

Where Did We Drop Those Beads? Looking for a Map of Undocumented Feelings

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Barbara Gittings was the first among us to notice—in print, anyway—the connection between homophobia and the disease model of gayness: all the (mis)information contained on library shelves. If she had not published “Combating the Lies in Libraries” in Louie Crew’s *The Gay Academic*, and if I had not read it in 1979, I would not even be here today. That she was not a professional library worker speaks to both the profession’s social morbidity during the latter part of the Betty Crocker era. She is so right to emphasize the importance of stories to queer culture, for paper and the print upon it held inordinate sway on collective memory until the internet changed how we communicated, to whom we communicated, and in what circumstances—anonously, if that was our bent. Much of the real story, however, is communicated only lover to lover, one coming-out at a time. Finally, we are grappling with archiving all of those bits and bytes and, while one half of the culture still laments the loss of the archival record, the other seems content to let the Googlization of life proceed apace, to let the past be buried with the past, and to hell with who gets credit for what. That must not be allowed to happen. For many of us, our tortured past lives held at least the possibility that social conditions could be ameliorated for gays, lesbians, the differently gendered and for a host of other non-elites. For us, print, however veiled its references, provided the only tangible validation for our existence outside of our heads.

Today, there are as many gay titles published in a year as had appeared in print in libraries up to 1969, at least according to the OCLC database. Of course part of this dearth is due to the opaque subject headings employed by the Library of Congress, or not employed at all, as Sandy Berman can tell you. Now, with this first meeting of GLBT ALMS, we can formally recognize the tremendous strides made in the collection of lesbigay materials by private, public and university collections all over the country. This year marks the 35th anniversary of The Stonewall Book Awards that Barbara set in motion, however, and it seems foolish to ignore the “products” that research in gay subjects yield. The efforts of grass roots collectors and “sharers” like Jim Kepner in Los Angeles and Marie Kuda in Chicago, Joan Nestle at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York,

and the more elaborate but perhaps no more heroic efforts of intellectuals Magnus Herschfeld in Germany, sexologist Alfred Kinsey, and present day historians like Jim Sears in Columbia, South Carolina, John D’Emilio in Chicago, and George Chauncey and Martin Dubberman in New York to preserve and disseminate a documentary trail of the fragments of queer culture that were permitted to survive familial, governmental, and self-administered gay purges. This impressionistic account ignores equally heroic tales in publishing and the arts in the twentieth century—Natalie Barney and William Burroughs in Paris, the Alyson Press in the United States, Daniel Tsang pounding the pavement for the Alternative Press Project, not to mention such literary icons as Allen Ginsberg, Jane Rule, Djuna Barnes, the “Bloomsburies,” Tennessee Williams, and the loquacious and virulent Larry Kramer. Is Edward Albee too upper-drawer to admit to this list? He won’t live forever, you know. Now, think of all the librarians and archivists involved with these literary products and those yet to come—everyone from Jeanette Howard Foster to Brenda Marsden, Polly Thistlethwaite, Rob Ridinger, James Van Bursick, plus score of others, many of them here today. Our growth is festively stunning.

I will take the non-celebratory tack and offer very brief considerations about the future. We are the guests of the Jean-Nicklaus Tretter collection and The University of Minnesota to celebrate our existence, to be sure: but why else are we here at this conference, and what do we hope to accomplish? So much has changed in the past thirty-five years, not least the fact, in the United States at least, that the Task Force for Gay Liberation has reached its apotheosis as a round table in the American Library Association’s burgeoning bureaucracy. Is all this corporatism a good thing, and/or does it make any difference? A camel is the product of a committee trying to design a horse, and in gay library land, we can hope at best to produce in committee a hippopotamus in a tutu, plus reams and reams of memos on rainbow-colored printer-paper, since we continue to receive paper however many WebPages are supposedly produced to save trees. Is money and power really all that speaks in the so-called era of globalization, and are gay readers, researchers, librarians, archivists, curators and information specialists really better people because of their marginally enhanced status among a larger segment of American society?

Can we imagine a time when we will lay aside our drag for a moment and simply be grateful to be alive, at ease with our ever more compliant aggressor: simply to be, to love, to live and to die, whatever our personal tastes? Whose collections are we going to collect, and why? Whose will we turn down, and why? In the event that say, a hundred years from now, homophobia in the United States is as quaint a notion as slavery, with whom will then be our argument, or will there be no argument at all? Will we be able to survive without an argument? Certainly, we will be transformed in some manner. Will we still find it necessary to haggle over how we are labeled, and will we give equal access to all customers to our collections, or special attention to gay customers, especially if they are cute?

What about our treasures? Complexities of copyright, ownership and privacy aside, will our lesbian and gay collections truly inform future generations about the qualities that we cherish in ourselves. Will we ever

evolve to the point where the excruciating refinements of nomenclature and identity politics are abandoned? Forgive me for waxing so rhetorical, but I can't help wondering how empty I might feel if my gay identity no longer mattered to the Christian right. I suppose the significant question is really, would it still matter to *me*, and if so, why?

Now that the once dubious breed known as gay/lesbian historians/biographers have ceased tagging every ambiguous historical-biographical subject as unambiguously “gay”—pace Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Dag Hammarskjöld, George Washington Carver and Stephen Foster—the product of gay research has become much more nuanced. For example, I find C. A. Tripp's controversial biographical pastiche *The Intimate Life of Abraham Lincoln* (2003) both highly suggestive and plausible, while retaining a remarkable degree of restraint about interpretation of evidence that is purely conjectural. William Benemann's recent *Male-Male Intimacy in Early America: Beyond Romantic Friendships* (2006) offers very sophisticated readings of historical and literary documents without falling into the trap of the dense jargon of Queer Theory or the equally perilous abyss of adamant queer labeling of Colonials. His is a highly imaginative work accessible to an average educated reader of whatever sexual bent. Consider the magisterial sweep of Louis Crompton's *Homosexuality and Civilization* (2003), which more than any other recent volume both indicts Western Christian civilization's attitude towards homosexuality within a broad cross-cultural context, proving, one assumes, that the tolerance and/or acceptance of homosexuality need not incur purges or the rabidity of millennialists—and not just in ancient Greece, either. Crompton leaves a relentlessly painstaking statistical record of purges in every country up to the Napoleonic era that is not likely to be surpassed in our lifetimes. My personal favorite is Terry Castle's *Noel Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits* (1996), which finally documents and discusses through two gay icons the largely unacknowledged and certainly unheralded “great love” between gay men and lesbians, one of the main sources, in my view, of whatever collective strength gay men and lesbians experience. Finally, there is James McCourt's effervescent *Queer Street: Rise and Fall of an American Culture, 1947-1985; Excursions in the Mind of the Life*, really an elegy to gay culture's age of innocence before it assumed ideological armor.

What is interesting about each of these historical titles is that while none of them were written without archival assistance from mainstream collections, none of them were written with the assistance of explicitly gay collections, either. It is interesting to speculate on what differences, if any, readers will discern between works created both with and without consultation with gay and lesbian archives. Perhaps our collections will serve merely as symbols of safe harbor for future writers in an era without the need for stories that emanate from pillow talk and kaffeeklatsches, from confessions and confrontations, and from the most private and outrageous flights of imagination in “the life of the mind.” I hope not, for our stories are talismans of the spirit, the inchoate and anecdotal evidence from which our archives, libraries and museums begin.

Toast to Barbara Gittings:

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When Barbara Gittings, with the assistance of Minneapolis's Michael McConnell and Jack Baker, took over leadership of the three-year-old Gay Task Force in 1970 from Israel Fishman, and Barbara devised the Gay Book Award and the Hug-a-Homosexual booth with the talents she had at hand—ballsiness, a sense of humor, and lots of goodwill, she set in motion in libraries and publishing a chain of events, that, inevitable or not in the Stonewall era, would have happened neither as quickly nor in as focused a manner as they did without her. For these acts of heroism, there is only one response: we thank you with our lives.