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“Archival of the Fittest: The Role of Archives in Constructing Public Memory of Queer History”

Brooks Hosfeld
SIT Study Abroad

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“Archival of the Fittest: The Role of Archives in
Constructing Public Memory of Queer History”
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ABSTRACT:

IHLIA LGBT Heritage, an LGBTI-specific archive housed in Amsterdam, is moving beyond traditionally-introverted roles of an archive by putting on an exhibit about the past 40 years of LGBT activism in the Netherlands. The archive alone contributes to public awareness of queer history, and the exhibit, *With Pride*, gives a heightened platform for select gay narratives from the collections. The subjects on display, as well as the goals and decisions that selected them, reflect which narratives are included in historical memory and deemed palatable to the public.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION	7
LITERATURE REVIEW	8
HISTORY IN MEMORY	8
CONSTRUCTION OF TRUTH	11
COMMUNITY ARCHIVES	13
ARCHIVE OF FEELINGS	15
METHODOLOGY	17
OBSERVATION & ANALYSIS	21
IHLIA BACKGROUND	21
WITH PRIDE	24
CONCEPTUALIZING	26
AUDIENCE	28
OUTREACH	30
QUEER CONTINUITY	32
CONCLUSION	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY	38
APPENDIX	41
INTERVIEWS	41
WITH PRIDE EXHIBIT	42

INTRODUCTION:

Archives play an incredibly important role in shaping what societies understand to be “history.” Unnamed people have cultivated what we remember of the past. These people have carefully constructed what they deemed important enough to preserve. Archives establish the stories we know. The documents and materials within an archive are the resources historians have to piece together the puzzle of historical periods, contributing to what society knows about history. Because of this, power structures commonly use the archive to strategically destroy or exclude information from an archive, thereby often erasing the history of marginalized groups and people.

Archives are a vital site to the construction of public memory, either furthering or destroying systemic power imbalances. It is the collection and preservation of narratives within archives that allow historians to access historical experience and identities of queerness. Conversely, a prominent method of erasure is in the deliberate lack of platform given to these materials. If no one knows queerness existed in a particular time and space, within historical memory it did not exist at all. It is alongside the institutional exclusion of LGBTQ+ people and experiences that queer-specific archives came into existence, where as a form of resistance to homophobic systems, queer folks took matters into their own hands, remembering each other and preserving community stories by creating personal archives for themselves. Archives centering LGBTQ+ histories have the ability to be powerful spaces of resistance to invisibility and homophobia by reclaiming access to queer narratives, refusing to let these stories fall victim to systemic erasure.

I am observing how LGBTQ-specific archives contribute to public narratives of queer history through a case study of IHLIA LGBT Heritage, (hereby referred to in short as IHLIA), an

international, LGBTI-specific archive located in the center of Amsterdam. More specifically, I am looking at IHLIA's most recent exhibit, *With Pride*, and the historical narratives it displays. In these spaces space, I have tried to answer, how does this LGBTI-specific archive directly contribute to the construction of public memory about queer history? Does IHLIA uphold Dutch tokenization of cis, white, gay men, or expand Amsterdam's historical memory to more radically include the experiences of queer folks who do not adequately conform to normative, homonationalist identities and expressions?

LITERATURE REVIEW:

HISTORY IN MEMORY

People in the past live on through the stories we know. Whether recalling an encounter with a late loved one or reading a letter written by someone a hundred years before you were born, what is remembered continues the life of those who may no longer otherwise exist. We ascribe value to what we know only because we know it. Without some written or spoken record of a person or event, there would be no current knowledge of what took place in the past. It is as a collection of memories in various forms that "an archive is a guarantee for a future that remains faithful to the present, a guarantee that my desire, my institutions, and my existence are not only represented in the future but also recognizable by those people occupying that future present" (Edenheim, 2014, p. 49). Those whose narratives are kept in the archive are given the power to exist in the future, while others are lost in forgetting, impossible to be recalled again. Archivists, then, are protectors of those in history who currently exist, and the cultivators of those who will in the future be remembered, "Since inclusion in the archive is deemed synonymous with life, exclusion from the archive means death, a death that the archivist is responsible for" (Edenheim 2014, p. 53). They fill the role of decider of who lives and dies within public historical memory.

Archives are compilations of what somebody deemed, for whatever reason, significant enough to keep. Everything that exists in an archive is reviewed, filtered, categorized, before becoming permanently housed in the institution. Accessioning processes allow archivists to measure the worth a piece has within their collection, if any. The point is well-summarized by Achille Mbembe when he says:

The archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status. (2002, p. 20)

For the most part, archivists are the gatekeepers within this selection process, who are then in charge of assigning value to each piece. They and their biases determine what will be kept to potentially contribute to narratives within future memory of the present and past, and what will be discarded into the depths of what has been forgotten.

It is not exclusively the archivist who is determining what is going into an archive; donations can build up unassessed, informally part of the archive, in which the donor themselves had found enough in the offered materials to want to continue its life in a more permanent collection. To them, as well as to those who turn to the archive for research, “The archive is a place of safe-keeping, preserving and imagining.... It is the repository, not only of documents and records, artefacts and memorabilia, but the place where all that is important and special and valuable is stored and preserved for posterity” (Reid, 2002, p. 206). Personal significance of

donated items are much more highly valued in community archives than state, as these spaces value and keep the stories of queer experience that are told within personal items.

Archives hold the evidence needed to prove the existence of those who exist outside of societal norms. Most frequently, in state archives, this evidence comes in the form of criminal records. This type of document both proves what was deemed criminal in the first place—with which historians identify marginalized people—and can later be used for the liberation of individuals wrongly accused of criminality (Ketelaar, 2006). After all, “the violation of [human] rights has been documented in the archives, and citizens who defend themselves appeal to the archives. The archives have a twofold power: being evidence of oppression and containing evidence required to gain freedom, evidence of wrongdoing and evidence for undoing the wrong” (Ketelaar, 2006, p. 146). For this reason, states exploiting their power frequently turn to destruction of archives in the attempts to silence information that damns them; this does not eradicate the power of an archive, but only displace it (Migraine-George, 2016, p. 200). Destroying an archive reaffirms the power it had in the first place.

Through intake and record-keeping, archives are sites that shows who is included and who is not in historical narratives, whether through criminality or gaps in the historical record. During a roundtable discussion entitled “Queering Archives,” Regina Kunzel says, “[Archives are] 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.” (Arondekar, 2015, p. 214). It is the role of the researcher to assess what and who is represented in an archive, and give platform to their perception of the truth.

Positionality creates bias when historians come to do their primary source research, since “Most historians write history before they enter the archive, beginning their professional apprenticeship by using those secondary sources in libraries that are already contaminated by interpretation and selection” (Dirks, 2015, p. 28). It is possible and likely that a researcher is looking for the information that affirms what they think they already know. Previous education, identities, life experiences, everything the historian brings with themselves to the archive is imposed in their reading of the records within, whether in line with or counteracting normalized historical narratives. A researcher is inseparable from their positionality. Even after archivists have enforced their judgement over archived pieces, researchers establish a new round of human bias for the material before it is given a larger platform within the historian’s accounts. As seen in the politics of exclusion in archival record, our understanding of the past is constructed by larger systems of power, education, identity, and access.

CONSTRUCTION OF TRUTH

History is not an objective truth but a compilation of narratives pushed to further a specific understanding of what happened in the past. Public memory constructed in ways that suit our ideal narrative, presenting the past in ways that we want our future to think of the present. Government powers turn to the state archive as tools affirming their power, keeping and using and eradicating information selectively for their benefit, knowing that those who control the access to the archive control historical narratives.

While not directly political, historians are the ones who go to the primary sources of the archives to see firsthand what is recorded and return with an interpretation that represents the wider narratives within the archives. They are the ones who most directly create wider understandings of what is true, though “the historian’s project is not one of reporting what is true

in itself—but to *choose* which narrative creates the most *comprehensible* representation of the past” (emphasis original, Edenheim 2014, p. 51). They must consolidate the information recording what happened, unpack the state bias, recognize who is missing from the narratives told directly within the records, and report back about their interpretation of historical truth.

Historians and public interaction give archives a purpose. Materials are stored to be kept and found, for stories to be retold and given fresh life. Queer historians have developed methods of identifying queer narratives and codes within state archives, in order to recognize the presence of queer people state powers tried to erase. To counteract the narratives so commonly found within state narratives, community collections by queer people establish a semblance of control over the way historians retell queer stories, because:

A passing on of the knowledge necessary for remembering correctly is vital. This cannot be defined as anything but a quest for eternal reproduction, a sort of assurance that *only* our archiving desire will preserve a (recognizable) queer time and place in the future. There is no coincidence, then, in the repetition of the symbolic order; there is only a fear of not being remembered ‘as we were,’ fear of not being represented by future researchers, fear of not being able to reproduce an offspring ‘like us.’ (Edenheim 2014, p. 53)

Queer people have been denied their own truths within state archives. Preserving queer narratives outside of state criminality allow historians to access the range of queer experience and establish a wider understanding in their academic reconstructions of a particular period. Queer archives counteract systemic cisheteropatriarchal knowledge by creating space for a queerer truth, a truth built on experience and emotion and community outside of societal definition and acceptance. A new perspective in the seemingly-objective recollection of what

actually took place is evidenced through the queer archive; reclaiming history and public memory gives power to the archive and the queers within it.

COMMUNITY ARCHIVES

Queer, community archives are a method of resistance to state narratives that limit queerness to criminality and coding. The deliberate expansion of collections to include what is valuable to those within the community, rather than what is ascribed to them. This takes away power and reclaims control over the way queer individuals are remembered and memorialized.

Archives are spaces in which people preserve and collect the things that they deem important. Most public archives revolve around preservations of state documents, but community archives are a completely different field in terms of what is perceived as valuable. Community archives are able to be much more personal, caring for materials and memories that revolve much more around what may be more largely seen as mundane or everyday. In a lack of decent representation from state institutions, “Communities create archives because of a lack of representation in or access to records from their pasts.... marginalized groups distrusted institutional archives after seeing how their lives had been represented or, in some instances, completely omitted” (Wakimoto, 2013, p. 440). By creating their own archives, marginalized communities reclaim their representations and narratives in public memory.

Queer people deserve to have access to their histories. More than this, they deserve to have themselves remembered on their own terms. This requires a collection of memories, through tangible materials and oral histories, by and for queer people. Queer experience is worth preserving and sharing so all people—queer or not—can learn more about the value of queer people. Archives focused on compiling and celebrating these marginalized identities are vital to defying societal norms and state erasure, as they hold the evidence of queer existence and values.

Simply, “Because of its being there, the archive... is proof that a life truly existed, that something actually happened, an account of which can be put together” (Mbembe 21). They make the presence of queerness throughout history accessible and personal.

Within identity-based archives, people who consider themselves part of that community are able to be more closely involved in archiving processes, undermining the bureaucracy and secrecy of more institutionalized archives. More than this, they can contribute what is important to them through donations and personal research, as [researchers and historians are the ones who determine the stories that exist in an archive by bringing them into the public]. By deliberately adding to the queer archive what is memorable to the queer individual rather than staying in line with state-sanctioned narratives, “the reoccurring emphasis on preservation, authenticity, future research, and hierarchical inclusion (only queer ephemera allowed!) is anything but random or chaotic” (Edenheim 54). Marginalized people who create archives for themselves and their communities are able to step outside of societal and systemic views to redefine their historical narratives and create proof of their existence on their own terms. Representation becomes a matter of self-construction, for historians to uncover, research, and bring into continued existence in the future.

Queer archive studies is a still-growing field, and in recent years, case studies of queer archives in a variety of contexts have been published addressing structural methods, significance, and complications within these institutions. As points of inspiration, three articles stand as examples and references for their success in constructing case studies that identify queer archives’ social relevance and complications. These are: “Querying Queer African Archives: Methods and Movements” by Thérèse Migraine-George and Ashley Currier, “The Case of LLACE: Challenges, Triumphs, and Lessons of a Community Archives” by Diana Wakimoto,

and “The Queer Archive: Teaching and Learning Sexualities in Australia” by Daniel Marshall. Each of these archives are different, but divulge overarching themes of the symbiotic pairing between queer communities and archives that strive to represent and preserve them. They offer structural insight as introduction to queer archives and been helpful sources to referencing theoretical writings. Like these works, I turn to case study of an individual archive to unpack the structural impact of power within queer-specific archives. Queer community archives reclaim the erasure imposed by state archives to expand narratives of marginalized communities, and do so through by establishing what Ann Cvetkovich refers to as an archive of feelings.

ARCHIVE OF FEELINGS

Most queer archive theory has some form of roots in Ann Cvetkovich’s 2003 book, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. This groundbreaking book brought a queer perspective to archiving trauma, breaking down the lines between individual and communal trauma to better make space for women and queers in historical records. Cvetkovich calls for a recognition and archiving of both everyday and experiences of trauma, incorporating the wide varieties of emotions that contribute to personal experience and archival processes (Cvetkovich, 2003). For her queering of archives, *An Archive of Feelings* is a highly-referenced piece that has come to shape the face and thought of queer archive discourse.

Jack Halberstam, author of *Queer Archives in a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, addresses a small portion of the emotional spectrum in queer archives when during a 2006 conference he says, “[In] the gay male archive... fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity, and camp make up what Ann Cvetkovich has called ‘an archive of feelings’... we can identify, for example, rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness, overinvestment,

incivility, and brutal honesty” (Caserio, 2006, p. 824). In this way, he brings to attention a level of negativity enforced by queer trauma that is and must be captured within queer archives.

The processing of marginalization, violence, holds space in the queer archive, because this negativity allows queerness to exist without having to be palatable. Rage and mourning and unknowing are valuable in their queer expression. Joy and love and hope sit intermingled with these emotions in queer record, for queer people have been forged into resilience through care for each other. Queer archives, while not necessarily built by a geographically-specific community, represent larger communities connected through identity. They center queer feelings—traumatic or joyous, large or small—in ways that other archives both do not have the range and do not care to include.

Who, then, is engaging with these sites of vulnerability? Is anyone truly qualified, capable to interact with the intensity of queer feelings? Is it possible to have a genuine understanding of what has happened in the past if truth is subjected to the perspectives and experiences we, as researchers, apply and project to what we observe in the archive? Does genuine understanding of archival material require personal experience, or is the expectation of empathy enough to expand queer material to cisheterosexual researchers? How does the extent of significance of a queer archive of feelings differ to those who are queer and those who are not, and should there be an expectation of empathy from those who do not share the emotional magnitude of queer history?

While unable to explore each of these questions in such a small study, the overarching influence of audience is a topic I intend to unpack through the lenses of queer archive studies. As Sarah Edenheim writes, “In relation to the call for a queer archive, it becomes essential to discuss for whom we are expected to narrate our feelings and experiences, for whom we should make

sense of these feelings and experiences, for whom the archive of feelings should transfer its content (2014, p. 45). Archivists are put in charge of gatekeeping access to recorded memory, and control how and for whom these emotions are granted access. It is the question and impact of audience to which my work consistently returns, as audience impacts the ways information is shared. I will expand upon this pattern of thought through a case study of IHLIA LGBT Heritage and their recent exhibit on Dutch LGBT activism highlights in the past 40 years. By broaching traditional archival platforms to reach out to the public rather than queer researchers, IHLIA is actively making the emotions within the archive visible, even to those who may not have the depth to understand how radical those emotions are.

METHODOLOGY:

This project was initially going to attempt to assess IHLIA's functional structure as a whole to assess how power—and thus, by extension, historical memory—is constructed within this particular archive. using a combination of historical and ethnographic methods to holistically observe archival processing (such as accessioning/deaccessioning, cataloguing, and inventory work), spatial organization of collections, and content accessibility. The hope was to work with archival materials directly and interviewing IHLIA workers, to determine what is in the archive (including material types, whether exclusively documents or including wider artifacts such as photographs, film, or clothing), who it is created by and for, each piece's purpose in the collection, and the influence of finances.

Upon beginning research, I came to understand that the collections housed at IHLIA are much more expansive than I originally anticipated, and the time I had available would not be sufficient to address the subjects and analysis to the extent I had originally planned. Then, by coincidence and great timing, I was informed of an exhibit opening the first week of my

internship that was being put on by IHLIA in celebration of the archive's 40th anniversary. This exhibit, "With Pride," came to be the site of my research focus within IHLIA, as it is an exemplary embodiment of the way archives contribute to public memory of queer history.

The deliberate selections that come with curating exhibits therefore are calculated representations of the wider archive, allowing the exhibit to function as a case study of archivist bias within the case study of IHLIA as an LGBT archive. I will still explore the significant role of archives in constructing historical memory, as well as the construction of archives as sites of memory themselves, but these topics are contextualized through the deliberate publicizing of archival material through a more commonly museum platform.

This research is approached alongside and through an internship with IHLIA LGBT Heritage. Doing research as a temporary staff member allows for participatory insight to archival process and organization, as well as inherently establishing time to analyze content from a more informed, internal perspective than the average researcher. The tasks done as an intern for IHLIA has been telling of what projects are a priority to the center and division of labor between archivists, registrars, and volunteers.

The tasks specifically assigned to me as an intern surround a recently-launched online international platform in which people from around the world can drop a pin on a map, adding information and photos of gay bars that they have been to/frequented/owned. This platform was created to identify historical significance of gay bars as sites of community-building and activism, and connect people across borders in research and/or personal interest. This also digitizes the materials from each bar to that they are more permanently recorded and publicly available. IHLIA is working to collect memorabilia (coasters, menus, posters, etc), backgrounds, and historical narratives of gay bars throughout the Netherlands to pin themselves, so my role is

to correct and further available information for them. Currently, all descriptions of bars are in English, but are not necessarily correct in the eyes of native English speakers, since they were translated from Dutch. My task has been to edit out any translation errors, ensure the materials are organized as efficiently and accessibly as possible, and upload bar information/memorabilia for the site. Retrieving this information involves going to the ten Amsterdam bars other staff members have not yet had the chance to visit, and talking with any willing bartenders and available owners about the history of the location (and for my own research, their previous understandings of and interactions with IHLIA). Any physical materials collected will be added to the IHLIA collections, as well as the digitizing site that keeps the information publicly accessible.

This internship allowed me to go into the collections and get to know the archivists in ways that most researchers do not get to experience. Archivists' role not only establishes the internal structure of the archive, but also manages local queer history's current connection to the public through potential curatorial and research projects; building relationships with IHLIA staff members gave insight to the goals and complications of the archives, so having this intern role made this project possible.

Separate from my assigned tasks, my research revolved primarily around ethnographic interviews and exhibition spatial analysis. When access and logistic complications arose to the point that an interview was not able to be conducted in person, questions and consent forms were sent over email. With IHLIA managers, I expanded conversation to address the archive's history, existing collections, ongoing projects, outreach goals, and funding sources.

I held interviews with three IHLIA staff members about the archive's history, existing collections, ongoing projects, outreach goals, funding sources, and the With Pride exhibit; the

interviews have been the most telling part of the research collection process. The two IHLIA staff members who were directly involved in the creation of *With Pride* recommended I reach out to the exhibit curators from Van Gisteren to have my questions about the reasoning behind the focus on certain objects and subjects in *With Pride* better addressed. Unfortunately, I was unable to get their input, as they did not respond to my attempts to reach out for an interview. They went on holiday immediately after the exhibit opened after seeing their months of dedicated work paying off. Similarly, one of the exhibit designers from Vandejong responded to my request with interest, but did not respond beyond that point.

Their insight would have been extremely beneficial, since their intentional decisions actively created the content of the exhibit. In the future, I hope to continue this project to fill the gaps left by gaining a curatorial perspective, as they seem to be the missing piece in determining the extent of whose voices are included within *With Pride* and the larger public memory stemming from it. However, the people I spoke with were well-versed in overarching goals of the exhibit and details of collaboration between curators and archivists, even though they were not able to answer “why” to selection details on curators’ behalf.

In terms of analyzing the *With Pride* exhibit itself, my biggest issues came with my inability to read Dutch. All of the information available throughout the exhibit was written in Dutch, and while I could pick out familiar words and phrases enough to understand main ideas, I was almost entirely reliant upon IHLIA coworkers and Google Translate to make out details. This is unfortunately limiting to my (and other visitors who don’t have a full grasp on the language) understanding of the material on display. Translation inherently further contributes interpretation since there is usually no precise lingual exchange. Google Translate, while a helpful guide, is insufficient for a translation of idea rather than literal words. All of this led me

to rely my analysis heavily on the visuals offered throughout the exhibit—contributing to a frustration expressed by multiple IHLIA staff members about how even the text presented left out so much of the stories.

OBSERVATION & ANALYSIS:

IHLIA BACKGROUND

IHLIA's founding in 1978 began with gay student activism pushing for access to gay materials and later turning to collecting for themselves outside of existing libraries and university programs. IHLIA was first established not as an archive at all, but as a gay documentation center known as Homodok, where references were recorded to point for cis gay male material throughout existing libraries, archives, and museums. This was part of a student movement centered in the University of Amsterdam and Vrije University as Dutch students were demanding and creating the first Gay and Lesbian Studies departments of the universities. Students in Amsterdam were leaders in change throughout the 1960s and 70s, radically restructuring institutions and activism spaces alike to make room for the gay and lesbian students who studied there.

Homodok didn't become IHLIA in title until it joined collections with competing lesbian archives in 2000 to expand and include bisexual, transgender, and intersex materials (Van der Wel, 2018). Now, IHLIA describes itself by saying that anyone can reach out for "information about gay men, lesbian women, bisexuals & transgenders, their history, world and culture" (Meest gestelde vragen, 2018). From protecting stories from queer communities in countries where it is not safe to be openly gay, to the same task in locations closer to home, IHLIA is trying to "do what no one else is doing," in collecting LGBT material (Van der Wel, 2018). This adjustment in subject matter came about when sponsorship changed from local Amsterdam

universities to federal funding. With the altering in funding sources came a turn towards institutionalization; it was furthered when IHLIA moved into the largest Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam (OBA) public library location in 2007, where they do not pay rent but use the collection and office spaces made available to them (Van den Hoonaard, 2018). What was previously a small community documentation resource is now the largest LGBT-related archive in Europe.

IHLIA's funding as an institution comes from the Dutch federal government's Department of Emancipation within the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science (Van den Hoonaard, 2018). This funding comes with the condition that IHLIA centers LGBT emancipation within their collections and exhibits, but there is not strong supervision or influence in determining what subjects and materials fall under this category (Van der Wel, 2018). The task of defining what falls within the emancipation category is left to the interpretation of the archivists. This allows staff to choose, to an extent, the materials they put into an archive, and even further, the narratives they display to match this emancipative attitude.

Archives are inherently inseparable from the agendas of their funding sources, as there comes to be a cycle in which . Donors fund the projects they want to see, the project happens with donor influence, archivists feel reliant upon funding for the continued existence of the archive, then continue to work with donors in a cycle of manipulative dependency. Archives and the materials within them are influenced by:

who owns them; on whose authority they depend; the political context in which they are visited; the conditions under which they are accessed; the distance between what is sought and what is found; the manner in which they are decoded and how what is found there is presented and made public. (Mbembe, 2002, p. 23)

These have massive power over the archive, and, by extension, the history that goes into and out of it. The conditions assigned with the Department of Emancipation's funding, the authorities of the collection, and the public presentation of information all come into prominent play when looking at IHLIA's newest and current-largest exhibit.

The national department offering funds encourages topics of LGBT emancipation, wanting to include as many people as possible. Due to this public funding, the staff—most prominently the archive manager—mirrors this federal goal of increased diversity. On the surface, this seems and is incredibly beneficial, but even still, this emancipation expectation risks restricting the archive, as the everyday materials that can be added to a community archive may be overlooked for not being liberative in and of themselves. More than that, representation has turned to prioritize white, cis, heterosexual audiences rather than marginalized groups already erased from historical memory. Prioritizing heterosexual comfort with gay material for the sake of making the archive available to everyone, IHLIA has adjusted its accessions to adopt more normative collections, for example seeking out more academic secondary sources than primary sources or fictional literature (Van der Wel, 2018). Archivists risk subconsciously censoring themselves and the materials they take in, out of fear of repercussions from those who fund archival projects.

Federal encouragement of liberationist narratives in community collections follows a pattern in which the Dutch government projects its own progressiveness. By doing so, the kingdom of the Netherlands co-opts the work of gay liberation for its own “progressive” national image, without addressing continued societal issues of violence and heteronormativity. Though “Homodok was established in order to serve a particular community, and at the time of its inception was considered particularly radical in the international academic arena” (Reid, 2002, p.

203), IHLIA now works to please the larger institutions that sponsor it. IHLIA's growth and federal sponsorship have deradicalized the archive.

*WITH PRIDE*¹

With Pride is an exhibit put on by IHLIA in celebration of the archive's 40th anniversary in the main exhibition space of Amsterdam's largest public library. Commissioned by IHLIA staff members, curated by historical workshopping company Van Gisteren, and creatively designed by Vandejong Creative Agency, it is open 8 November 2018 to 23 January 2019. The exhibit had been conceptualized over two years, and after a long process of translating an archive into a museum, it has come to light. Towards the beginning of planning, the team had hoped to focus on the activism that took place in the founding year, 1978, to "show where it all began as community archives," but in the attempt to appeal to a larger audience, the subject ended up broadening to a more general overview of gay activism since IHLIA's founding (Van den Hoonaard, 2018).

The November edition of IHLIA's monthly newsletter advertises With Pride, describing it by saying, "*With Pride* shows that the lgbti struggle is part of a broader social change that not only affects a minority, but all of us" (With Pride, 2018). Van Gisteren, the company commissioned to curate the exhibit from IHLIA collections, goes into even more specific depth about the exhibit. They describe With Pride on their website by saying:

"Visitors are welcomed in a world of lesbian guerrillas, safe sex activism, Gay Games and discos with acid house. Through various theme worlds the visitor experiences the turbulent history of forty years of lgbti battle. Special pieces from the IHLIA collection, supplemented with photographs and personal stories of pioneers who were there at the

¹ Example photos from the exhibit can be found in the appendix.

time, create a picture of what the emancipation struggle has yielded for lhbt people and for society as a whole.” (Randprogramming With Pride, 2018).

This description identifies the array of gay experiences displayed within the exhibit. By selecting highlights of activism and community energy since the late 1970s, With Pride gives a general overview of gay movements and history of the past 40 years, with some lesbian and trans narratives included throughout.

With Pride team members narrowed down the four decades into five categories, and depicts them chronologically down the zig-zag hallway of the exhibit. “Starting a Movement” addresses lesbian subculture and gay student movements of the late 1970s, “Fighting Taboos” focuses on the AIDS crisis and ACT UP activism in Amsterdam, “Claiming Rights” features the first trans woman to access gender-affirming surgeries and legalities in the Netherlands, “Celebrating Life” highlights popular gay bars and party scenes of past and present, and “Becoming Visible” exemplifies events like the international Gay Games and the 2001 legalization of same-gender marriage. There is a wide variety of materials making up the display, including photos, pins, video clips, t-shirts, flags, posters, digitized copies of letters written by a man who died of AIDS, newspaper clippings, books, and foot-tall dolls mimicking the leather scene. Most materials have a small description next to them for context, and each section had a panel describing overarching information for that area.

The exhibit highlights only four individuals who are not white, cis, and gay. Despite IHLIA listing itself as an LGBTI archive, there are no intersex people mentioned. The presence of a Black lesbian from Sister Outsider, a Jewish man with ties to Israel-Palestine, a white trans woman, and a Black drag queen make up the extent of diversity throughout the exhibit, while every other piece of media shows only those who fit the three above categories that are more

normalized and tolerated in Dutch society. Their presence flows with the exhibit so they don't look haphazardly included, but *With Pride* leans into this halting of emancipation in its performative diversity, including people marginalized even within the LGBTQ community in the attempt to represent as many narratives as possible, while simultaneously trying to avoid critique for what comes off as an unspoken diversity quota.

Conceptualizing

The struggle to cover 40 years of Dutch LGBT activism in a relatively small exhibit requires a massive amount of filtering through archival material to decide what stories are most valuable to present. This prioritizing process ties back to the conditional state funding of emancipatory subjects and widespread representation. A goal of curators, then, had to be, how they can present as much material as possible in a way that is understandable to as many people as possible. This required analyzing accessibility to not only LGBT people familiar with queer language, and determining difficult balances between visual and written presentations. Since exhibits are not a traditional archival task, IHLIA turned to outsourcing curation to a communications company, Van Gisteren, to help archivists navigate the masses of material and establish methods that make queer material appealing to a wider (read: heterosexual) public. A separate company, Vandejong, did the spatial design.

IHLIA's director described the exhibition process as "terrible," but not for the quality of curatorial work done or end result, upon which she bestowed high praise. Rather, she identified painful emotion in letting go of all the stories that couldn't be told in one exhibit and putting aside personal attachment to detail for the sake of sharing any information at all—going as far as to say it felt as if it took years off her life to watch miles of narratives translated into just a few sentences (Van den Hoonaard 2018). Finding the balance between what needs to be shared to get

a point across is the struggle of those who interact with history. Filtering becomes difficult when one is able to see the extent to how smaller, seemingly insignificant details, influence the overarching happenings of an event. Even the exhibit team's historian described himself as struggling with overexplaining, then discussed five decades of movement waves that led to gay student activism in the 1970s when asked about his role at IHLIA—as without these decades of radical energy, the archive itself may never have existed (Sleutjes, 2018). It was incredibly difficult for the team to find a balance between visuals and written word that satisfied all parties (Van den Hoonard, 2018). Overcoming this detail-oriented mindset to access layman's terminology was, in part, why it was deemed necessary to outsource curation of *With Pride* to communications business Van Gisteren. Through *With Pride*, outsourced curators create their own construction of gay history, anticipating visitors who have little to no prior introduction to the material.

IHLIA directors decided to outsource production of *With Pride* because it fell outside of their traditional connections with the public. Within their usual role, “Archival institutions, unlike libraries, do not publicly display their holdings to offer a panoptic view to their clients. But they do display the knowledge-power of the finding aids as representations of what the public may not see openly but may expect to and behind the closed doors of the prisonlike repositories” (Ketelaar 2006, p. 147). By creating an exhibit, IHLIA has used the library space they physically occupy to step outside of a familiar role of introverted archive. This has brought them to a platform that puts the archive on a nerve-wracking new level of public visibility.

This begs to question, why bother to prioritize subject quantity over quality in the first place? Even the collections director, one of the students who founded the archive in 1978, held the same question, as he wished the 40th anniversary exhibit would have focused more on the

many activations taking place during the opening year rather than trying to cover highlights since its opening (Van der Wel, 2018). He described his involvement in the exhibit brainstorm process as more passive, limited to retrieving items from the archive requested by curators; had he been more involved in the curation process, he would have encouraged a narrower focus instead of glossing over a wide variety of subjects. The reasoning for a more generalized scope is not to show off as much archival material as possible, but lies in the goals of making *With Pride* appeal to visitors outside of the LGBTQ community—phrased as wanting to make the exhibit and the historical narratives within it as accessible as possible.

Audience

This anticipated heterosexual audience vaguely contradicts IHLIA's designated purpose to represent the LGBTI community, since creating material for heterosexual audiences does not guarantee further learning or acceptance from straight people, but may further ostracize queer individuals who may have hoped to see more of themselves in this accessible public space. Doing so implies that even queer history is not for queer people. IHLIA's collections are filled with miles of materials that fall into the Dutch government's category of "emancipation" (Van der Wel, 2018). It seems to be a positive, well-intentioned goal to be as inclusive as possible within each archival project, and diversity is necessary for genuine representation of marginalized people. However, this narrative of liberation by shaping exhibits towards wider straight visitors is not liberative at all. If outreach is turning to heterosexuals for validation of history, the purpose of community archives is inherently disrupted. The memories preserved become a search for acceptance, rather than a defiant declaration of existence.

Homonationalism is rampant throughout the Netherlands, and prioritizing normative gay narratives—even those that were radically disruptive to heterosexual society 40 years ago—is

assimilationist and unproductive (Hekma, 2011). This assimilation is a liberal strategy to be conditionally accepted into society, rather than a more radical critique that society should not be rooted in homophobia. Presenting only stories and identities that are already comfortable—or at least familiar—to the Dutch public does not further the emancipation of queer Netherlanders, but instead leans into the idea that expressions outside of these norms are uncomfortable and unfit for public platforms. Through their public funding, IHLIA is unknowingly used as a tool by the Department of Emancipation to further an image of national progressiveness that the Dutch government works to project; IHLIA’s contributions to displaying more normative versions of queerness detaches from the radicalism with which the archive first began.

People turn to materials that represent themselves. At the opening event of *With Pride*, the primary attendees were gay men who had participated in the activism on display. Staff members managing IHLIA unanimously claim that outreach, especially to young people, is one of the biggest objectives the archive has begun to take on, so this crowd was appreciated but not all they were hoping for (Van den Hoonaard, 2018). Viewers, gay or straight, who are unused to interacting with archival materials, show that “however we define archives, they have no meaning outside the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them. It is this subjective experience that places limits on the supposed power of the archives,” (Mbembe 23). In whatever way IHLIA is working to present queer memory, the construction of memory only goes as far as those who experience it.

When gatekeepers of the queer archive prioritize straight visitors, they alter presentations of gay material by excluding it entirely or making it more palatable to accommodate those who want queerness to look however they are most comfortable with it. Queerness, however, is inherently in resistance to cisheteropatriarchal values, so prioritizing straight potential audiences

only erases queerness from the archive itself. I would argue that it is unrealistically optimistic to expect decency and investment in queer history from a society that is—even subtly—homophobic, but it is necessary to display queer history regardless, as a declaration of its existence and source of education and hope for queers who may need to see their selves and feelings in an archive.

OUTREACH

For a long time, IHLIA's information desk has been the main point of connection between the archive and public. 12:00-17:00 Monday through Thursday, an IHLIA staff member or volunteer is manning this desk to retrieve archival materials for researchers, answer any questions for people who approach, and lead tours. This desk is located on the third floor of the OBA, alongside a desk reserved for IHILA researchers, a section of literature from the collection, and a rotating exhibit that highlights new queer art every three months. These resources are beneficial to those who know what they're looking for and can show up during traditional 9-5 work hours. If someone wants access to documents from the archive, they must email their request 24 hours in advance, already knowing specifically what they want (Meest gestelde vragen, 2018). This does not make the archive accessible to anybody just walking in to explore, or any working person who wants to do research outside of their job. IHLIA is hoping to expand its public relations even further by focusing more strongly on exhibitions like *With Pride*, that share queer history but are more accessible than what has been offered before.

One way they are doing this is by stepping outside of Amsterdam to further representation of more rural Dutch LGBTI communities. National expansions of *With Pride* are in the works and have slowly gained traction in the past year and a half. IHLIA director is reaching out to libraries, archives, and museums across the Netherlands to establish smaller,

traveling With Pride exhibits for local communities. This is to give platform to LGBT history and activism in the hopes of overcoming the silent-but-prevalent avoidance of homosexuality. Local institutions are only asked to make connections with local LGBTQ communities and find queer materials already within their collections so local narratives are put into the exhibit; IHLIA handles everything else. Even this is not enough to convince many of the people who run these establishments. Their biggest resistance is in the idea that an exhibit would be completely unnecessary.

Homophobia is prominent throughout the Netherlands, but is prevalent in its subtlety. Homosexuality is not taboo or outright renounced, per say, but treated across the country as if it does not exist at all (Van den Hoonaard, 2018). In trying to create personalized exhibits for local institutions around the country, she has come to face something even more complicated to defeat than open resistance: denial. Directors of museums and libraries across the country have directly told her, “There are no gays here, you need to go to Amsterdam,” in response to her asking about local queer communities (Van den Hoonaard, 2018). Any queer person, specifically a historian who has been trained to identify queer coding within archives, can see the blatant untruth of the statement, as queerness has never been limited by geography, only visibility; but people cannot be convinced of what they refuse to see. Straight people have immense abilities to talk themselves out of recognizing queerness, and cannot be convinced to value putting queer history on a platform. If they do not see queer people existing in their space, they do not extend energy or resources to accommodate them; by not allowing platforms for LGBTQ content, they further the closeting and invisibility of queer folks in their area.

These attitudes of neglect establish direct barriers between LGBT Netherlanders and access to their histories. Those in charge of archival and exhibit material refuse legitimacy of

queer existence in their spaces, and compound the invisibility by further refusing queer material. Closed off behaviors of curators and directors across the country stand in opposition to Dutch narratives of tolerance. They have convinced themselves of belief in the national narrative of progressive tolerance, thus eradicating their sense of responsibility in contributing to queer historical erasure. Their practices of “tolerance” demand a complete invisibility of homosexuality but are deemed acceptable for their lack of outright aggression. Erasure as a method of structural violence is not given a single critical thought from those turning down LGBTQ+ exhibits, except from those at IHLIA trying to bring local queer history to an accessible forefront.

Some hope with this continuation of the project is to address ongoing encourage conversations and awareness of LGBT subjects within educational-adjacent spaces by connecting people—both archivists and civilians—with their existing collections. Not only this, but it allows more directly for local communities to select and hopefully help display the information they want shared about themselves, on their own terms and for themselves. This is vastly important work. Goals of expanding LGBTI representation across the country are necessary, but should take place alongside introspection of the ways IHLIA itself is closing itself off to and erasing members of the LGBTQ community within their own spheres—though in beliefs and behavior rather than policy or methods visible to the surface.

QUEER CONTINUITY

Some of IHLIA’s efforts towards outreach revolve around hopes for passing down and continuing the archive. It is a growing priority of existing archivists to attract the interest and energy of young people to the archives so that community collections continue to be preserved and grown (Van den Hoonard, 2018). Even with an understanding that the archive needs

younger people to take on the collections as current archivists retire, generational gaps are a road block to sustainability and outreach. It is not that young people are not interested in history or archives, but that IHLIA is pushing them away at the same time they are trying to connect. People go to the spaces in which they see themselves represented and respected, so if their identity is missing, or is present and ridiculed or demeaned, they will not show up. Since the 1990s, there has been a boom in visibility for transgender and nonbinary individuals, alongside the reclamation of the word “queer” as not only a group category but complete individual identity. This wave has only been exacerbated by technology of the past 15 years. IHLIA, however, has not kept up—and not out of accidental ignorance.

Younger LGBTQ+ people are more visibly adopting more publicly-illegible definitions of themselves, outside of the systems themselves that utilize categorization towards structural violence. From recognizing “queer” as both an umbrella (all-inclusive, collective) term and whole independent identity to a detachment from binary gender, non-conformity to traditional expressions of gender and sexuality is in itself becoming a norm. Cultivated attitudes of radical, defiant unrest against binary norms may very well have resembled the energy held by the now-retiring gays in their younger years of student activism, just applied to different social battles.

“Queer” as a radical, undefinable identity is not included in the history IHLIA works to preserve. In fact, it was a deliberate decision to leave out the Q or plus sign when describing IHLIA as an LGBTI institution, and “the IHLIA [workers] are always very skeptical about queer and nonbinary identities” (L., 2018). Under the claim that there are just too many identity letters to include, IHLIA staff makes excuses to cover the changing language. This would possibly stand as a valid argument if it wasn’t the role of an LGBTI archive to represent individuals within the LGBTI community, and if they didn’t market themselves as for everyone regardless of

identity. With this language, they take on a responsibility of keeping up with changes within the LGBTQ community to accommodate them within the archive, keeping records of those who are something other than white, gay, and cisgender. Despite this, IHLIA staff members tend to detach their own sense of responsibility for learning and representing in favor of a, “what can you do?” dismissive attitude (L., 2018).

In this case, what can be done requires listening and opening the archive up to new, potentially uncomfortable, frames of thought. Instead, “they’ve grown quite annoyed that every time they have an exhibition, they get some kind of critique. Because of this... they have adopted a very skeptical and dismissive attitude towards political correctness and inclusion,” (L., 2018). When these critiques are pointing out the exclusion of people of color or erasure of bisexuality in women-loving-women content within exhibits, the issues are larger than just “political correctness.” What they deem to be policing of their language is a critique of the ways they play into harmful systems of power.

It is immature and negligent to maintain defensive, emotional responses to their complicity as if they are personal attacks rather than turning to self-reflection in the ways the institution continues systemic oppressions. These histories are ones that center older white cis gay narratives, in language accessible for straight people, with just enough mention of marginalized people’s experiences to avoid criticism. The critiques they are tired of getting reflect the gap between a genuine interest in diversity and a performative one. If exhibitions are a method of searching for praise and funding from a “progressive” heterosexual public and government, they are displaying histories that will give them that gratification.

Scorn for queerness in sexual identity applies to gender queerness, as well. Both “formally and definitely informally, they do prioritize a certain audience that is not queer or

identifies outside of a gender binary,” (L., 2018). The acceptance of non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities is conditional to the requirement that the expressions that come with that identity are normative and meet their definitions of what is acceptable performance of gender. This mirrors a cishetero Dutch perception of homosexuality, in which “the homo-norm has become not to behave in public like an effeminate fag, a bull-dyke or an erotically explicit queer,” just applied as intra-community gatekeeping (Hekma, 2011, p. 629). If they won’t put in the work to learn about identities different than their own, why would they expect straight people to do the same? This even more strongly applies to updating their understandings of trans identities, nonbinary and gender non-conforming in particular.

One IHLIA staff member is aggressively against the use of they/them/their pronouns, refusing to do so even when asked. They/them pronouns are an increasingly common identification for queer young adults and adolescents. Transgender people and their allies recognize that it is transphobic to deny someone the decency of using their correct pronouns, and upon finding out this form of bigotry in a staff member of an LGBT archive, reasonably experience unease towards the institution that staff member represents. It takes no stretch of the mind to assume that trans experiences outside of the gender binary—in both performance and identity—are excluded from that institution. Anyone who feels angry and inconvenienced at the existence of identities that do not consider valid should not be in a position where they have archival power over the material about those identities. Archivist bias leads to historical erasure.

If an archivist feels angry and inconvenienced by the existence of nonbinary and gender non-conforming identities, they will consciously or unconsciously do their best to avoid that material, and approach the subject matter with hostility if they have to engage. Maybe they include nonbinary material in the archive because their job requires them to do so, but even a

difference in the care and investment in those stories shows in historical records. Support of trans people must include an appreciation for all forms of transness, not limited by the gender binary or cisgender beauty standards in passing and medical transition. Excluding nonbinary people from the historical narrative—as seen in *With Pride* when the only trans example included is of one woman who first got access to genital reconstruction surgery in the Netherlands to better fill a biologically binary definition of her own womanhood—starts with archivists’ refusals to learn and accept unfamiliar identities.

An LGBTI archive should be the last place a young queer person should feel unwelcome and unrepresented. Welcome into the archive shouldn’t be conditional or uneasy, when, at their best, “Archives can sometimes also be sanctuaries.... Sometimes, quite unintentionally, archives may be safe havens” (Ketelaar, 2006, p. 146). Emotionally closing off an identity-based archive to people within the identity group is not meeting the role of a community archive—to be there for the community and the people within it, to capture all valuable memory. If queer and gender non-conforming identities are not deemed genuinely and equally valuable within IHLIA on all levels, then the archive is no longer serving its purpose. While the *With Pride* exhibit is spoken about with the intention of diversity bridging generational gaps, outreach to young people and their identities will not work if the people within it keep pushing away new forms of thought and expression.

In order for archived memories to be passed on, information must be made accessible (at least, approachable). For a queer person to learn about their community history, they should not have to sacrifice their own comfort and identity from those responsible for preserving it. Sites of marginalized memory must be emotionally as well as physically safe from destruction; it is arguably more difficult to overcome discrimination within a space that advertises itself as for all.

Archivists' personal rejection of nonbinary identities—whether actively aggressive or passively dismissive—reflects an unwillingness to adapt to the needs of the queer folks who want to use IHLIA as a resource but are made to feel unwelcome. If an archive's survival is reliant upon its ability to be passed down, it is counterintuitive for archivists to reject the changes of the community they want to represent. While terminology of queer and transgender identity has adjusted rapidly since the 1990s, it is negligent for those preserving queer history to not wholeheartedly attempt to keep up; sharing history requires keeping up with the present. In a way, they are called to challenge their own structures in the ways they called heterosexual people to do in the 1970s; any discomfort associated with this is merely a symptom of adjusting the ways one sees the world, which is a necessary task while humanizing someone outside of what was previously known.

CONCLUSION:

By creating *With Pride*, IHLIA has stepped out of the archive to more directly contribute to historical memory. While successfully capturing highlights of 40 years of Amsterdam's gay history, it has not reached a more diverse audience to the extent that the archivists may have hoped. The subjects on display throughout the exhibit connect older and primarily white gay generations to their personal memories, while vital, are already familiar within Dutch public memory. *With Pride* reiterates and gives more detail to known white cis gay narratives, but does not bring in the younger populations staff members say they prioritize, much less people of color and trans folks. Staff members' priorities of heterosexual audiences over queer youth exemplifies the current unsustainability of the archive. Furthermore, archivist hostility towards newer identities further keeps queer young people from the archive, restricting the already systemically-

limited opportunity to find their history in collections and risking the continued existence of the archive.

Having existed as an institution centering any kind of queer subject for 40 years is no small achievement; continued recording and collecting of any kind of LGBTQ history is necessary and must expand to keep up with present constructions of identity. The community-based aspect of an archive entirely does not exist if the archive and the people who manage it do not foster space (physical or emotional) for people who hold the identities that make up a community they claim to represent. Whatever political radicalism that once existed in creating a gay archive was lost with archivists' refusal to adapt understandings of sexuality and gender beyond the second-wave liberationist period of its founding. To live up to the radical activism in which the archive has its roots, IHLIA must start by honestly and critically assessing what the narratives they want the archive to offer the public, and be upfront about that when discussing their goals of diversity. Inclusion is not treated as a burden, afterthought, or personal attack, but rather necessary and valuable part of the archive. Marginalized people deserve their history remembered.

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APPENDIX: *INTERVIEWS*

This baseline guide of interview questions was adapted within each interview to match individuals' roles/expertise and allow conversations to naturally flow:

- Tell me about your role at IHLIA.
 - What brought you to IHLIA?
 - What tasks are assigned to you? How many hours a week do you work?
 - How long have you been working for IHLIA?
 - Are you a volunteer or staff member?
 - Have you done personal or academic research through IHLIA?
- What experiences do you have with archives other than IHLIA?
- What current projects are going on? What are you doing now that With Pride is open?
- What kinds of stories do the collections you've seen tell? What are their subjects?
- How would you describe the structure of IHLIA? In the archives? Between workers?
- Where does IHLIA get its funding?
- Tell me about the With Pride exhibit.
 - What processes were required to create it? Meetings, design steps, etc.
 - Who was involved?
 - How long had With Pride been in the works before it opened?
 - What was your role in creating it?
 - What was the goal of the exhibit?
 - What did you want to show? Were you wanting to tell the history of the archive, gay movements, or something else?
 - Why was it spatially designed the way it is?
 - How did you decide which topics to focus on? Photos? Objects?
 - Who made these decisions? If a group, what were the dynamics? Were there disagreements in priorities
 - Why did you outsource construction?
 - How do you feel the company did? Is it what you wanted?
 - To what extent was there collaboration? What say did you have in the way it was designed?
 - What were some frustrations in the process?
 - Of the two entrance options, which do you prefer? Is there a "correct" entrance?
 - What, if anything, would you change about the exhibit?
- What is your favorite collection? Why?

WITH PRIDE EXHIBIT



