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On Equal Terms?
The Stakes of Archiving Women's and LGBT History in the Digital Era

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Bryn Mawr College
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The presentation I'm about to give may be an odd fit for a conference dedicated to the promotion of digital women's history, as my projects do not yet have a substantial digital component. But—in between Erin's subject-specific project, steeped in digital methods, and Mia's research on building and maintaining a presence of women on Wikipedia—I hope my experiences as a researcher and project curator can create a conversation about the opportunities and constraints of going digital for the histories of women, gender, and sexuality.

I have been mulling over this topic over the last year as both a graduate student in History and as a researcher and curatorial fellow for two projects at the University of Chicago. Since 2007, the University of Chicago's Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality and the University's Special Collections Research Center have collaborated to grow archival collections documenting the experiences of women and LGBT faculty, staff, and students. Together, both Centers have supported the research and writing of graduate student subject specialists in gender history, resulting in two exhibition projects. The first, entitled '*On Equal Terms' – Educating Women at the University of Chicago,* produced an on-campus exhibition and publication in 2009. The second, *A History of LGBTQ Life at the University of Chicago,* is currently in the research stages, with an exhibition and publication expected in the Spring of 2015.

Together, the projects will result in a deposit of approximately 150 alumni, faculty, and staff oral histories to Special Collections as well as an ongoing undergraduate internship program in oral history and four archives-based undergraduate history courses taught between 2008 and 2014. What has not yet existed for either project, however, is a dynamic online portal.

The lack of a digital research profile for either of these projects is not especially surprising. Unlike, say, George Mason, the University of Chicago is not a place where digital history (or public history) is particularly in vogue; in fact, neither of the projects I'm discussing are sponsored by the History department. Instead, using my two collecting projects—one completed, one still in development—as case studies, this paper invites conversation on the reason we're all here this weekend: how do you do women's, gender, and sexuality history in a digital world? Specifically, in my own instance at UChicago, what does it mean to once-marginalized University communities to have a place in the physical archive? And how do scholars' collaborations with institutional partners both expand and constrain our resources, particularly when it comes to going digital? I will probably provide more questions about gender history in a digital world than answers.
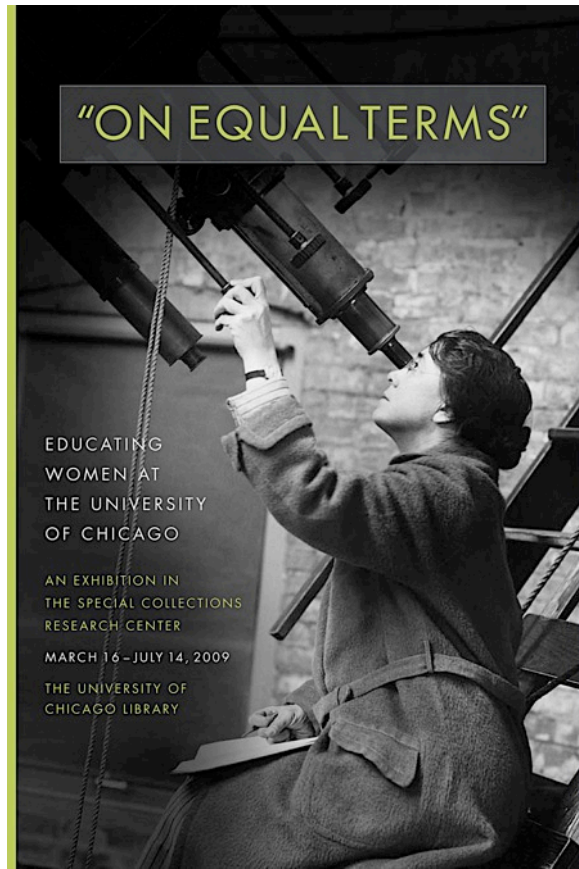
Fig. 1. "On Equal Terms" exhibition poster, University of Chicago Library (2009)

The Projects

I was hired in 2008 by the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality to curate an exhibition on the history of women at the University of Chicago. Initially imagined as writing an archival finding aid for women's history, previous research assistants found that there was such a wealth of materials in the University archives documenting the experiences of women that we had to showcase it. Our exhibition and publication came out in 2009.[i] [Fig 1] On display were a number of papers, photographs, books, and ephemera illustrating the consequences of coeducation at the University of Chicago. We followed the ways in which communities of women formed at the University over time. We were interested in how women at the University have understood their conditions and worked—visibly or invisibly—to give other women access

Fig. 2. "On Equal Terms" exhibition catalog online:
https://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/webexhibits/OnEqualTerms/

to knowledge. As you might expect, we found stories that seemed to fall out of the University's

own histories of itself but deserved to be there.

Our sponsors were pleased with the exhibition's reception, and with the undergraduate

seminar we taught at Special Collections on the same topic. Our twelve students, as part of their

final assignment, produced a small poster exhibition that hung concurrently at the Center for

Gender Studies. Here, participating in the making of a physical, community space was key. The

poster show was nothing fancy – we had a small budget – but the student exhibition enlivened

our community space and displayed student research in ways that proved unexpectedly popular

with students, faculty, and alumni, who held events in the space over the course of the term.

The main exhibition lives on as a "web exhibit" designed and hosted by the University of Chicago Library's website. [Fig. 2] It is a digital version of the forty-eight page published catalog (the catalog also included a CD of women's oral histories collected as part of the project; the website has no such audio element). The site is static; although I don't have figures, it still receives many hits – Special Collections librarians direct researchers to it, and I receive many emails every year from people who have stumbled across it online and seen my name as co-author. It is a useful resource, a starting place for research on gender history at Chicago, with many links to digital images and an exhibition checklist. It has not changed since 2009, nor do I expect it to, as it was produced by the University archives as a record of completed work.

Based on the success of this exhibition, the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality approached me in 2011 to coordinate a new public history program, one that could shed light on the history of LGBTQ individuals and communities at the University. This includes not only collecting oral histories from gay alumni, but also collecting artifacts and ephemera that will build new archival collections documenting gay life and activism. I'll give you a quick preview of what we've collected thus far, before talking about the digital stakes involved.

The other project coordinator has gone through every issue of the student newspaper from the late 1960s through the early 00's, looking for traces of queer activism—many of our oral histories are coming from alumni associated with the first gay liberation club on campus, founded in 1969. [Fig. 3] We've also been asking alumni to search through their own files – new fliers join just a handful already present in the University Archives in which we see many connections between the University and city-wide movements. The student newspaper donated its photo archive to Special Collections recently, giving us access to views of campus from the
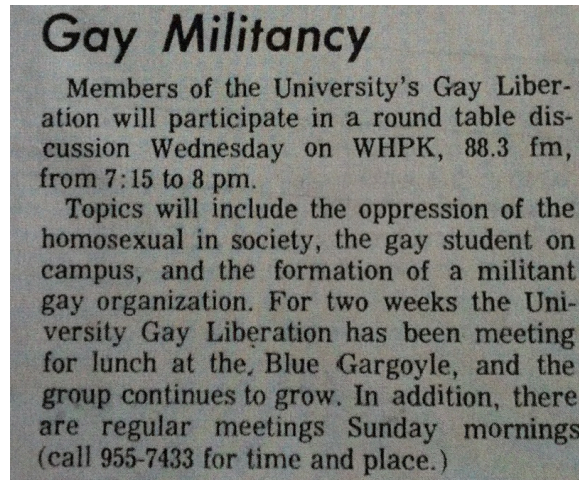
Fig. 3. *Chicago Maroon* classified ad (ca. 1969), University of Chicago Library

1990s – here, on the occasion of the AIDS Quilt on campus; here, Chicago students marching in the city's pride parade.

There are a few existing collections in the University archives that deal directly with LGBT politics and culture: we hold the records of the Chicago chapter of ACT UP, for example. And finally, young alumni are eager to donate materials—we have just secured a promise of a small lesbian 'zine collection, as well as a number of photographs and born digital files documenting recent student groups. With these items, we are beginning to create a physical archive; whether it goes digital remains to be seen. Hampering support for a digital archive are a number of factors that I want to review in the second half of this paper: correcting archival silences, University priorities, and academic labor. Again, I stress, these are elements that may be particular to my University case, but I think they are important to remember as we consider the possibilities of digital history.

The Limits of Possibility: Institutional Constraints, Digital Catch-Up

First, I want to argue, that the idea of the "archival silence" drives our project's emphasis on building new deposits for a physical archive, and for our partners—faculty, librarians, and

donors—for their desire to see collections feature on site, documented in print and not simply online.[ii] As the archivist Rodney Carter argues, "Archives are filled with voices… Archival power is, in part, the power to allow voices to be heard…The power of the archive is witnessed in the act of inclusion."[iii] Inclusion drives our partners to support the women's and LGBT history projects, but it has made them wary of digital products. For them, the power of our projects is counted in the Hollinger box and numbers of visitors on-site; that once marginalized communities are getting a place at the table in the "official," University sanctioned space of Special Collections Research Center.

As the editors of my feminist archiving bible—2012's *Make Your Own History*—as the editors argue, "when the creators are on the margins, archivists are activists: when materials are archived, they achieve the status of something significant enough to be worth saving, and then those artifacts are available so that scholars, students, and other activists may continue engaging with them."[iv] The first part of that statement gives us the reason for the physical archive – "the status of something significant." Yet the second half gives us the reason for going digital – making material more *available.*

That issue of availability, in our case, is fraught with issues of partnership, funding, and institutional support. In the case of *On Equal Terms,* the women's history exhibition, we received generous underwriting from the University of Chicago women's board, with the promise of a paper record. Paper means permanence; paper, in some sense, gave the project more weight…But I also want us to consider the role of academic labor in the support for digital history, particularly in fields like women's, gender, and sexuality history, which are sometimes still marginalized in our departments and schools. With grad students at the helm of projects like mine, there is no full-time attention to the subject. An institution in which digital methods are not
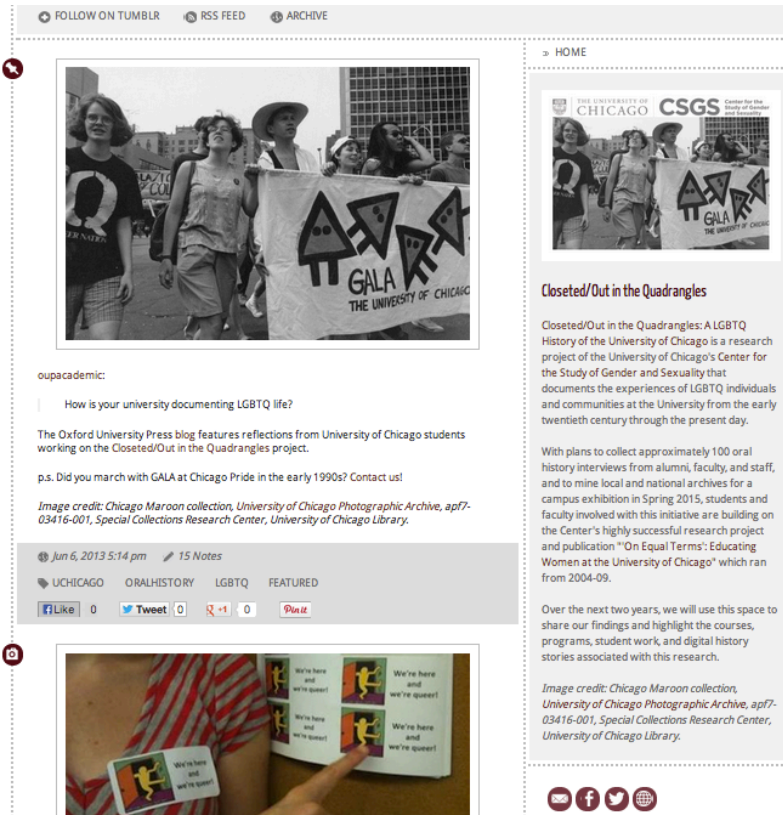
Fig. 4. UChicago "Closeted/Out" project tumblr (2013)

yet considered critical to expanding the "life of the mind" does pose issues for who we recruit to

work and advise this project.[v] My continued work on women's and LGBTQ archiving has

opened up questions of digital potentials—how do we create the kind of digital presence we want

for our projects without the supports for formal (or informal) training?

If an eventual goal for the current queer archiving project is to create a dynamic online

portal giving researchers access to finding aids, oral history recordings, and digitized collections,

we are taking baby steps digitally. One stopgap measure in development is beginning a queer

archives tumblr, maintained by student interns at the Center for the Study of Gender and

Sexuality [http://uchicagolgbtqhistoryproject.tumblr.com]. [Fig. 4] We are choosing tumblr to

build on the popularity of other UChicago tumblrs—namely *f**k yeah UChicago*

[http://fyuchicago.tumblr.com, an independent student-run site, and the Office of LGBTQ student life [http://uchicagolgbtq.tumblr.com]. This allows us to cross-promote, and gives us a flexible place to show off the kinds of research we're finding in bite-size pieces, text and images, in the year and a half before the official campus exhibition. And in the meantime, Special Collections lends us its flexible, wired teaching space for grad students to experiment teaching with digital methods. As I said, these are baby steps; the question for projects like mine is whether anything more substantial can grow out of them when grad students and other contingent faculty are at the helm.

Conclusions: History, Community, and Digital Archives

To conclude, I want to return to the issue of community and the archive. Last month, Madhu Narayan published a piece on New York's Lesbian Herstory Archives in the journal *enculturation*. Narayan argued that the Lesbian Herstory Archives maintains an "unique blend of communal and archival commitments" in which part of the work entails "persuading community members that their lives are historical *and* worthy of being archived."[vi] Part of what makes the Lesbian Herstory Archives special, in her analysis—and to many of its users, probably some in this room—is the kind of close-knit in-person community it fosters. This idea of *home* is important to the Chicago projects as well. Our classes and programs are full of students involved with on-campus feminist and LGBT organizations, who feel that we're offering new spaces for them to explore an activist and social history; they crave the face-to-face engagement with their history, and our archivist partners spend a good deal of their time encouraging new users into Special Collections Research Center. But the community-building aspect of this work at UChicago, thus far, pales online.

The lack of materials in Special Collections documenting the history of University women and LGBT individuals and groups is an archival silence we have worked hard to overcome; as Yvonne Perkins has argued, "a lot can be done by asking the right questions and being persistent and creative." Conferences like the one we are at today convince me that part of being creative is embracing the digital; how we go about that at institutions that do not see digital history as a priority remains an open question.

I proposed this paper initially not as a complaint about projects I am deeply committed to but as a push for digital historians to think critically about archives, partners, and resources. If we are here with a shared commitment to promoting "Women's History in a Digital World," then the questions that keep me up at night are the following:

- Whose responsibility is it to digitize history?

- How do we balance the pros and cons of working with departments and funders tied to a paper record?

- How do we balance our potential donors' interest in being a part of the official institutional archive with our desire to increase access by prioritizing the digital? [and]

- How do we convince all of these potential partners of the importance of maintain a digital legacy, particularly when so many digitizing projects are being led by graduate students and contingent faculty?

If my examples are any measure, women's, gender, and sexuality history in a digital world, I argue, involves issues of academic labor, institutional supports, and archival power that we have only begun to interrogate.

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i Monica Mercado and Katherine Turk, 'On Equal Terms': Educating Women at the University of Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Library, 2009).

ii For a summary of debates over the meanings of "archival silence" and the digital humanities, see Kate Theimer, "Two Meanings of 'Archival Silences' and Their Implications," accessed February 20, 2013 (http://www.archivesnext.com/?p=2653).

iii Rodney G.S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," Archivaria 61 (September 2006), 216.

iv Alison Piepmeier, "Archives as Activism: a Preface," in Make Your Own History: Documenting Feminist and Queer Activism in the 21st Century (Los Angeles, CA: Litwin Books, 2012), ix. Later in that volume, Angela DiVeglia makes the case for new issues of privacy when discussing models for LGBT archives and the "unique concerns of many potential LGBT donors." As DiVeglia argues, "From increased privacy needs to an inherent distrust of large institutions, the desires and goals of members of the LGBT community who possess personal papers or organizational records may differ from other potential donors."

v Recently, Rice historian Caleb McDaniel organized a graduate student roundtable on digital history and the digital humanities, where panelists laughed about helpful personal links: a mom who's a computer science teacher, a husband who is a computer programmer. What do students do who don't have these informal ties? See "Grad Student Roundtable on Digital Humanities," accessed March 8, 2013 (http://digitalhistory.blogs.rice.edu/2013/03/08/grad-student-roundtable-on-digital-humanities/).

vi Madhu Narayan, "At Home with the Lesbian Herstory Archives," in enculturation: a journal of rhetoric, writing, and culture 15, accessed February 28, 2013 (http://enculturation.gmu.edu/lesbian-herstory-archives).