labors as audiences and researchers. Working together, LGBT archives, mixed media archives, moving image archives, professional archival organizations, scholars, LGBT film festivals, queer filmmakers, and the LGBT community can maximize our ability to preserve LGBT moving image heritage and to make queer images widely accessible, now and in the years to come.

Notes

1. In this article, I use “queer” and “LGBT” interchangeably and with the intention of including people who identify as gender or sexual outsiders.
2. A survey of North American LGBT archives conducted by the Society of American Archivists’ Lesbian and Gay Roundtable gives information about the history and holdings of 58 repositories. “Lavender Legacies Guide,” <http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/lagar/guide/guideintro.html> (accessed May 30, 2006). Two Web sites that list and give links to international queer archives are Library Q: “Archives and Libraries,” <http://carbon.cudenver.edu/public/library//libq/archives.html> (accessed June 10, 2006), and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archive: “Links to Related Sites,” <http://www.clga.ca/> (accessed June 22, 2006).
3. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, the largest lesbian archive in the world, has “always been completely organized, managed and staffed by volunteers.” See “Volunteers,” <http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/supvolunt.htm> (accessed June 3, 2006). Prior to 2005, the ONE National Archives, the largest LGBT archive in the world, had only one paid staff member. (Author’s conversation with Joseph Hawkins, President of the ONE Board of Directors, January 11, 2006.)
4. Author’s conversation with Terence Kissack, Executive Director of the GLBT Historical Society, January 18, 2006.
5. Financial reports for 2001, 2002, and 2003, in Lesbian Herstory Archives newsletter 19, Spring 2004, 16.
6. Author’s conversation with Jim Hubbard, creator of the Royal S. Marks Activist Video Collection, December 1, 2005. Mr. Hubbard said that another reason for placing the collection at NYPL was the library’s ability to provide space for tape duplicating equipment.
7. E-mail to the author from Ann Butler, Senior Archivist, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, March 14, 2006. Finding aids for the Downtown Collection may be found at <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/cdfa.htm> (accessed June 5, 2006).
8. *Lilith* was preserved by a joint effort of the Academy Film Archive and Sony Pictures. *Lianna* was preserved by the UCLA Film and Television Archive as part of a project to preserve the films of director John Sayles. Several 8 mm Kuchar brothers films were preserved by the Anthology Film Archives, with a grant from the National Film Preservation Foundation. Many other queer titles have been preserved by moving image archives.
9. For a list of queer LOC subject headings, see “Gay-Related Library of Congress Subject Headings,” <http://library.auraria.edu/libq/glbtlsh.html> (accessed June 30, 2006).
10. Information about the Legacy Project is available at <http://www.outfest.org/legacy.html> (accessed June 14, 2006). The first films selected for preservation are the documentary *Word Is Out* (1978) and the narrative feature *Parting Glances* (1986).
11. Three valuable online resources are the Washington State Film Preservation Manual, which is directed at mixed media repositories and includes easy-to-follow guidelines for

- no-budget, low-budget, and higher budget film care: "Washington State Film Preservation Manual," <http://www.lib.washington.edu/specialcoll/film/preservationmanual.pdf> (accessed June 16, 2006); the National Film Preservation Foundation's detailed "The Film Preservation Guide," <http://www.filmpreservation.org/> (accessed June 16, 2006); and Film Forever's "The Home Film Preservation Guide," <http://www.filmforever.org/> (accessed June 16, 2006), aimed at individuals with home movies and independent films.
12. "Volunteers needed for the Community Archives Manual," Society of American Archivists Lesbian and Gay Roundtable Newsletter No. 27 [i.e., 28] (February 2006), http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/lagar/newsletters/LAGAR_newsletter27.pdf (accessed April 19, 2006).
 13. "Out of the Closet, Into the Vaults" took place in Los Angeles on April 10, 2006. The symposium program is at http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/pdfs/LGBT_SYMPOSIUM.pdf (accessed June 7, 2005). Persistent Vision 2006: Envisioning the Future of Queer Media Arts took place in San Francisco June 19–22, 2006. Conference details and blog are available at <http://www.pv2006.org/agenda.html> (accessed June 25, 2006).
 14. To find lists of queer archives, see Note 2. The MIC Web site may be accessed at <http://mic.imtc.gatech.edu/>; to browse MIC's archive listings, click on "Archive Explore" in the horizontal menu bar (accessed June 1, 2006).

The Library of Congress National Audio-Visual Conservation Center



by Mike Mashon

Seventy-five miles southwest of Washington, D.C., outside the town of Culpeper, Virginia, on a site once occupied by the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, a revolution in audiovisual preservation and access is taking shape. A building that once held sufficient monetary reserves to restart the American economy east of the Mississippi River in event of a nuclear holocaust now contains the more than 5 million film, video, and audio items in the collections of the Library of Congress. Next to it, a state-of-the-art conservation center will open in spring 2007, broad in scope, bristling with innovation, representing a paradigm shift in the way archives preserve moving image and recorded sound material and deliver them to patrons around the globe. Together with 124 vaults designed to house the Library's 130 million feet of nitrate film, the complex is known as the National Audio-Visual Conservation Center (NAVCC).

Funded primarily by the Packard Humanities Institute, the 415,000 square foot complex will contain not only state-of-the-art preservation laboratories but also space for the Library's moving image and recorded sound processing staff, an acoustically perfect critical listening room, and a 200-seat theater capable of projecting nitrate film.

Most strikingly, the NAVCC will usher in a complete redesign of the way the Library acquires and preserves film, video, and recorded sound, particularly in the