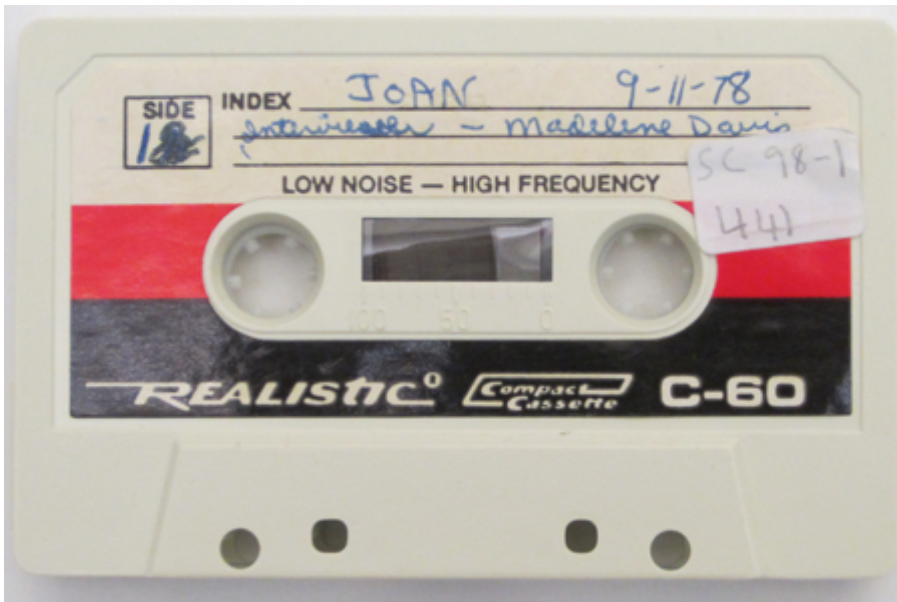


Out of the Basement and on to Internet: Digitizing Oral History Tapes at the Lesbian Herstory Archives





The basement of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in Brooklyn, NY seems a lot like the unfinished basement of a family home: stuff is everywhere, arranged into the kind of organized chaos befitting objects that don't belong upstairs, but are too important to discard, including a shelf crammed with books that haven't yet been cataloged and shelved in the mainfloor library. Despite appearances, this basement also houses one of the most

historically valuable but underused parts of the archives: 3,000 audio tapes that make up the LHA's "spoken word" collection.

One wall of shelves is lined top-to-bottom with acid-free Hollinger boxes, each containing thirty-six tapes, mostly consumer-grade compact cassettes manufactured in the 1980s. The precious audio they record documents an exciting time in U.S. feminism and constitutes the material remnants of a politicized oral histories movement conscious of its role in constructing documentary evidence of women's history. There are big names (lectures and readings by Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde) and big events, recorded without knowledge of their future significance, including the 1982 Barnard Conference on The Scholar and The Feminist, remembered as the moment when the feminist porn and S/M debates exploded. These events share space with more modest recordings: scratchy, hard-to-decipher sounds of the birthday parties of "regular" lesbians.

The very existence of this collection—the sheer number of tapes—speaks to the conditions of possibility for the women's oral history movement: a combination of technological innovations that made audio recording affordable and easy, the rise of a DIY media-techno culture in the 1970s, and an ideological shift in academic feminism toward the recovery of women's histories. Today, these tapes are being digitized and offered online as streaming audio, bringing this history, and the archives' operation, out of the basement waiting room of history and into the technological present.

The LHA is a volunteer-run, community archive that operates on a shoestring budget funded mostly by individual donations. An evolving, intergenerational coordinator committee manages the archives on a consensus model. Materials are spread over the basement and first two stories of the archives' three-story, Park Slope heritage home, while the top-floor apartment is home to the archives' two "caretakers," who are also

coordinators. In addition to the audio tapes, the collection includes vertical subject files on dozens of topics related to lesbian culture—bathhouses, fat liberation, matriarchy, nuns, utopia—a book collection, 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: comfortable reading nooks and macramé welcome visitors who are allowed to access and handle any of part of the collection without credentials or prior request. This environment is a material reflection of the archives’ guiding commitment that “all Lesbian women must have access to the Archives,” which “shall be housed in the community.” [i] Founding principles written in 1979 continue to influence the archive’s decisions about media: they include an anti-institutional position (one coordinator I interviewed wouldn’t say the word “Google”), 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. These lesbian-feminist commitments complicate the normative imperatives that can accompany digitization in information contexts, including the archives’ approach to its audio tapes.

During my two months of dissertation research at the LHA, I spent an afternoon hanging out with Colette Montoya, a volunteer who works on digitizing the tapes every Friday. Colette is 31, a queer woman-of-color finishing her library science degree. She’s been volunteering at the archives for a couple of years, and she makes the regular 1.5-hour subway trip to the archives from her home in Queens, even though she’s already met the internship requirements for her degree. I asked Colette questions as she showed me how the tapes are digitized, and I guess I seemed surprised by the scale of this task relative to what

she can get done in a day, week, or year. Nonplussed, Colette explained, “All these boxes are tapes,” 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.”

Watching Colette, who is a little over five feet tall, stand in front of the wall of 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 *seem* impossible, 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 in the first place. This lesbian-feminist organization’s investment in making a dent in its collection, given the urgencies of preservation through format-migration and the desires for access archival publics have in an era mediated by online interfaces, is a critical engagement with the time-scale of digitization. The project reveals how big promises of preservation and access are always slow and partial gestures in practice.

Critical of the present and oriented toward an alternative future, the work of feminist activism runs on what Sara Ahmed calls “strange and perverse mixtures of hope and despair, optimism and pessimism.” [ii] This is a complex temporality, in which investments in a not-so-great past from which “we” have come and a future to which “we” aspire motivate action in the present. Grand ideals and fantastic visions manifest in the regular production of small-scale “utopias,” feminist spaces such as archives, collectives, or events that attempt to produce conditions denied elsewhere. These are micro-moments that set an ideal in relationship to an everyday practice—what *I can do*—a glimpse that motivates activist-archivists to carry on with their work, however modest it may seem. Small dents in substantial projects take on a significance that makes the larger mission seem do-able. The

everyday work of running the LHA, the digitization of one tape amongst thousands, is a modest, singular act in the present, motivated by a vision of what the archives could be.

Maxine Wolfe, one of the longest-serving coordinators at the archives, oversees the digitization project, working closely with Colette and other volunteers and interns. Maxine is a long-time organizer who grew up in Brooklyn, learned about activism from the civil rights and women's liberation movements, was a vocal force in ACT UP's women's caucus, and helped to found the Lesbian Avengers. She suggests that part of the LHA's readiness to take on what seem like massive digitization projects is this history of balancing larger ideals and goals—what she calls a “vision of the world”—with the smaller tasks required to get there. Guiding this idealism is a politics of direct action. Referencing her own biography, Maxine likens what motivated her work with ACT UP—“a vision of a world without AIDS”—to the messy, unrelenting work of running the archives: “You can only do that if you have a vision. You have to believe you can do it.” The grandiose is quickly translated into the mundane tasks needed to get there. Says Maxine, “We developed a whole system that made it possible to do it over time.”

Something brave but totally unassuming guides the way Maxine and other volunteers describe what motivates their engagement with digitization. Though wary of institutional partnerships, the archives accepted the offer of Dr. Anthony Cocciolo, a Pratt University library science professor who works with students to digitize selected tapes, which are offered online as streaming audio. [iii] The online interface includes, among other recordings, all the interviews from Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Kennedy's oral history of mid-century, working-class butch-femme culture in Buffalo: *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993). The LHA modeled its small-scale digitization of the rest of the collection on the Pratt project. Maxine, Colette, or other volunteers listen to each tape to

create a catalogue record, interpret donor agreement forms to confirm that audio can be circulated online, and create uncompressed, preservation-quality masters and noise-reduced, streaming-ready MP3 versions of each tape. When Maxine began to research the cost of sending the tapes out to be digitized—far beyond the means of the archives—she learned that the expense is mostly due to labor hours: audio digitization must be completed in real time, regardless of whether it's done “professionally” by a third-party vendor, or in house. Always resourceful, the archives have plenty of what Maxine calls “woman hours” to dedicate to the project.

Colette shows me the digitization system she researched and designed, which includes a 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 files, and a CD folder where the compressed versions of each tape are cataloged for visiting researchers who would like to listen. Colette talks with pride about her ability to design a system that was in budget and works just as well as professional equipment: we “realized we could do it on the cheap because this thing [pointing to the digitizer] cost ten dollars and we get the same quality.” The system is, above all, good enough—the audio quality is remarkable, actually, and the portable hard drives are a decent substitute for the stable online repository that the archives would love to have but can't afford. Colette showed me how to set up the digitization station, how to watch for and eliminate clipping, and how to noise-reduce the files, all of which she learned through a process of “trial and error,” made possible by a willingness at this archive to try something at which one is not an expert, to be wrong, even to fail.

When I ask Maxine about the equipment, she resists my framing of the LHA system as one set 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.”

Maxine’s quip about “archival” hard drives is clever precisely because the existence of such a device seems plausible but is fundamentally absurd; data is data, just as labor hours are labor hours, two aspects of digitization demystified by the LHA’s feminist/lesbian-feminist critique of technological accessibility. There are all kinds of resource-related reasons why the archives aren’t ready to take on a large-scale digitization project. Colette, handcuffed by the “realness” of time, gets through just two or three tapes a week, a rate that does grow exponentially during periods when other volunteers join the project. Despite the slow pace of DIY digitization, the LHA is doing the work anyway. “I think that’s how we enter into everything,” Maxine told me, drawing on the example of the archives’ 10,000-volume book collection, which was systematically cataloged by dozens of volunteers. “Ok, so the books [were] going to take us six years. Where are we going? We’re not going anywhere, we’re just going to be here.” Between the Pratt students and volunteers like Colette, about 400 tapes have been digitized so far, which represents thirteen percent of the collection. It’s a project the LHA fully expects to complete in a matter of years. Digitization is daunting in the cost, strategic planning, labor, and technological expertise it seems to require; but something about a resourceful, feminist work ethic makes endeavoring toward the “impossible” seem, well, reasonable.

Notes

[i] LHA, 2013 [1979], Statement of Purpose and Principals,
<http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/history.html>.

[ii] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 163.

[iii] See HerStories: A Digital Collection, <http://herstories.prattsils.org/omeka>.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Maxine Wolfe, Colette Montoya, Anthony Cocciolo, and the volunteer staff at the LHA who generously hosted me in support of this research.