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Making Invisible Histories Visible: Processing A/V Collections

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Processing A/V Materials

16 mm, 8 mm, Super 8, VHS, DVD, Beta...

AUDIOVISUAL HOLDINGS make up a significant part of the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives. Kimberlee Granholm and Daniel Williford, Graduate Student Researchers who have been processing the A/V holdings, estimate that the collection contains 230 VHS recordings that are unavailable anywhere else, 60 to 70 VHS movies and other easily accessed materials, and 50 items in DVD, U-Matic, Betamax, VHS, 16mm, 8mm, and Super 8 formats. Granholm and Williford have reviewed and processed between 150 and 200 items, and it has proven quite an exciting adventure. I met with the two of them to discuss what they have found the holdings and why these findings are so important to scholars, UCLA, the LGBT community, and anyone interested in the complete history of 20th and 21st centuries.

Processing the Mazer's A/V holdings began when Granholm and Williford unearthed many boxes filled with VHS tapes, with varying degrees of labeling. Next, the graduate student researchers went through the Mazer's extensive list of recordings, and highlighted any materials that as far as they could tell, were unavailable elsewhere. Since then, they have spent

months reviewing video materials, checking for quality, and adding as much identifying information as possible to the labels. In doing this, they have processed a treasure trove of videotaped history, which includes community meetings and conferences from the 1970s to 1990s, self-produced lesbian history videos, memorial services, birthday parties, films and videos that appeared in festivals, musical performances, footage from a march on Washington from the late 1970s, a talent show from the Califia lesbian retreat, educational videos, and rare lesbian pornography.

Because the videos offer them

unique opportunities to watch activist histories that they've read about come, in a sense, to life, Granholm and Williford both admitted that they have loved viewing the Archive's A/V materials.

"I've been looking at footage produced by these regional lesbian activist organizations of their own meetings, events, and performances," says Williford. "That's been exciting to me, because I'm sort of used to reading critical theory from certain time periods, say the 1970s and 1980s. To see the footage of the grassroots community-based events—the other side of that feminist theory—



has added that human dimension. It is exciting to see all the work that people put into living out this political goal of feminist theory.”

Granholtm particularly appreciates footage of activist meetings because they clearly demonstrate the contradictions, complexities, and disagreements that make up lesbian history: “It comes up very often,” says Granholtm. “This idea that an open discussion is not just intended to facilitate everybody’s similar attitudes and ideas. In the good majority of these videos, discussions always seem to be prefaced with a statement that this discussion should be a zone for us to safely disagree with each other and to facilitate our own opinions rather than just create a major backing.”

Williford has been impressed by the extent to which the people documented in the Mazer Archive have used their various creative talents in political advocacy. The subjects of the videos often use the arts to circulate widely the tenets of academic queer theory and make them accessible to audiences that might not otherwise have become aware of them. “In a way I was surprised at how much art—and, in particular, theater—have been elements of this practice of political theory and community organizing,” says Williford. “There’s a lot of performance art, and there are many theatrical productions, shows, and things like that, which allow people to bring their creative abilities to community events. It really makes certain ideas and political notions a little more available to people through art. That’s inspiring.”

Granholtm and Williford both noted that the women who took the videos

in the collection clearly felt that they were in the process of documenting important history. “The other thing that has surprised me is just how carefully and consistently these organizations have documented and preserved their own activities, and their own people and figures who were influential and involved along the way,” says Williford. “I’ve been impressed at the extent to which these women working with these organizations were all so aware of documenting themselves along the way, preserving the history of activities even as they were doing them. Crucial to the project is their awareness at the time and that is coming through to me as we process all these materials, but especially the video material.”

The Mazer Archives are known for preserving evidence of the lives of women that might otherwise go lost. Granholtm was impressed by the histories revealed by the self-made documentaries in the collection. For example, Diane Germaine’s self-made documentary *Lesbian Decade, The San Diego ‘70s*, which includes excerpts from many lengthy interviews taken by the filmmaker, illuminates the otherwise undocumented stories of a multi-faceted community.

“It consisted of a couple of hour-long interviews with women talking about their own experiences, whether that was coming out, meeting other women, bar culture, and how that’s changed from then to now,” says Granholtm. “A lot of these things were mind blowing to me because I just didn’t know most of this stuff. It was really incredible.”

The collection contains generous documentation of the work that lesbians did with gay men in order to

fight AIDS. Popular accounts of the epidemic often overlook this angle of its history in their emphasis on the activism of gay males. It also includes meetings of OLOC (Old Lesbians Organizing for Change), providing a welcome visual corrective to the majority of LGBT visual media, which often focuses on the young.

“Hearing about OLOC, hearing the speeches, and hearing older women argue about why they needed different attention than young people is extremely important. Especially when you think about the fact that this is a lesbian feminist group,” says Granholtm. “Often times, older people are forgotten about in general. But when you have this sect in society in which young and old people have to look hard for small signs of themselves in pop culture already, it becomes even less likely that older lesbians will be considered. It is wonderful that there were so many attempts at making these videos, at actually recording this for history.”

In addition to preserving the materials of lesbian lives, the Mazer Archives (like many queer archives) has encouraged the expansion of definitions regarding what constitutes historically valuable archival materials. As a result, some of its holdings are startlingly intimate.

“The memorial services are so incredible,” says Granholtm. “During one of them I cried because it was so touching, the ways in which these women are remembered.”

Williford points out that the lo-fi quality of many of the recordings, many taken on home camcorders, gives them an unusually candid quality that makes the spectator feel as

though he is peering in at past events as they happened. "There's a certain aesthetic in the format and lo-fi quality of these video clips that I really like," says Williford. "You feel like you're just sort of peaking at some kind of documentation that is removed from the original, that maybe has a somewhat amateur quality, and the nature of the equipment just makes it feel a little more like the people are familiar. Through that technology, you feel that you can re-experience what they were documenting through real time."

The Mazer Archives provide an opportunity to put under-seen footage, like talent shows and conferences, in conversation with mainstream representations of queerness that took place concurrently. Williford and Granholm are in the middle of processing a series of videotapes, recorded off of television using home VCRs, which include footage of lesbians in popular culture and on news programs.

"There are lots of TV clips, things that a general audience would probably have missed," says Granholm. "They have a recording of Northern Exposure in which a character references the town being named after a lesbian. It's just a small passing moment that a lot of people probably wouldn't think twice about, but it was something that was referenced in popular culture, and the person recording wanted to note that 'it referenced us!'" "I think that the ephemeral television programming will be fun to sift through," says Williford. "Because things like that might be archived somewhere, but not in connection to a lesbian archive. I think that through those videotaped,

miscellaneous collections you end up getting this sort of timeline of the lived experience of going through the popular mainstream media discussion of some of these issues related to queer identity."

The tapes are almost like collages of found footage, re-presenting a version of mainstream popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s in which LGBT characters (who were often the exception, rather than the rule) become constantly and repetitively present, even leading to the erasure of more common, heteronormative representations that were ever-present on the airwaves at the time. The footage offers valuable evidence not only of the period's pop culture representations of queerness, but of certain manifestations of active lesbian spectatorship which became allowed by the invention of the VCR.

Viewing the Mazer's abundance of audiovisual materials has emphasized all that could have been lost. It further illuminates the profundity of what the Mazer's archivists have done over the years in order to keep such a huge loss from happening.

"I consider myself somebody who seems to be informed. I want to be accepting, and make sure that I'm viewing diverse things," says Granholm. "But going through and digitizing this has shown me how little is actually available. So I am glad to have this collection, which completes that history within a larger institution, and represents the walk or paths taken by West coast feminist lesbians going from the 1970s into the future. It would be inaccurate, at the very base of things, not to include [the A/V materials]. More than just the

political importance of these materials, it would be a lie not to have them as part of the historical archive. It's also inspiring, I think, for somebody who is trying to be a better feminist, to see how much these women had to fight. This collection is more than just a historical component, but a cultural one. It's heritage. To be able to share that with UCLA is really the most important thing. It can be inspiring to a larger group of women and men."

"I believe in the work of the lesbian archive," says Williford. "The motto of the Mazer is 'Where lesbians live forever,' and there's something really powerful about that. When you are part of a community, an identity, and a subculture that is always under the threat of erasure and invisibility, to say 'This is an archive in which lesbians live forever' kind of ties together life and the preservation of life, which is actually a real concern in a community that is always under the threat of not just symbolic erasure, but also bodily violence and death."

-Ben Raphael Sher

Ben Sher is a doctoral student in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA and a graduate student researcher at CSW.

Finding aids are available at the Online Archive of California (<http://www.oac.cdlib.org>). This research is part of an ongoing CSW research project, "Making Invisible Histories Visible: Preserving the Legacy of Lesbian Feminist Activism and Writing in Los Angeles." Funded in part by an NEH grant, the project is a three-year project to arrange, describe, digitize, and make physically and electronically accessible two major clusters of June Mazer Lesbian Archive collections related to West Coast lesbian/feminist activism and writing since the 1930s.

For more information on this project, visit <http://www.csw.ucla.edu/research/projects/making-invisible-histories-visible>. For more information on the activities of the Mazer, visit <http://www.mazerlesbianarchives.org>