

Archiving Transgender: Affects, Logics, and the Power of Queer History

Transgender: "people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (*trans-*) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender"
(Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*)

This dissertation examines three archives that collect transgender material in order to analyze archives as rhetorical sites where a complex interplay of language, politics, logic, and affect shape archival research. Current scholarship in rhetorical historiography has (re)turned to archives to consider the rhetorical dimensions of archives themselves and the impact these dimensions have on researchers (Kirsch and Rohan; Morris; Ferreira-Buckley). I extend and complicate this line of inquiry by focusing specifically on transgender archival practices and logics. Transgender archiving is an especially rich site for critical investigation because of the complexities of the term “transgender” itself, including its recent emergence, its current academic slant, its repeated failure to represent those to whom it is often applied, and the ethical considerations that are prompted by its use.

I consider a spectrum of archival contexts—including grassroots, non-profit, and university archives—to better understand the variety of approaches possible for archiving transgender materials. Specifically, I investigate three sites with sizable transgender holdings: The Sexual Minorities Archives in Northampton, Massachusetts; The GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, California; and The National Transgender Library and Archive in Ann Arbor, Michigan. My methods are multi-modal, including theoretical, rhetorical, and qualitative research methods, which consist of spatial and textual analysis, close reading, direct observation, and approximately 20 interviews with archivists, volunteers, and researchers.

From this research I develop three interconnected inroads for recognizing and evaluating the rhetorical qualities of transgender archiving, which are each explored in a separate chapter of this dissertation. For the first inroad, which is the first data chapter, I provide rhetorical histories of the three archives to demonstrate the ways that these archives emerged as political responses to particular historical climates. Because these archives serve a larger function beyond aiding researchers, they have politically-charged environments where researchers are likely to be influenced in both how they read historical materials and what they then do with those materials. This directly corresponds with a second inroad, which constitutes the second data chapter of my dissertation, where I consider various archival logics and their impacts. Archival logics is a phrase that I use to refer to the entire access system that archives employ, including classification and organizational systems. As grassroots classification systems elucidate, archival logics are always subjective and as a result, they encourage particular research pathways and privilege particular researchers. The third inroad attempts to capture the complex affects (including identification, disidentification, trauma, shame, pleasure, desire, and attachment) that can occur in archival encounters with transgender materials. Such affects, I argue in this third data chapter, should be taken seriously as rhetorical interactions, which can be either intentional or accidental, but nonetheless have direct impacts on the way people experience history.

To provide a framework for these inroads, my dissertation begins with an introductory chapter that reviews the scholarly conversations and context for this study. The introduction also provides an explanation of the methods I use to examine archives and the methodologies that undergird my approach. Given that “transgender” is a recent term, I spend the second chapter unpacking the term and the particular considerations that transgender historical work warrants, particularly in the context of the now-established field of queer historiography. Finally, I conclude this dissertation with a chapter that re-theorizes the concept of “archives” as fluid, rhetorical, adaptive, and ever-political.