The Bedside Table Archives
Archive Intervention and
Lesbian Intimate Domestic Culture

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This article introduces the Bedside Table Archives, a curatorial project and archive intervention that explores the domestic culture of lesbian and queer women at a particular moment in time. Inspired by the sociology of Ben Highmore and the methodological approach of Rachel Hurdley, this project borrows from arts-based research practice, oral history, and archival theory to create a collection of records relating to women's queer homemaking practices in the intimate realm of the bedroom. I entered the homes of lesbian and queer-identified women to document the objects found both in and on their bedside tables. Then, using a narrative interview approach, we sat together, usually on the bed, and used personal possessions to guide us in a conversation about each woman's day-to-day life. Objects were photographed and cataloged to ensure that the impression of this brief or transitory assemblage was documented, and our conversations were captured using a digital audio recorder. The collection of materials created from these sessions—photographs, notes, and recorded interviews—forms an archive of what Highmore has called “the banal bizarreness of ordinary life,” a snapshot of the everyday that would not otherwise find its way into the annals of history. All project material will be donated to the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony (A LOT), a digital repository of records relating to lesbians’ and queer women’s experiences in Canada. A selection of images and quotations drawn from conversations are presently accessible on the project website, www.bedsidetablearchives.com.
The first phase of the project includes ten sessions with eleven women residing in and around the greater Toronto area. Women were invited to participate in the project by an informal call posted on Twitter and Facebook, a formal call distributed through academic and community listservs, and by word of mouth. Two participants live together as a married couple, and two others were in a relationship together at the time of their sessions but did not reside in the same home. Ages of participants ranged from twenty to fifty-seven years, and only one participant had any formal training in archival methodology. Although the project is in no way designed to represent the rich diversity of Toronto’s lesbian and queer cultures, it is interesting to note that women who took part identified across a range of ethnic backgrounds, but only two identified as nonwhite. Three identified as working-class and one as upper-middle-class. The initial phase reflected a diversity of opinions about political identities, sexuality, and personal experiences. An additional twenty sessions have been planned, and material collected will be accessioned into the Bedside Table Archives as it becomes available.

The Bedside as a Site of Inquiry

The Bedside Table Archives responds to the growing interest in queer domesticity and the home as a key site for identity construction and reconstruction. As Andrew Gorman-Murray suggests, researchers have been increasingly attentive to the “geographies of sexuality” since the early 1990s, producing studies that investigate the
ways that gay men and lesbians experience social spaces. She has looked at, for example, Toronto’s Church-Wellesley Village, a so-called gay ghetto that emerged in the 1960s and has thrived as a political and commercial district for the city’s gay and lesbian population. Others, including Annette Pritchard, Nigel Morgan, and Diane Sedgley and Elise Chenier, have explored lesbian experiences in both gay (male) social spaces and in predominately lesbian spaces. Karen Tongsom’s work on suburban queer cultures has also initiated a discussion about the ways that lesbians and gay men have increasingly taken up residence in various kinds of public places. Gorman-Murray contends, however, that our homes remain “heterosexualized spaces,” designed to support nuclear families and therefore imbued with the power to inhibit or at least conceal nonnormative sexual expressions and practices. He urges researchers to look closer at the domestic realm as a site of inquiry and consider the ways that our homemaking practices both challenge and uphold sexual and gender norms. Queer homemaking practices, Gorman-Murray argues, “generate material anchors for affirming gay/lesbian identities,” although these often remain hidden from certain visitors.

The snapshots of intimate domesticity that form the Bedside Table Archives not only support Gorman-Murray’s assertion that our homemaking practices help us develop our sense of selves but also show how the objects we keep can embody both our public and private selves simultaneously. The project is, however, not an academic endeavor and should not be read parallel to the scholarly literature that Gorman-Murray discusses. Academic inquiry into the management of identity within the home is best found in work by historians and geographers such as Matt Cook, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Brent Pilkey. The Bedside Table Archives is purposely designed to minimize its ties to academic scholarship to underscore its interventionist roots, which are discussed in the next two sections. The project methodology and the material records it produces not only tether the exploration of queer homemaking practices to the kinetic experience of documenting a domestic culture but also privilege the act of intervention over any scholarly insight that the records might provide. The experience of developing and carrying out a queer archive intervention also lays bare my own distrust of the archival methods and practices that I, as an archivist, have been trained to uphold.

**Defining Archive Intervention**

The term *archive intervention* is most commonly associated with the work of Lubaina Himid, a practicing artist and professor of contemporary arts at the University of Central Lancashire. Archive intervention is a research-based art practice that seeks to enliven and engage relations between archives or research collections and the communities they serve. The overall aim of the intervention is to generate new interest in a collection and reestablish its importance and relevance. Archive
interventions can take any form, but many include an exhibit, workshop, or event that is intended to challenge the community to challenge the collection. That is, the end goal of the project is not to educate the public about the collection but to interpose into this orthodox thinking about its significance. Himid’s curatorial work uses historical documentation to create new artistic pieces that call attention to the voices that are either absent from the archival record or distorted to promote a particular kind of national or colonial narrative. In *Naming the Money*, for example, Himid created one hundred life-size figures using patterns and colors from the many African textiles acquired through European colonial practices and preserved in the archives of several British museums.

Archive intervention can also refer to the process of using research and documentation to create an archive where one does not already exist. The oeuvre of Horst Ademeit (1937–2010), for example, consists of several thousand Polaroid photographs and accompanying texts that document the “secret universe” of Cologne and Dusseldorf, Germany. As art critic Stephanie Buhmann explains, when viewed as a whole, Ademeit’s records “manifest as an elaborate archive of everyday information.” The archive reveals the many incremental changes taking place in Ademeit’s world, however trivial. In some cases, the creation of an archive can be an explicitly political act. One example is the Hope in Shadows archive, a collection of photographs taken by residents of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside neighborhood. The archive began with a series of photography contests sponsored by the Pivot Legal
Society, which aimed to empower residents of Canada’s poorest neighborhood to document the surrounding geographic community and serve as a catalyst for change of perceptions and misperceptions about the place they call home. The Hope in Shadows archive now contains more than twenty thousand images and accompanying notes.

One might also consider Cheryl Dunye’s 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman*, to be an archive intervention. The film follows a protagonist, Cheryl, as she searches for information about Fae Richards, an African American actress who often appeared unaccredited in early Hollywood cinema. At the same time, the film explores Cheryl’s own identity as a black lesbian filmmaker living in a post-Stonewall America. She follows several leads and is ultimately drawn to the archival collections at the Center for Lesbian Information and Technology (CLIT) (a loosely veiled reference to the Brooklyn-based Lesbian Herstory Archives), where she pores through photographs and journals, unsatisfied by the privileging of white experiences. At several points in the film, Cheryl “breaks the fourth wall” and talks directly to the audience about her frustration with the scant evidence of black lesbianism. Only at the end of the film is the audience made aware that the character of Richards is part of Dunye’s fictional narrative. Thus *The Watermelon Woman* is an archive intervention because it “reads” like a documentary; the audience is presented with the character of Richards as if she were a historical figure. In fact, the fictitious Richards purposefully dupes the audience into feeling complicit in the erasure of black experiences because viewers could not possibly know anything about Richards. As Laura L. Sullivan explains, the film uses both deconstructive and realist techniques to challenge our own lack of knowledge about African American history and black lesbian culture. The film is also an intertextual project. The pseudorealism, underpinned by Cheryl’s direct dialogue with the audience and the faked documents created for the purpose of the film, allows the film to serve as pastiche, imitating not another work of art but the absurdity of excavating evidence of queer lives from the historical record. Although fictional, *The Watermelon Woman* is as much an archive intervention as a curatorial project because it challenges us to challenge the archival record as we imagine it.

The Bedside Table Archives as Archive Intervention
The Bedside Table Archives is an archive intervention on at least three distinct levels. First, although the scale is much smaller than similar projects by Ademeit and the contributors to the Hope in Shadows archive, the goal of this project is to produce an archive of everyday experiences that would not otherwise find their way into the historical record. This aim disrupts traditional archival practice that sees records creation as a passive activity and archivists as neutral guardians of these records. In its strictest definition, an “archive” is a selection of records that have been created organically by an individual, family, group, or organization during the
normal conduct of affairs. That is, archival records are by-products of activity and not the ultimate purpose of this activity. Furthermore, they become archival only after they have been appraised for their enduring informational or historical value. As archival scholar Terry Cook notes, the traditional conception of archival records is that they are “static physical objects” and “passive products of human or administrative activity.”

Postmodern thinking has nevertheless challenged archivists to shift our understanding of how archives are created and to acknowledge our role “in actively shaping collective (or social) memory.” Archival theory has responded, for example, to Jacques Derrida’s dismantling of our most cherished methods and troubling our allegiance to neutrality as a professional ethic. From Tom Nesmith’s early writing on the “ghosts of archival theory” to Verne Harris’s sustained response to Derrida’s challenge, archival theorists have become more responsive to, what Rodney G. S. Carter has called, the “power of archival silences.” Concomitant with this new awareness of the power of archives has been increasing recognition of the importance of community-led archiving practices, often initiated because of a real or perceived failure on the part of mainstream archives to accurately represent certain voices. Andrew Flinn’s investigation of community archives and identity in the United Kingdom and Mary Stevens’s work with rukus!, a London-based black queer archive, contribute to an activist turn in archival theory, a standpoint unimaginable by traditional archival scholars.
The Bedside Table Archives grows out of this new activist turn. It is an “artificially” constructed collection of records and one that remains dynamic in its meaning and importance even after it has been made “archival” by its donation to an archival repository. It reveals how history does not just happen but is created and recreated over time. The archival character of the project is also what distinguishes the Bedside Table Archives from Tammy Rae Carland’s Lesbian Beds photography series, which also documents the intimate realm of the bedroom but does so to achieve an aesthetic purpose and not necessarily an interventionist goal. The series more closely parallels Onya Hogan-Finlay’s Lez Con exhibition project to unearth lesbian content in the archives and show material not usually visible to visitors. The final act of inserting the material I collect into an archival repository is not just a part of the intervention but is its central purpose.

A second interventional characteristic of the Bedside Table Archives project is its insistence that the intimate domestic lives of lesbian and queer women are not only important enough to document but that this culture actually exists. In An Archive of Feelings, Ann Cvetkovich shows how lesbian culture has been systematically devalued in mainstream heritage production. Through examinations of performance, literature, and oral histories, she confronts the erasure of lesbian public cultures and its effect on lesbian women’s health and well-being. Cvetkovich then introduces a queer approach to understanding trauma as an ordinary consequence of such erasure and argues for the importance of archiving women’s everyday lives as a healing or reparative response. The Bedside Table Archives takes up Cvetkovich’s call to action and contributes to a reparative process by archiving the lesbian everyday. The decision to use bedside tables rather than mantelpieces or refrigerator doors, for example, is also a purposeful poke at the popular depictions of women’s same-sex desire—it is either fetishized through the male lens of pornography and erotica or erased by the persistent “lesbian bed death” mythology that desexualizes women in same-sex relationships. The project therefore intervenes into the devaluation of lesbian cultural expressions by recognizing the importance of archiving lesbian intimate domestic cultures.

Third, the Bedside Table Archives is an intervention into the exceptionalism of established lesbian and gay archives that tend to privilege the unusual or extraordinary events, organizations, and people who have contributed to our queer social histories. The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), for example, grew out of the working files of the Body Politic, Canada’s gay liberation newsmagazine of record from 1971 to 1987. The newsmagazine covered political activism, such as demonstrations and early pride marches, as well as community events, including annual Halloween drag shows and the 1981 bathhouse raids. Today the CLGA has grown significantly in size and scope, and the emphasis remains on collecting material that documents public activities with national significance. As a result, the collection does not always provide sufficient evidence of the day-to-day lives of queer people but rather focuses on the extraordinary lives of community activists, politicians, athletes,
and those engaged (successfully) in the creative arts—writers, visual and performance artists, and media personalities.

Archival exceptionalism is certainly not unique to lesbian and gay collections; however, the effects are amplified in this environment because it is often assumed that archivists of lesbian and gay collections are “rescuer-historians” of a material culture that would have otherwise been lost. This amplification therefore provides a false sense that the records kept by established lesbian and gay archives can appropriately and adequately evidence the lives of lesbian women. The Bedside Table Archives therefore follows the tradition of Himid and Dunye to create artistic work that makes visible that which is hidden and calls attention to the silences in the archives.

**Water Bottles and Lube: A Reflection on My Conversations in the Bedroom**

In the early stages of this project I joked that it should be renamed “Water Bottles and Lube.” In each of the ten initial sessions, the bedside table was not only a repository of artifacts related to nighttime routines—lotion, earplugs, and clock radios—but also the space of what one participant called “the cause and effect.” As she explained, the lube that I found on her bedside table had to be “at arm’s length” because she had a very active sex life. The water was there to keep her hydrated after “playing.” In fact, many of the women I met had similar items on their bedside tables. One woman remarked that there is “nothing quite like” her Conair neck massager, which sat out on top of her bedside table, next to her lesbian erotica book and a collection of clothespins. Others kept their toys in drawers or in boxes, but it was clear that the bedside is a sexual space for many of the participants. The bedside table also appears to be an aspirational space, where women place their books in the hope that this might inspire them to invest a few minutes before bed for leisure reading. Many women kept lists of daily tasks or journals—although several admitted to lapsing in their duty to record their own experiences of daily life. “There is
just not enough time to invest in documenting ourselves in this way” was a common sentiment. I was also intrigued by the number of pill bottles and medications that I discovered, a reminder that each of us has our own struggles with health and wellness.

In almost every encounter, women remarked that they were tempted to clean or to tidy their space, to set out items that would best represent them to me, the archivist. These comments were generally followed up with a reassurance that, with consideration for the purpose of the project, they had resisted this urge to curate and had allowed me access into their intimate space in situ. Perhaps a project that requires the invitation of a stranger to sift through the drawers of your bedside table attracts women who are already comfortable in their intimate realms. Or perhaps, as one woman confessed, we are “blessed to be born lesbian” so that we can heal in the company of women. I wonder if this sentiment is why she felt already at ease with me. Maybe my own aesthetic—short hair, stocky frame, casual clothes—resonated with the women I meet as a familiar or ally. Within the confines of this project, my queerness may have afforded me an additional intimacy with the participants that cannot be discounted. This status was an important element in my gaining permission to explore and discuss with relative strangers this intimate realm so closely connected to sex, addiction, abuse, feminism, and kink. I do not take this unfettered access for granted.

And although several women insisted that their bedrooms and bedside tables were not particularly lesbian or queer spaces, what became clear throughout our conversations is that, in fact, these spaces reflect the lesbian or queer women who keep them. This juxtaposition of public identities with intimate lives not only reanimates the nearly forgotten feminist adage “the personal is political” but also reaffirms the importance of archiving the intimate lives of lesbian and queer women. Thus my desire to draw attention to domestic culture should not suggest complicity in an erasure of women from a gendered public but rather should arouse acknowledgment that the line that divides the public from the private, the intimate from the distant, is less crisp than we often draw it. By seeking out and documenting those messy spaces and actively creating an archive of lesbian intimate domestic culture, the Bedside Table Archives intentionally engages in a critical practice of “queering the archives.” Using a strategy that takes cues from Howard Zinn’s radical reform, the project playfully uproots traditional acquisition and appraisal methodologies. Queering the archives in this way recognizes the importance of participating in the work of records creation as a way to better represent those who remain underdocumented.31
Notes

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3. A LOT was founded in 2010 to digitize and make accessible records of lesbian experiences in Canada. Materials include oral history audiotapes, radio and television program tapes, video and film produced by documentary filmmakers, and home video and film. The repository is supported by and operates out of Simon Fraser University’s library. See Elise Chenier, “Hidden from Historians: Preserving Lesbian Oral History in Canada,” *Archivaria*, no. 68 (2009): 247–70.


9. Ibid., 285.


11. Himid has worked as a painter, writer, and curator since the early 1980s and teaches as part of the Fine Art Site and Archive Interventions program at the University of Central Lancashire. Her work uses visual art to grapple with issues related to the black diaspora.

12. Lubaina Himid, Naming the Money (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Hatton Gallery, 2004). The art installation was exhibited from January 17 to March 3, 2004, at the Hatton Gallery at Newcastle University.

13. Ibid.


19. Alana Kumbier has called Dunye’s film “historic intervention” and compared The Watermelon Woman to Saidya Hartman’s “critical fabulation,” in which she “imagines what could have been, and makes her method more evident.” Alana Kumbier, “Inventing History: The Watermelon Woman and Archive Activism,” in Make Your Own History: Documenting Feminist and Queer Activism in the Twenty-First Century, ed. Lyz Bly and Kelly Wooten (Los Angeles: Litwin Books, 2012), 89–104.


21. Ibid.


26. Onya Hogan-Finlay was born in Fredericton, Canada, and is based in Los Angeles. Her exhibition *Lez Con* ran as part of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA) 2012 curatorial program. A play on the term *Can Con* (Canadian content), *Lez Con* featured objects associated with lesbian culture from the 1980s and onward, including posters, books, paraphernalia such as a Hitachi Magic Wand, reusable menstrual pads, and handkerchiefs. Although the majority of items were drawn from the CLGA’s collections, some pieces were brought by the artist.


28. According to Suzanne Iasenza, the phrase “lesbian bed death” was first used during a political rally that took place in 1987, and in reference to a major study on lesbian sexuality by University of Washington sociologist Pepper Schwartz. See Philip Blumstein and Pepper Schwartz, *American Couples: Money, Work, Sex* (New York: Morrow, 1983). According to Schwartz, lesbian couples in committed relationships have less sex than any other type of couple, and they generally experience less sexual intimacy the longer the relationship lasts. Although the lesbian community and some psychologists have criticized the study as popular myth, the theory of “lesbian bed death” continues to influence perceptions of women’s same-sex sexualities today. Suzanne Iasenza, “Beyond ‘Lesbian Bed Death’: The Passion and Play in Lesbian Relationships,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 6, no. 1 (2002): 111–20.

29. See Marcel Barriault, “Archiving the Queer and Queering the Archives: A Case Study of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA),” in Bastian and Alexander *Community Archives*, 97–108.

30. Terry Eastwood suggests that the “rescuer-historian” role of archivists is often the first stage in setting up archives. It is followed by work to establish authority and, finally, extend and strengthen this authority. See Terry Eastwood, “Reflections on the Development of Archives in Canada and Australia,” in *Archival Documents: Providing Accountability*.
through Recordkeeping, ed. Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward (Melbourne: Ancora, 1993), 27.