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## UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

### Title

Queering ArchivesA Roundtable Discussion

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7z19h7rg>

### Journal

Radical History Review, 2015(122)

### ISSN

0163-6545

### Authors

Arondekar, Anjali  
Cvetkovich, Ann  
Hanhardt, Christina B  
[et al.](#)

### Publication Date

2015-05-01

### DOI

10.1215/01636545-2849630

Peer reviewed

## Queering Archives

### A Roundtable Discussion

*Anjali Arondekar, Ann Cvetkovich, Christina B. Hanhardt,  
Regina Kunzel, Tavia Nyong'o, Juana María Rodríguez,  
and Susan Stryker*

*Compiled by Daniel Marshall, Kevin P. Murphy,  
and Zeb Tortorici*

*In your own work, how has your thinking about the relationship between notions of queer and the archive shifted over time?*<sup>2</sup>

**Susan:** I hadn't thought about this question until you asked it, but in retrospect I can see that 2003 was a pivotal year in how notions of the queer and the archive shifted in my own work. At that point in my career I'd spent about a decade thinking and writing about transsexual embodiment and transgender history. I drew inspiration and lifted techniques from queer-of-color feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde to craft a narrative voice *as* a transsexual writer that functioned as a critique of objectifying and delegitimizing knowledges about the mode of my embodiment and that expressed as well the counterdominant knowledges rooted in my own embodied experience. At the same time, I was immersed in archival research for a book project on trans history in San Francisco. That book remains to be written, but the research I conducted informed many of my other projects

*Radical History Review*

Issue 122 (May 2015) DOI 10.1215/01636545-2849630

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during those years, namely, editing *GLQ*'s transgender studies special issue (1998), writing coffee-table books on the Bay Area's queer history and the history of queer paperbacks (1996, 2000), and the lengthy process of making a documentary film about the Compton's Cafeteria riot that finally came out in 2005. What's clearer to me now than it was then was that I toggled back and forth between intensely subjective investigations into lived experience while also documenting the context in which that experience transpired and was fascinated by the interplay between the two registers. I've always been interested in the historicity of identity, in questions of how we become the particular kinds of people we are through the mutually constitutive interplay of psychological, social, and environmental forces. I should note that I was doing this work while deeply involved with the GLBT [Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender] Historical Society in San Francisco, initially as a volunteer, then a board member, and finally as the first paid executive director of the organization. I earned my living in those days by attending to the care and feeding of an actual, physical collection of queer historical materials and had even gotten a certificate in archival studies.

The configuration of my life started changing in 2003. Perhaps significantly, this was the year of publication for Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings* as well as Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire*. Although the former is ostensibly about trauma and the latter ostensibly about performance, both works are also centrally concerned with the embodied nature of memory and with the transmission of cultural knowledge through bodily practice. Both were extremely influential for me in beginning to piece together conceptually the two halves of my working life—the archives and the body—as commensurable material expressions of assembled knowledges. More directly influential was meeting Nikki Sullivan, who introduced me not only to her own brilliant scholarship on body modification practices but also to a wider conversation within Australian feminist philosophies of the body and to bodies of continental philosophical work whose edges I'd only skirted before. I started working closely with Nikki and her colleagues in the Department of Critical and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney in 2003, and later that year [I] left my job at the GLBT Historical Society in part to take a visiting scholar position there. I spent time in Australia nearly every year for the next decade, participating in the formation of what's now known as the Somatechnics Research Network. It was in this milieu that I began to assemble a theoretical apparatus capable of bridging affective and embodied experience with the material-discursive, the historical, and the archival. In 2010 I guest edited a special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* called "Embodiment and the Archival Imaginary" that gestured toward these interests.

I fell in love with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of embodiment as an ongoing process of becoming, rather than a mere static material existence, a process he characterizes as a sedimentation, or an archiving, of

experience. This lived body materializes its historical and psychical contours over time precisely through the gestures and patterns of motion that it acquires, automates, forgets, and repeats, through the habits and habitats it enacts and occupies by means of a *habitus*, which Pierre Bourdieu tells us is nothing other than “history turned into nature, i.e. denied as such.”<sup>1</sup> As Gaston Bachelard noted in *The Poetics of Space*, “We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting” the spaces where we have lived intimately. “The word habit,” he says, “is too worn a word to express this passionate liaison of our bodies, which do not forget,” with the unforgettable spaces of our inhabitation.<sup>2</sup> And yet as Henri Bergson reminds us in *Matter and Memory*, we remain capable of initiating voluntary motor actions that introduce the potential for change and creative expression that emanate within but depart from received patterns of movement. There is more than a prescribed social choreography, in other words; there is an improvisational ontological dance, which is inherently queer or trans to the extent that it crosses and disrupts old patterns and bends our movements, both personal and collective, toward new and previously unrealized ways of being.

**Juana María:** This resonates so deeply with me. In doing the work that became *Queer Latinidad*, I really didn’t have a theoretical foundation for thinking about archives, even as the differences among activist, legal, and digital archives and their relationship to identity practices were at the heart of what I termed discursive spaces. *An Archive of Feelings* and *The Archive and the Repertoire* were both published the year my book came out, so they were simply not available to me. (Timing is everything!) In writing about Proyecto ContraSIDA por Vida, I remember having to work against the academic assumption that I needed to do ethnographic work; instead, I was interested in the ephemera—flyers, notes, objects, images, manifestos, party debris, art—that folks at Proyecto were producing at an almost manic pace. Folks were dying every day, so the urgency to preserve and remember was palpable, particularly for queer and trans folks of color. In the daily heartbreak of the AIDS epidemic, documenting racialized sexual difference, producing creative queer forms of memorialization and self-representation was/is about producing materials for the streets, for the funders, and for each other. The many folks at Proyecto elevated that form.

Curiously, for that project I had originally wanted to look at a group of Latina lesbians and bisexual women doing local political work, a group I had been centrally involved with in San Francisco, but when I presented the idea to them—they went into panic mode, wanting to control and dictate what I was able to write, and that was not going to work. Queer archives are all about the soiled and untidy—about leaving your dirty *chonies* [underpants] on the kitchen table. Because communities of color are so often under attack, marked as a collective hot mess of excessive, irrational, unorganized bodies and behavior, we have reasons to worry about what we make available to the public for consumption. But the queers and queens that

were dying at Proyecto mostly just wanted to be remembered; they wanted to leave a beautiful trace. And they did.

In the new project, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings*, I try to draw out how the archives of colonialism, slavery, and state violence become lodged and also activated in our archives of gesture, sensory memories, language, cultural histories, and sexual fantasies. I am working with phenomenology and performance studies, but also with law and public policy. I wanted to open up the tension between the ephemeral and the sedimented in order to explore how the racially gendered abjection that characterizes the archive might get deployed as a resource for the political projects, but also for our own erotic pleasures. So what is the psychic residue of history, how does that become embodied, and how does it inform our meaning-, erotic-, and world-making practices? Because I was interested in how these traces inflect sex, the question of archive—of representing archives of feelings, of desire, of erotic imaginings—became both the theoretical impulse and the methodological challenge of the project.

**Regina:** In a probably apocryphal story, when an FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] agent asked legendary bank robber Willie Sutton after his capture in 1933 why he robbed banks, Sutton replied, “Because that’s where the money is.” Trained as a historian in the 1980s, I was encouraged to think of archives in terms similar to Sutton’s (though without his dry wit): as places where the sources are. But even before the “archival turn,” it was difficult to spend much time in archives without coming to the realization that they were less depositories of documents than themselves historical agents, organized around unwritten logics of inclusion and exclusion, with the power to exalt certain stories, experiences, and events and to bury others. Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and others have underlined the archive’s normative, normalizing power, but I wonder, too, if there’s something queer about archives: in their unruliness masked by orderliness, their excess and eccentricities, their sometimes erotic charge, the way they spark and frustrate our desires (as self-conscious as Anjali’s work has made me of the desires I bring to the archives).

Thinking more self-consciously about the relationship between notions of queer and the archive came later for me. In the late 1990s, when I started working on what became *Criminal Intimacy*, people would ask me how I could possibly find sources to write about prison sexual culture. There is no archive devoted to the subject, of course, and so I assembled one from an against-the-grain reading of a wide range of sources, including nineteenth-century prison reports, mid-twentieth-century sociology, autobiographies, popular films, and more. Since so much of the archive available to queer historians is authored by people who judge, police, condemn, and punish nonnormative sexuality and gender, the methodology of reading against the grain is perhaps the key methodological strategy of queer history, as it is for other histories of marginalization. Jennifer Terry’s 1991 article, “Theorizing

Deviant Historiography,” continues to inspire and guide me in that method and also stands as an early meditation on the challenges of the queer archive.

In my current project, on the encounter of queer and gender-variant people with psychiatry and their negotiation with attributions of mental illness in the twentieth-century United States, I’ve taken Ann Laura Stoler’s work as a provocation to think about what reading *along* the grain of the archive might yield—in this case, the psychiatric archive and its pathologizing accounts of sexual and gender difference. If I don’t mine this archive for instances of queer resistance and redemptive counternarratives, I’m forced to reckon with its arguably more overarching story: of remorse, self-loathing, shame, humiliation, and pain. To borrow Ann Cvetkovich’s evocative concept, this is an archive of feelings, a record of the psychic costs of stigma and social exclusion often erased in institutional or official archives and often inaccessible to us as historians. Doing justice to that archive is an enormous challenge to me.

**Anjali:** I work primarily on histories of sexuality in mid- to late nineteenth-century British and Portuguese colonial India. I belabor the specific geopolitics and periodization of my work, not to gesture to its limitations and/or fixed sets of expertises but rather to emphasize the inescapable centrality of the imperial archive (as idea and institution) within such formations. Simply put, interrogations of archival form and content have been and continue to be rather axiomatic within colonial and/or postcolonial scholarship. My engagement with archival hermeneutics thus began more through my work within critical area studies (i.e., South Asian studies) than with any specific turn in queer studies. In fact, for many years, it seemed surprising to me that queer studies had not engaged more robustly with the archival challenges posed by the Subaltern Studies Collective, for example (which included interventions from formidable feminist scholars such as Indrani Chatterjee, Kamala Visweswaran, Susie Tharu, and Gayatri Spivak, in case we tend to simply think of the collective solely in terms of the big gents: Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyanendra Pandey, et al.), where the expansion of the archive was constitutive to the very unsettling of colonial epistemologies. Queer studies provided me with critical tools to think through questions of subject formation and historiography, but, for a large part, I struggled to find a way to bring those questions to the specificities of locations such as South Asia.

One key difference was that archival debates within queer studies in the Euro-American academy (at least till about a few years ago) relied primarily on a search-and-rescue model, or savage-to-salvage model, where the lost histories of the past were recuperated and reinstated within more liberatory histories of the present. Rather than render sexuality’s relationship to the archive through such a preferred lens of historical invisibility (which would presume that there is something about sexuality that is lost or silent and needs to “come out”), I began to be more interested in exploring sexuality’s recursive traces within the colonial archive

against and through our very desire for access. If my first book on colonial British India signaled the failures (pleasurable or otherwise) of such recuperative forms within histories of sexuality, my current work in Portuguese India reaches beyond the grammar of failure and loss toward an archival poetics of ordinary surplus. More broadly, I am now more interested in thinking through how the absence and/or presence of archives secures historical futurity, and what proceeds from an unsettling of that attachment, from a movement away from the recursive historical dialectic of fulfillment and impoverishment. I am, for example, currently reading archives produced by a collectivity of *devadasis* [a compound noun, coupling *deva*, or god, with *dasi*, or female slave; a pan-Indian term, (falsely) interchangeable as sex worker, courtesan, or prostitute]. The archives, from mid-nineteenth-century colonial Goa, are exhaustingly plentiful (over one hundred years of materials), continuous to this day, and surprisingly accessible, all archival forms that run counter to our expectations of archives as lost, erased, and/or disappeared.

**Tavia:** The origin story of my relation to the archive (no doubt as fictive as any other origin story) lies in my undergraduate exposure to the work of Foucault, and specifically the essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History.” I have never really deviated from the formative impression Foucault gave that what I should expect from the archive is the estrangement of myself and others, or that I could call that estrangement queer. So, in possible contrast to Anjali’s experience, I first encountered historical “search and rescue” missions always already undermined by Nietzsche’s and Foucault’s corrosive irony. Persuasive arguments against using the archive to reach and somehow repair historical injury have recently been made in queer studies by Heather Love and in black studies by Saidiya Hartman. I like to imagine that I have always accepted such arguments as axiomatic, much as I like to believe that the argument against the “ruses of memory” in my first book were aligned with such a perspective.

This origin story does not really answer the question, which I might paraphrase as follows: How has my relationship to the archive “changed over time”? Change over time (and space) is the historical *sine qua non*, so I’ll try to be answerable to it, in two ways, both of which may be a little to the side of history *proper*, but ways that might still be of some use to an *improper* history, which I still think queer history is or could become.

The first answer is pedagogical. I have taught a course on “queering the archive” for a decade now, following the “Jessica Seinfeld” tactic of hiding nutritious vegetables in more appetizing dishes (shredded carrots in meatballs and so on.). The appetizing dishes in this case were the contemporary topics that my students—mostly in performance and cultural studies—brought to the class, and the blended vegetable was the historical sensibility I hope they left with. By presenting the archive not as an intimidating, dry-as-dust array of institutions and protocols but

rather as a chaotic array of objects that fairly pulse with weirdness and surprise, I tried to sidestep the use of history for salvage purposes. Instead, at the risk of pandering to their narcissism, I encouraged students to enter the archive phenomenologically, to move and be moved by the past as they encountered its sensuous fragments, and to build narrative, speculative, and creative accounts accordingly.

The change over time here has only been that the task of queering the archive has gotten easier as the archives I work with have themselves moved toward promoting themselves as exciting, accessible, and, well, queerer destinations (alongside libraries, museums, and other institutions tasked with neoliberal reinvention). As queering the archive has gotten easier, however, I of course have begun to suspect that it is becoming too easy and that some kind of corrective, such as the “reading along the grain” proposed by Regina (via Ann Stoler), might be called for, in order to better grapple with the enduring significance of archival power in the era of its partial transition into a space of ludic exploration and flexible self-fashioning. What kinds of metanarratives does the archive continue to encode that may actually be fostered by our routinized epistemological doubt as to its hidden efficacy? The emergent interdisciplinary literature on the Anthropocene is one area where this important question is being asked, and queer historicist scholars like Dana Luciano are providing necessary interventions in that field as it takes shape.

The second answer is more speculative and perhaps a little banal. The digitization of archives has radically changed the experience of researching in archives and thereby transformed the stakes of making the kinds of genealogical arguments about the past that I cut my intellectual teeth on. Genealogy is no longer, as Foucault stated, “gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary.”<sup>3</sup> It can also now be in vivid color, slapdash, and instantaneously aggregative. Think of a genealogical topic today (say, “passing women”) and a cornucopia of digitized primary material, much but not all formerly classifiable as “ephemera,” can be at one’s fingertips. This accelerationism has rapidly expanded and popularized archival research (now often just “searching”) from a specialist pursuit to an almost ubiquitous activity. But the towering irony of that is that it is communicative capitalism that has brought us Foucault’s “great carnival of time where masks are constantly reappearing.”<sup>4</sup> Are we already past the tipping point when the primary commonsense usage of the word *archive* refers not to an institution housing documents but to the ubiquitously accessible location where digital copies of one’s e-mails, MP3 files, videos, et cetera, one’s so-called data double, are stored? I think my students are already there. What will it mean for them to encounter the traditional archive as a back formation from this new digitally native sense of the archive as information retrievable through metadata and algorithms? I speculate that as the sheer quantity of historical information (across time and especially space) has expanded, queer subjectivities are poised between, on the one hand, a sharp rejection of the past (for its manifest failings in relation to the ongoing autopoiesis of new gendered and sexual subjects) and, on



the other, an uneasy embrace, really, an immersion in a kaleidoscopic range of past subjectivities, historical and fabulated. It is this latter tendency, actually, that seems to be increasingly hegemonic, which presents the classic opportunity/danger dyad for historical scholarship.

**Christina:** Although I probably should not admit it, I have always had a queer relationship to the “archive” insofar as I am a hoarder. (The stigma attached to collecting tendencies such as mine means that no matter how imaginative we may be here, *archive* must be placed in scare quotes.) I have long lived among boxes and piles of paper, disks, videos, files, and other formats of information. An object of both repulsion and fascination for many, including, most recently, audiences of The Learning Channel and other networks dedicated to health-based television programming, hoarding is—as Scott Herring argues in his new book *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture*—a queer relation to material culture and its accumulation. And it was from the bottom of my own collection of flyers, notes, objects, images, and other ephemera that Juana María so perfectly describes that I began to think about doing the historical research that would become my first book, *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*. As a graduate student, activist, and committed denizen of nightlife venues, I had amassed a large collection of materials charting debates about and innovative responses to the politics of safety and gentrification in New York and San Francisco neighborhoods. I was eager to better understand how LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] identities had become so bound up with ideas of injury shared by the rational choice criminology restructuring US cities, as well as how activists and other collectives had imagined alternatives. This backward process—of anchoring historical research in the present—is, of course, not the *proper* way to write history. But my approach was shaped by Foucault’s concepts of archaeology and genealogy that, as for Tavia, had influenced my own training from the start. (It was also archaeological in a more literal sense, as I would sort the layers of papers copied from archives and other sources that would accumulate and mix on my floor.)

This is, then, to repeat Tavia’s reminder of the ever-fictive (or fantasy) nature of origin stories, as I locate my long-standing relationship with queerness and the archive in a different self-professed pathology. But it is also to express a kind of wariness about offering a queer relation to the archive as necessarily that different from a range of other practices that go under other names or as that which somehow escapes the shortfalls that have been diagnosed as constitutive of more traditional archival approaches, the latter of which I will confess to quite enjoying (perhaps because, as Regina notes, even traditional archives can have queer qualities). I am struck by—and my own story here might serve as an example of this—how often queer projects repeat the same recuperative drive that Anjali describes, as they are routed into new forms of visibility and institutionality even if in the name of perversity, marginality, or shame.

*From the perspective of your work, what types of things are being referenced when people describe queer studies as having experienced an “archival turn”? Do particular uses of archival materials, techniques, or knowledges in effect periodize particular practices in queer theory?*

**Ann:** As these issues and the enthusiasm they have generated indicate, there is a queer archives movement with tremendous vitality right now. As universities and public libraries acquire their collections, grassroots and community-based archives have crossed over into mainstream visibility and institutional legitimation. Moreover, it is not just scholars but also activists and artists who are working in archives and redefining what we mean by archival research and practice. And in addition to the creation of LGBTQ [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer] archives, there are efforts to “queer” the archive, that is, to return to conventional archives from the vantage point of radical and alternative forms of archival practice, research, and exhibition. These are only some of the many good reasons to declare an “archival turn,” but I would also suggest that this groundswell of recognition and institution building is the result of work that has been going on for quite some time, and to privilege this moment of visibility can run the risk of erasing a lot of invisible labor behind the scenes.

It’s also gratifying to see others acknowledge *An Archive of Feelings* as a point of reference for the archival turn especially since my own archival turn was somewhat accidental (although the accidental encounter is, of course, a form of queer archival method). As Susan notes, *An Archive of Feelings* is centrally concerned with trauma, and, like others who’ve told their origin stories, I came to the concept of the archive by way of theoretical critique—in my case of trauma as unrepresentable and hence creating trouble for the archives. Having gone to graduate school in the 1980s, my foundational texts for the archival turn predate queer theory. One of them is Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (and the Subaltern Studies project that Anjali mentions), in which a provocative fusion of critique and archival research generates alternative accounts of colonialism. Another is Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which turns to fictional ghosts to grapple with the affective and practical challenges of slavery’s compromised and absent archives. Like Tavia, I currently find indispensable Saidiya Hartman’s recent writing with and about the archive, which builds on *Beloved* and other so-called postslavery novels, to explore the limits and the necessity of the archive for a history of racism’s enduring present.

My route to what I call “actually existing” archives (in a nod to Marxism’s ambivalent relation to the real) was thus quite circuitous, but, once I got there, the lure of collections like the Lesbian Herstory Archives as both utopian horizon (a place for all lesbians to touch their herstory) and lived reality (a house in Brooklyn filled with all kinds of crazy stuff) was irresistible. My encounters with LGBT community-based and activist archives complemented my oral histories

with lesbian AIDS activists, another kind of research method that went against the grain of my training in theory and literature by getting me into messier encounters with real people and with questions of what counts as evidence or archive. Many of the women I interviewed, such as Polly Thistlethwaite, Maxine Wolfe, and Jean Carlomusto, had ties to the Lesbian Herstory Archives and articulated very direct connections between AIDS activism and archive activism. I'm intrigued to see not only how many of us were driven to the archive by the demands of activism and community-based history projects, especially AIDS-related ones, but also how the archive sometimes provided relief from the demands of oral history and ethnography, which often privilege the live encounter as activist method.

Also worth mentioning since it has come up in other comments is the relation between performance studies and the archival turn. My oral history and archival research was facilitated by a guest teaching gig in performance studies at New York University among a cohort that included José Esteban Muñoz, Diana Taylor, and Fred Moten, and in the context of the debates inspired by Peggy Phelan's claims for the ontology of performance as disappearance. José's "Ephemera as Evidence" was foundational for the concept of the "archive of feelings," as was Lauren Berlant's use of the term *archive* to talk about evidence and method in cultural studies.

Although the "archival turn" can be understood as cultural studies' theoretical reframing of what historians call the archive, I would emphasize that, through that process, cultural studies has also come to new archival practices. My own archival turn is thus a double one—initially conceptual but ultimately actual. And so much has happened since *An Archive of Feelings* that I'm now working on the sequel!

**Regina:** The "archival turn" in queer studies has intensified a kind of thinking in the field about crucial questions: the vulnerability and often absence of documentation of queer life, the places beyond official archives where we might locate such documentation, the relationship of grassroots archives to official archives, the possibilities of what Jack Halberstam calls "silly archives," the importance of what Ann Cvetkovich calls an "archive of feelings," the elusive archive of traces, ephemera, innuendo, gesture.

I'd locate the beginning of important thinking about the queer archive, though, before the archival turn. The ONE Institute archive was founded out of an audacious ambition to create a new field of homophile studies in the late 1950s. I think, too, about community-based gay and lesbian history projects in the 1970s, and about Jonathan Ned Katz's extraordinary *Gay American History* (1976), in which he combed archives for evidence of queer life over the course of four centuries. Katz's documentary projects were not just about culling sources (although his work has been an extraordinary gift to scholars since) but were also early reflections on the queer archive—on where we might locate it, what we might read as queer, and on its possibilities and limits.

**Anjali:** In many ways, the “archival turn” in queer studies mirrors the broader shifts in the field itself. If, for example, affect studies, trans/studies, postcolonial studies, to name a select few, have radically shifted the parameters of what and who constitute the “subject/s” of queer studies, so also have they transformed our understanding of what stands in for the idea of the archive. We continue to expand our understanding of archival forms, across genres, periodizations, species, but less so, I would submit, across geopolitics. Even as we mobilize the historical and locational transactions enabled through the sign of geopolitics, some troubling analytical turns persist. In many ways, “geopolitics” continues to be more about territorial demarcation, linguistic affiliation, demographic enumeration, divergent temporality and less an epistemology that interrogates the very persistent demand for those formations. The challenge here is to ask what does the turn to geopolitics bring to queer analyses of the archive and vice versa, even in its providential failures? I am, for instance, currently coediting a special issue with Geeta Patel called “Area Impossible,” and we are exploring just such a conversation. What’s become obvious for us as we navigate the architecture of the issue is how US-centered our conversations around archives still are (to wearily make that argument yet again!) and how rare it is to see discussions of archival forms that reach back beyond the nineteenth century.

**Tavia:** In addition to the tendencies and developments above, I would also argue that the archival turn in queer studies cannot be fully grappled with without also reckoning with the shift in meaning of *archive* and *archiving* wrought by technology. Without being technologically determinist, it is certainly possible to point to the “real subsumption” of archivally oriented queer scholarship, to adopt the Marxist terminology. Whereas earlier efforts at queer archival formations—the ONE Archive and Jonathan Ned Katz’s pioneering documentary histories—were hardly even subject to “formal” subsumption, being after all volunteer efforts conducted outside even nascent neighborhood gay economies, the cognitive labor through which digital archives are produced and interpreted is thoroughly colonized by capitalist rationality and valorization. The Google corporation’s move to digitize every book ever published is still the most salient event through which to think the real subsumption of the archive and processes of archival interpretation. Those of us trained before these tools became ubiquitous are deskilled by them, even as those for whom they are second nature may lack any sense of an outside or limit to the content, and, more importantly, the form, of the information they encode. For queer studies, I think this means specifically the partial banalization of our claims to exclusion, suppression, or disappearance, as what we confront instead is a superfluity of indifferent and undifferentiated access to the past: queer, straight, and everything in between and beyond. That such access is demonstrably *not* a replacement for the kinds of radical historicist projects that emerged within queer social movements and queer academic praxis is the most pressing reason that an “archival turn” in queer studies is on the pressing intellectual agenda.

**Juana María:** To echo Tavia, rather than exclusion we are entering a moment of such intense saturation of images, text, and video that our relationship to documentation and the archival is transforming. I have become curious to witness those situations that actively elude the archive, that refuse the allure of documentation and cherish the ephemeral qualities of the live. Those moments where you really did have to be there, a return to the “Event,” but also the secret, the intimacy of friendship, the play party, the club, the digital exchange. I have been attending more events where photography, posting, or tweeting is not allowed, and I see it as a way to respect the integrity of the collective experience that wishes to remain unruly, that wants to dissolve into the night. There is an impulse to Snapchat the archive, to make the records of foreclosure, debt, prison, surveillance, institutionalization disappear. At the same time, places like YouTube and Twitter have become vital repositories for documenting everyday violations and using these as evidence to demand reparations, creating a collective archive of systemic state abuses that contest dominant forms of mass media and the soul-crushing logics they promote. That the contradictory potential of these digital forms captures the “corrosive irony” of previous archival forms should therefore not surprise.

*Do you feel there is a necessary tension between inclusion and critique?*

**Ann:** Celebration and critical caution are both important when assessing the “archival turn.” The successful work of inclusion has brought us to an interesting crossroads where it is useful to maintain a critical perspective that is alert to blind spots, absences, and the operations of power, especially given the origins of national archives in forms of state power and surveillance. The archive can become an extension of neoliberal and homonational strategies when inclusion is about assimilation and equality and not about alternative and absent voices or transformative knowledge. The goal is not just stand-alone buildings and collections but critical engagement with existing practices.

I would suggest that the critique of the archive and the creation of counter-archives exist in a necessary, and ideally productive, tension with each other. We need both—a passion for alternative collections and ongoing attention to absences that can’t be filled. We want a queer archive, not just an LGBT archive—not just inclusion but transformation of what counts as an archive and innovative approaches to an engaged public history that connects the past with the present to create a history of the present.

**Juana María:** Yes! I am reminded of Roderick Ferguson’s work on governmentality that crystallizes the paradox that surrounds the queer archival project: “institutionalization is founded on divisions between legitimacy and illegitimacy.”<sup>5</sup> That is the risk, so we need to remain attuned to our own affective attachments to forms of recognition and be willing to challenge how legitimacy is established and the forms

of power it serves and upholds. Our response to risk needs to be about generating promiscuous forms of knowledge production, responding with activist creativity and intellectual agility rather than efforts to conserve or canonize.

In understanding ourselves through alternative logics of making sense that are often viewed as irrelevant, irrational, and illegitimate, queer others have had to create methodological practices for what José Esteban Muñoz terms “queer evidence: an evidence that has been queered in relation to the laws of what counts as proof.”<sup>6</sup> And, sometimes, we just have to resist the impulse to offer proof and allow ourselves to dwell in the realm of unknowing and nonsense.

**Christina:** Following Anjali’s earlier comments about what has not been included in queer studies’ shifts in recent years, I would add that the historiography of LGBT social movements has had a tenuous relationship with queer theory and has held onto what appear to be many conventional understandings of the archive. One reason has been an understandable defensiveness, as scholars who have long adopted imaginative, suspicious, and tenuous approaches to archiving and to writing history, often with limited resources, have found their efforts ignored and then replicated or assumed to be restricted to literal preservation or transcription, when in fact their practices have always been engaged with critique.

In addition, as Ann and others have shown, LGBT community-based archives emerged out of social movements. One result has been that collecting and processing tendencies reflect the dominant parameters of that movement, not only in demographic but also in ideological terms. As might be self-evident, they tend to collect the materials of organizations founded in the name of LGBT individuals and so identified goals. This has by no means been static; archivists and others have worked hard to expand the terms of inclusion, to represent, albeit slowly, those individuals in the margins of a mainstream movement, most especially along race and gender lines. Many archives have also sought to recognize queer politics as they take form in a US-centered antiassimilationism, perhaps best represented by groups like Queer Nation. But other political cultures that might also be described as queer are not always found within LGBT-identified archives. For researchers who hope to historicize the kind of queer politics described by Cathy Cohen—a politics that centers analyses of race and attends more to the interlocking structures of normativity, power, and kinship than modes of sexual or gender identification (without dismissing so-called identity politics)—it requires looking for sources outside LGBT-designated archives.<sup>7</sup> This is in part about exclusion—multi-issue groups are often sorted into archives along the same vexed terms of movements themselves (e.g., debates about identity and the Left, or, more importantly, what is *the Left*?)—as well as about suspicion—radical or systematically ignored groups rarely trust their papers to institutional *or* community-based archives. But it is also to say that this kind of social movement history requires scholars not only to queer their analytic

but also to queer their research practice. Where and how might one research critiques of normalizing sexual relations outside lesbian and gay identification or ways in which nonnormative gender has been the grounds for varied forms of radical political affiliation? This requires a critical analysis of the geopolitical, to return to Anjali's discussion earlier, not only to capture what might be called queer internationalisms (and their others) but also to engage the very different forms of legibility social movements have taken around the world.

This has been a pressing concern for me in my most recent research. *Safe Space* was organized squarely around the history of US LGBT-identified social movements, and it tells a story about how activism against violence became a key means by which normative LGBT identity was slowly and unevenly disaggregated from forms of vice and deviancy otherwise associated with racialized poverty in the city. My current research looks at those left out of that vision; namely, I am trying to write a *queer* left social movement history that focuses less on LGBT subjects per se and instead on how a range of individuals on the outsides of normative leftist social movements in the United States have been variably taken up or ignored, and it traces this alongside the entwined dynamics of social services and social movements in the post–World War II city. The project begins by thinking about some of the uses of the category of the so-called *lumpenproletariat* so reviled by Karl Marx and invested with potential by Frantz Fanon and others and then looks at a series of collective projects including antipoverty groups, harm reduction strategies, and antiprison organizing. Some repositories are obvious here, but others less so.

*What are your reflections on practice as theory?*

**Ann:** A key principle that stems from this tension is that we can't know what a radical or queer archive is in theory and instead need to work it out in practice. I say this as someone who has been shaped by theoretical critique, including Derrida's deconstructive claim that the archive never reaches its goal, postcolonial critique's insistence that the subaltern cannot speak, and Afropessimism about the impossibility of retrieving the experience of the lost and disenfranchised. Many of us remain perennially suspicious of institutionalization, of knowledge claims, of dreams of liberation through archival collection. Although it can be tempting to think so, the archive cannot necessarily redeem us from the past or guarantee our survival into the future.

At the same time, for those in the humanities who are steeped in critique, it has been very meaningful to take up archival practice as a research method, to see critical ideas about incomplete and partial archives as tools that can lead to practical decisions about what kind of archives to collect and preserve and, even more importantly, what to do with them. To this end, I have found it useful to develop a practice of ethnographic fieldwork in both alternative and institutional queer archives—to study not just the items in the archive but the material history of their archivization.

*What about the connection between affect and activist artists?*

**Ann:** In looking for how the critical impulse can be fused with practice, I have been especially inspired by the model of queer activists and artists, and especially the combination of the two together. When activists work with or create archives they do so with an eye toward preventing them from becoming a dead memorial, and they make them come alive by connecting them to the needs of the present. Working creatively with archives, artists are unafraid to make use of their very personal, subjective, and affective investments in the archive and thus produce alternative scholarship and activism through a mixed method that is not just aimed at factual knowledge.

Central to this queer archival method has been attention to the affective power of archives—that they are collected out of affective need, generate complex affective responses (both positive and negative), and enable affective approaches to history, including the scholarship on queer temporalities so generative of late within queer theory. I have been gratified to see my own concept of “an archive of feelings” gain traction not only among scholars but among artists; Tammy Rae Carland, for example, used it as the name for her exhibition of photographs of objects that had affective meaning for her. Inspired by her work as well as that of artists such as Zoe Leonard, Barbara Hammer, Catherine Lord, Ulrike Müller, Allyson Mitchell, and Alexis Pauline Gumbs (just to name a few), I have embarked on a new project that picks up where *An Archive of Feelings* left off in exploring the current state of LGBTQ archives as well as the creative practices they have generated.

**Juana María:** *An Archive of Feelings* remains such a pivotal text for me; it gave language to the affective flows among artists, activists, and academics in such a compelling way, not because they are organically conjoined, but precisely because so often they are not. Part of what made that work so transformational for me was sensing [Ann’s] embodiment of vulnerability; in that text (and others) Ann allows us to see the seams (and tears and sweat) of her practice. As academics, we are always already archivists, making editorial decisions about inclusion, representation, value, and pitch. And it is this articulation in her work of what an ethical queer archival academic *practice* might look like (and feel like) that touched me so deeply.

**Tavia:** I resonate with what Juana and Ann have said. Part of the phenomenological turn I have been privileged to witness and foster in my students has been in seeing them develop, alternately and in tandem, a queer praxis and a queer poetics of the archive. At the same time, I sense that praxis, or struggle, and poetics, or making/production, remain in tension within queer circles today. Praxis-oriented activists are not in automatic congruence with poetics-driven artists. To the contrary, their happy meeting often seems like an ephemeral miracle. I don’t believe in their conciliation, personally, and one of the biggest dangers that Roderick Ferguson alerts us to, in his useful theorization of the “will to institutionality,” is that we



will seek to make them so. The drive to merge queer activism, theory, and artistic production, I would go so far as to argue, is part of the flattening out of counterpublics we can associate with communicative capitalism and neoliberalism. José Esteban Muñoz's recent theorizing of the incommensurable is equally pertinent here. It returns us in a different way to his early theorizing of ephemerality in the queer archive, which has had a deserved influence among artists as well as researchers. The incommensurable for Muñoz points to differences that cannot be subsumed under a single term (much as queer ephemerality cannot be fully appropriated to the logic of the archive) but that can nevertheless be shared out. The incommensurable points to the spaces between us, across which we touch and are touched. It sounds a little poetic, but that is my preferred image for how queer activism and art can encounter each other without becoming each other.

*How has archival theory engaged postcolonial and indigenous critique?*

**Juana María:** Where to begin? For ethnic studies scholars in the United States, official archives have often been encounters of indescribable psychic violence, torture, mutilation, and horror. While African Americans have often been erased from accounts of US history, cataloged instead in property records, juridical encounters, and chronicles of imprisonment, Native Americans have suffered the unabated brutality of romanticized archival *misrepresentation*, memorialization as murder. In the bloody archives of slavery and colonialism, even as we witness the psychic perils of expurgation, we already have evidence of the dangers of "museumization." Through anthropology, law, photography, and exhibition practices, Native Americans have served as the quintessential dead subjects of the official archives of "Americanness." And generations of scholars like N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, Shari Huhndorf, Beth Piatote, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, and so many others have been instrumental in reimagining the relationship between official archives and the living subjects that escape their grasp.

For diasporic African people and other racialized groups there has long been a move toward reimagining the relationship between materiality and memory and creating alternative archival forms that fill the spaces of exclusion. This lineage includes folks like Arturo Alfonso Schomburg, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and queer of color scholars like José Quiroga, Jafari Sinclair Allen, Deborah Vargas, Mireille Miller-Young, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, and so many others. Their work points to how genres like slave narratives, *rumba* (Afro-Cuban rhythms and dance), folktales, *corridos* (Mexican ballad or folksong), and porn also constitute archival forms of knowledge. However, these genres are not just engaged in transmitting social histories; they also function as inspired projections of other ontological possibilities. As methodological models, these academic histories of archival engagement become resources we can turn to, not just because queers are also part of these racialized records, but because scholars of race have already produced such a rich

theoretical reservoir that considers the limits, risks, and imaginative possibilities of archival engagement.

**Tavia:** For those of us working in black studies as well as queer studies, it is hardly possible to begin without addressing Saidiya Hartman's statement that "the archive is a grave."<sup>8</sup> In the face of the evidence Juana has just presented, and the generations of radical scholarship in ethnic studies, indigenous studies, black studies, and colonial/postcolonial studies she cites, who could doubt this claim? And yet as scholars like Rinaldo Walcott and Christina Sharpe have argued, taking death as a point of departure (rather than as an ultimate horizon) has as yet unforeseeable possibilities for black queer studies. In the realm of queer theory, this entails a complete reconstruction of the problematic identified with the work of Lee Edelman, for whom queerness is inexorably the cultural figuration of the death drive. Edelman scrupulously eschews a racial analysis he seems to associate with identitarianism, but the strand of negativity that runs through current black studies is very far from encoding identity logics. To the contrary, it posits that the slave, in whose afterlife we are shadowed, is *anterior* to the human around which identity, rights, and so on coalesce. We cannot be posthumanist (let alone postracial), because we are not yet human. The living death of slavery is a structuring antagonism and perpetual spur to a black speculative drive that exceeds the terms of history's destruction of the body (perhaps another way in which black studies has led me beyond my formative reading of Foucault). The radical strand of black testimony that runs from Olaudah Equiano's praxical documentation of the *Zong* massacre to M. NourbeSe Philip's poetic reconstruction of it may count as so many insurrectionary instances of this black fabulation.

**Anjali:** I concur with all that has been said and would add just one wrinkle to the story. The incursions of postcolonial and indigenous critiques need to be equally understood through the shifting parameters of what each of those terms (*postcolonial* and *indigenous*) means within geopolitical formations. And this is not to make the obvious point about multiple histories or temporalities; rather, it is to point to broader epistemologies of postcoloniality and indigeneity than the ones currently in circulation. Simply put, what does indigenous critique signify in the postcolonial space of South Asia? Is it fungible with Dalit critique or debates around scheduled castes and tribes? I am always wary of the summoning of postcoloniality and/or indigeneity as the desired alterity, without a clear understanding of how the terms emerge and create archival forms that demand radical exclusions rather than inclusions (as is the case in India, for example). Archives are, after all, always in situ.

**Ann:** I proposed this as a topic for discussion because, in my view, the project of combining postcolonial and indigenous critique and queer critique more substantially in theory and practice remains unfinished business. (Anjali's *For the Record* is an important benchmark here.) The current moment of archival activism repre-

sents an opportunity to create new alliances on the ground, but I find that LGBT archives are still not always actively considering their relation to the racialized histories of colonialism and slavery that Juana María and Tavia have very eloquently articulated as foundational for any radical, and hence queer, archive. Moreover, the degree to which museums and archives have absorbed the critical frameworks we have been describing is uneven, and the limits of recovery work that many of us take for granted are not always part of public histories, which frequently remain celebratory, redemptive, or “postracial.” The messy gaps in the process whereby our scholarship gets taken up can be, in yet another spin on the archival turn, the site of ethnographic research.

Of late, I have been drawn to indigenous perspectives, inspired in particular by revisionist work in Canada’s national and regional museums and new forms of cultural sovereignty for archives and museums such as the return of artifacts to their ancestral homes. Indigenous frameworks that question notions of open access or the paper document and the archive’s intimate connections to property, ownership, and land claims have important implications for queer archives. The archival turn ultimately requires the thorough rethinking of what counts as knowledge and method. By approaching the land as living archive, transforming schools, and embracing the digital, indigenous resurgence is actively creating new cultures from the archive rather than exclusively mourning past violence or lost traditions.

*As an interdisciplinary space, queer studies can often be characterized by ongoing territory disputes that reflect tensions between particular disciplinary knowledges and methodologies. Can engagements with the archive and the archival in queer scholarship be understood in these terms?*

**Regina:** I’d like to think that an engagement with the archives and things archival would have the power to bridge territory disputes and tensions between disciplines in queer studies, or if not to bridge them, then at least spark real conversations across those different disciplinary spaces that I wish happened more often. A wide array of scholars from a range of disciplines and interdisciplines have become interested in the archive. This discussion in *RHR* is itself evidence of a conversation across disciplinary knowledges and locations, one that I hope is enriched by a theoretical engagement with “the archive” as a discursive field and a material engagement with archives.

**Anjali:** I have always been slightly bemused by the constant celebration or dismissal of interdisciplinarity within queer studies, particularly when it comes to the diversified holdings of queer archives. To return to a point I made earlier about periodization and geopolitics, such questions of interdisciplinarity often seem beside the point within histories of colonialism and sexuality. If one were to take the case of colonial India, for example, interdisciplinarity emerges more as a ruse of the colo-

nial state, rather than a disruptive reading practice. What we need, now more than ever, is a genealogy of interdisciplinarity as concept and practice within and without Euro-American archival forms. For me, queer archival forms demand reading practices that are meandering, ragged, and unfamiliar; no blueprints here for a studied interdisciplinarity!

*What types of key limits or liabilities do you observe in the expanding uptake of the archival in queer scholarship?*

**Regina:** Sometimes I worry (along with others) that *the archive* referenced by the “archival turn,” understood as a universal metaphor for memory structures, information storage, and knowledge production, might become so expansive as to include nearly everything and that, as a result, it will lose any relationship to what I’m tempted, with some embarrassment, to call “real” archives. I’m drawn by calls like Jack Halberstam’s to understand the queer archive as a “complex record of queer activity” that might include ephemera of events, shows, meetings, and collective memory or José Esteban Muñoz’s insistence that we track evidence of the queer in innuendo and gossip, in “traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, I hope that some strands of the conversation about archives remain tethered to material archives, broadly construed, and engaged with the practices of working with, in, and sometimes against them. Among my favorite moments in Susan Stryker’s wonderful film *Screaming Queens: The Riot at Compton’s Cafeteria*, for instance, is when Susan is on camera in the archive, reminding us of the kind of material engagement with archival documents—fragmentary though they may be—that led her to recover that story of trans and queer resistance.

**Christina:** I share Regina’s sentiments here—both her investment in “real” archives, and her embarrassment about using that term. I also like the formulation “actually existing” archives that Ann used earlier in this discussion. I find contradiction useful, not only as an analytic for understanding capitalism but also as a method for *bothness*—that we can claim identities and critique the structures of their consolidation, write narrative history but also redirect its assumed end-point trajectories, take up a critical poetics and craft an earnest polemic. This is not to insist that these things can or should be the same, but I want to suggest that to only oppose them is to resolve rather than sit within or work with their differences. I very much agree with Tavia that it is important to resist “conciliation” and, following José Esteban Muñoz, to consider what happens in the space of incommensurability.

*Archival work is inevitably about selection: which collection to engage, open, or assemble. And this process is followed by further editing processes of sifting, sorting, and prioritizing key pieces for analytical focus. What sorts of archives do you think should compel the interest of contemporary queer studies?*

**Regina:** I am drawn in my work to subjects who are not always legible as “LGBT” and who sometimes stretch the limits of what we might think of as “queer.” In *Criminal Intimacy*, I explored forms of same-sex sexuality in prison dismissed as “situational” and therefore often treated as empty of meaning for an LGBT history that was primarily interested in questions of identity. Among the challenges of my current project on queer and gender-variant encounters with psychiatric “treatment” is its inclusion of subjects not easily assimilable into narratives of queer history and as a consequence often marginal to the enterprise of LGBT history: reluctant subjects, afraid that they’re homosexual; unpalatable subjects, attracted to young children; unheroic subjects, debilitated by shame and self-loathing. My interest in this collection of sexual and gender dissidents springs less from an impulse of inclusion than from an interest in a history of disavowal—a kind of strategic disaffiliation that might result from the promptings of gay activists to conceive of homosexuality beyond the mental hospital and psychiatrist’s office and by historians who often followed suit.

In my current project, I’m also thinking about the ways in which my conceiving of the sources I’m using as a queer archive might keep me from recognizing other things about it—for instance, its status as a disability archive or an archive of racialized encounter.

While this project and projects past have been utterly indebted to LGBT archives, my interest in these dissident subjects has made me think about the liberationist origins of so many of those collections and the ideas about gay and lesbian identity that shaped (and shape) their accession priorities and collection practices. The archival turn proposes that we ask how documents come to be archived in the first place, in whose interest they have been preserved, and how the documenting of particular events and processes (and not others) shapes what can be known about the past. What kinds of queer or LGBT subject is privileged in those archival collections, and who is left out? How do accession policies understand and define queerness? What stories do LGBT archives put into motion, and what stories do they make difficult to know and to tell?

**Christina:** In my new work, I am also interested in how the idealization of recovery in LGBT social movements and archival projects functions not only as a bringing into visibility but also as a normalizing aspiration to the healthy and self-realized self. This is in line with Regina’s new work on psychiatric institutions, and her framework of “disavowal” is very powerful to me as a way to think about the politics of representation. In *Safe Space*, I featured many activists whose forms of outsidership might cast them as the ideal vanguard of radical queer politics today—people who adopted nonconventional gender, exchanged sex for money, and lived on the economic and social edges of dominant society. But many of them also refused some of the ideals held by radical movements then and now including those of self-determination or communitarianism, be that by acting in ways others considered irrational or against

their own self-interest, embracing combativeness and materialism, working not only against but also for the police, shaming others who lived as they did, or adopting racism or sexism in everyday speech or exchanges, all practices that trouble these figures' neat integration into LGBT social movements *and* archives. The merging of social services and social movements in this history has often offered recovery (from addiction, mental illness, or other things understood as unhealthy) as solution, or it has provided an expanded framework for prideful identification. And as social movement history is often imagined as an aggregation of individual actors, it also assumes that those actors understand themselves as part of this political story. What analytics and methods, then, might the logic of nonrecovery offer?

**Anjali:** One of the first things that the newly elected Hindu-right government did in India a few months ago was to destroy a cherished collection of archival materials. These materials were government records of a key period in Indian history and had little (if anything) to say about queer bodies or subjects. Yet their destruction (alongside the growing rise in censorship) is a continuous reminder of the fragility of archives and access in so many parts of the world. Thus, even as LGBT archives in India are now beginning to emerge (especially online), the destruction of printed materials and cherished collections that interrogate India's so-called Hindu past is on the rise. All this to say, I worry less these days about the visibility of what we understand as queer archives and despair more about the disappearance of the very large, messy archives that we worked so long and hard to supplement! Such issues have particular import for those of us who work in the historical archive and in regions of the world where digitization or online access is not even within the realm of possibility.

## Notes

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78.
2. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 15.
3. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 76.
4. *Ibid.*, 94.
5. R. A. Ferguson, "Administering Sexuality; Or, The Will to Institutionality." *Radical History Review* no. 100 (2008): 158–69, doi: 10.1215/01636545-2007-027.
6. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 65.
7. Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437–65.
8. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 2.
9. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 170; José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (1996): 10.

