Improving Access and Discovery of LGBTQIA+ Materials Across Collection Services Workflows

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IMPROVING ACCESS AND DISCOVERY OF LGBTQIA+ MATERIALS ACROSS COLLECTION SERVICES WORKFLOWS

Author Positionality

Alexandra deGraffenreid is the head of collection services at Pennsylvania State University (PSU)’s Eberly Family Special Collections Library (SCL). Gideon Goodrich is the processing archivist at University of Michigan’s Bentley Historical Library. They previously worked as research services archivist and accessioning archivist in the Eberly Family Special Collections Library. They are also part of the Queer Metadata Collective and contributed to the Trans Metadata Collective.

As these case studies consider language and identity, the authors wish to position their own identities to contextualize their work. Both authors work at large, primarily white research institutions, and while we belong to and identify with the LGBTQIA+ communities—Alexandra deGraffenreid, as a white, cis daughter of a gay woman, and Gideon Goodrich, as a white, disabled queer person—we do not claim to speak for or represent the full spectrum of the queer community. The authors want to acknowledge the dangerous political and social environment for LGBTQIA+ persons, and particularly trans folks, in the United States at the time of writing. The ongoing systematic attempt to erase queer identities from public spaces and discourse reflects and informs the exclusion of their histories in archives.

We acknowledge that the solutions explored in these case studies may not work for every community or archival collection. The authors use language that reflects the realities and contexts of the collections presented as case studies. Often, our word choice reflects historical context and self-reported identities of each subject, rather than recommended language presented in guides such as the GLAAD Media Reference Guide.

Introduction

There is a unique sort of pain to searching for your community in an archive and turning up with four thin folders scattered across four relatively small collections—it’s a mixture of anger and resignation. Historically marginalized communities are often underrepresented in archival collections, and where those collections do exist, the description leaves much to be desired. The authors encountered obfuscating descriptions in their early careers, which impacted their feelings of isolation and underrepresentation in the collections they worked with. Even when searching with outdated terminology and scanning for potential references to the queer community (to which both authors have strong ties), expanded searches revealed little more than a handful of folders and were deeply uncomfortable experiences.

As we prioritize imperfect action over hesitation and inaction, we want to acknowledge that the language we use surrounding sexuality and identity is imperfect and reflects choices and compromises made in the name of accessibility. This case study is rooted in the obstacles particular to their institution and advocates for imperfect action as resistance to legacies of excluding LGBTQIA+ experiences in archives. Much of the work represented herein was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, and so the authors had limited opportunities for the external consultation
and relationship building that are core to reparative work. That being said, the authors argue we as a profession must utilize every aspect of archival practice to create positive change. This work must be embedded into standard archival workflows in order to be effective, and cannot wait for specialized positions, funding, or limited scope projects. This case study argues for doing better right now, because perfect is the enemy not only of good but of progress.

**Literature Review**

This section highlights works that directly informed the practices in this case study. It is not intended to comprehensively review the archival literature as, within the confines of a short case study, an extensive literature review is not practical. Literature about reparative archival description is very recent but emerges from more developed literature critiquing traditional archival practices. As the reparative archives genre is fairly new, significant gaps in the literature remain. Within the overall literature on reparative practices, recommendations for describing LGBTQIA+ perspectives are particularly underdeveloped. This case study attempts to be part of a conversation in addressing that gap.

Recent scholarship has focused on critiquing notions of the neutrality of archives and emphasizing archivists’ duties of care towards the persons represented within collections. Archivists have an impact on records by choosing to work with them, making their labor as prone to bias as any human endeavor. Despite the best of intentions, insisting on “neutrality” can create or perpetuate harms by continuing the use of outdated or obfuscating practices, which limit the discovery and access of archival material documenting marginalized groups. Bergis Jules calls out these types of practices as a failure of care because by not centering people in archival work, “we’re erasing people, communities and their humanity from the historical record.”¹ Winn further points out that “well-intentioned people can still write patronizing and erroneous descriptions. The historic record has been muddied and punctuated by perfectly ‘honest’ scholars who thought they were telling the truth.”² Alongside these critiques, Marika Cifor and Michelle Caswell propose adopting a framework of radical empathy emphasizing the overlapping networks of care between archivists and records creators, subjects, users, and the broader communities around the archives.³ Most recently, Jessica Tai recommends adopting a framework of cultural humility which more consciously acknowledges archivists’ implicit biases, normalizes not knowing, and ultimately encourages nontraditional voices to impact archival labor.⁴

The erasure of diverse histories, then, is an expression of institutional power. Eric Ketelaar argues that records and archives are instruments of power that reflect chosen realities and oppress other voices through the choices made to include or exclude records.⁵ He further critiques ideas of neutrality by positing the impacts people have on what is retained in archives: “Every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation by creator, user, and archivist is an activation of the record…. Each activation leaves fingerprints which are attributes to the archive’s infinite meaning.”⁶ Michel-Rolph Trouillot further demonstrates how silences emerge at various points of

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¹ Jules, “Confronting Our Failure of Care.”
² Winn, “The Hubris of Neutrality in Archives.”
³ Caswell and Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics.”
⁴ Tai, “Cultural Humility.”
⁵ Ketelaar, “Archival Temples, Archival Prisons.”

https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol10/iss1/18
historical production, including at the moment of creation and when they are made part of an archive.\textsuperscript{7} Scholars have also demonstrated that archivists impact archives at all levels, from what they acquire, to describing records, and ultimately providing reference services and that this work is inherently political.\textsuperscript{8} K.J. Rawson further argues that archival description itself is an “information infrastructure that provides powerful, although often invisible, frameworks for our orientations to the past.”\textsuperscript{9}

Much of the work on elevating the voices of marginalized communities within archives have focused on archival description. Jennifer Douglas advises creating an “honest description” which highlights the impact of archival labor on records.\textsuperscript{10} Going further, many archivists have focused on conscious editing or reparative description initiatives to address harmful or outdated descriptions.\textsuperscript{11} Reparative description emerged from Lae’l Hughes-Watkins’ work on moving towards reparative archives and is defined by the Society of American Archivists as “remediation of practices or data that exclude, silence, harm, or mischaracterize marginalized people in the data created or used by archivists to identify or characterize archival resources.”\textsuperscript{12} However, this remediation cannot only look back at legacy finding aids, it must be equally concerned with creating more inclusive archival description moving forward. Armando Suarez provided guidance on creating more inclusive description, which includes prioritizing language persons use to self-identify, balancing original context with perpetuating harmful language, and privileging creator or community-given description.\textsuperscript{13} Understanding that archival description is iterative and changing, Alicia Chilcott proposes a “good, better, best” model when addressing offensive language.\textsuperscript{14} Since Hughes-Watkins’ piece, a number of resources and community-driven vocabulary initiatives have been created to help archivists create more inclusive archival descriptions.

These discussions are also aligned with scholarship focused on “queering” the archive to elevate the voices of LGBTQIA+ communities and creators. Emily Drabinski discusses how queer theory argues that “systems of categorization and naming are inextricable from the historical contingencies of their own production; there can be no ‘correct’ categorical or linguistic structures, only those that discursively emerge and circulate in a particular context.”\textsuperscript{15} This challenges the very notions of archival and bibliographic description, which emphasize static classifications that “freeze” identities within a particular time and place.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, the approach to describing LGBTQIA+ perspectives must be iterative and responsive to the evolution of community language in order to support identification and discoverability by LGBTQIA+ researchers.

\textsuperscript{7}Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past}, 26.
\textsuperscript{9}Rawson, “The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description,” 331.
\textsuperscript{10}Douglas, “Toward More Honest Description.”
\textsuperscript{13}Suárez, “Language Matters.”
\textsuperscript{15}Drabinski, “Queering the Catalog,” 102.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid, 96.
Transgender Archive Style Guide builds on this perspective, describing words relating to queer and transgender experiences as “continuous battlegrounds as terms are created, discarded, reclaimed, disputed, etc.”\textsuperscript{17} Most recently, the Trans Metadata Collective’s “Metadata Best Practices for Trans and Gender Diverse Resources” acknowledges the complexity of describing trans and gender diverse individuals while also outlining recommendations for heritage professionals to more inclusively identify and describe trans and gender diverse persons.\textsuperscript{18} Ethically describing LGBTQIA+ collections can be contentious, because there is a balance between respecting evolving community vocabularies, respecting the intentional ambiguity of historical LGBTQIA+ experiences, and facilitating research into queer histories. Consciously choosing how to balance these considerations is necessary in order to provide more responsive and respectful access to records documenting queer histories.

**Case Study**

Laying the groundwork.

Pennsylvania State University’s Special Collections Library stewards approximately 50,000 linear feet of archival collections. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, archival collections were described in an ArchivesSpace repository, the EAD exported, converted to HTML, and made public through a static webpage. Due to this system, researchers could not search across finding aids and linked discovery tools such as subject headings could not be utilized, limiting the discoverability of archival materials. Efforts to improve access to LGBTQIA+ materials at PSU began without the immediate intention of targeting LGBTQIA+ collections for redescription. These efforts also serve the strategic interests of the SCL, as the Collection Development Plan (CDP) explicitly prioritizes documenting LGBTQIA+ history and experience as well as a commitment to responsible stewardship.\textsuperscript{19} In addition, SCL’s curator for LGBTQIA+ materials identifies as part of the community and has specifically prioritized building PSU’s collections where LGBTQIA+ experiences intersect with other areas of the CDP. As a result, the ingestion of LGBTQIA+ materials at PSU significantly increased after the CDP was implemented in 2019.

Improving access to LGBTQIA+ collections is both an ethical and strategic priority. More inclusive (re)description efforts were initially spurred by a high-level audit of all finding aids within PSU’s ArchivesSpace instance. In March 2020, the processing archivist audited more than 2,700 resource records to assess their adherence to national and local standards at the collection level. As part of this assessment, she also assessed whether collection-level descriptions contained offensive language. Importantly, this assessment did not include collection inventories, as it was specifically targeted to collection-level description. In addition, due to the lack of subject headings, they were only assessed so far as to note where they existed to inform a future dedicated subject headings project.

During the audit, what constituted “offensive” expanded considerably to include obfuscating language as well as absence. While she found very few instances of overtly racist or derogatory language, she determined that this was not a reflection of ethical, high-quality description for

\textsuperscript{17} Roles and Schlotterback, “DTA Style Guide,” 2020.
\textsuperscript{18} Trans Metadata Collective et al., “Metadata Best Practices for Trans and Gender Diverse Resources (1.0),”
\textsuperscript{19} Special Collections’ Curatorial Team, “Eberly Family Special Collections Collection Development Plan.”
collections representing marginalized histories. She instead determined this was a reflection of absence through either the lack of description entirely or the use of language which effectively hid the existence of these collections. She found this obfuscation itself to be offensive, as the absence of description created a void which made discovering these collections difficult or impossible without archivist support. These legacy practices in effect silenced the voices of creators and perpetuated their marginalization through using imprecise language to obscure peoples’ identities or providing insufficient description. In order to better understand the scope of collections requiring more inclusive (re)description, the definition of “offensiveness” was expanded to include this absence for the purposes of the audit.

The audit provided substantial data that informed collection improvement efforts. This article will focus on the resulting efforts to both remediate existing inadequate description and implement more inclusive description at the point of accessioning. These efforts were designed to be flexible to the continuing uncertainties of the pandemic while also focusing on creating responsive, sustainable workflows moving forward. First came the creation of hybrid processing workflows. The processing archivist created alternative workflows that maintained local standards and minimized onsite work to only essential tactile work, such as creating surrogates to facilitate remote description. The processing archivist used the audit data to compile a list of under-described collections, prioritized to address collections created by or documenting diverse perspectives. This hybrid processing model prioritized several smaller collections documenting LGBTQIA+ history.

Although hybrid processing was necessary to facilitate work, archivists acknowledged that this was insufficient. In order to respectfully approach collections documenting underrepresented voices, it was necessary to slow down, reflect, and educate ourselves as a team of mostly cis, white archivists. However, due to limited institutional capacities and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, a dedicated community advisory initiative was not feasible. To move forward with the urgent need to create more inclusive practices, the Collection Services Team created the Inclusive Description Working Group in summer 2020, which produced local documentation inspired by and responsive to the emerging literature on reparative practices. The working group researched and created a local style guide and compiled an associated resource guide. This resource guide was intended to both provide training and link to community-driven resources to inform the creation of more conscious archival description. Although not fully launched until spring 2021, the simultaneous development of these resources informed the implementation of these practices into PSU’s accessioning and processing workflows starting in fall 2020.

**Embedding more inclusive description into accessioning workflows.**

Inclusive description should not be restricted to processing alone. The descriptive practices outlined by the Inclusive Description Working Group were quickly adopted in accessioning workflows as part of PSU’s extensible processing program. Some collections, due to the nature of their creators’ or subjects’ personal or community identities, require additional time and consideration at the point of accessioning. These practices have their roots in slow archives, however to truly implement slow archiving as outlined by Christen and Anderson requires institutional changes regarding how we collect, collaborate, and curate knowledge.20 While our

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20 Christen and Anderson, “Toward Slow Archives.”
efforts are certainly steps on that path, the authors took to referring to our process as “conscious archiving”—that is, allowing ourselves the time to slow down in order to provide thorough and transparent description to the best of our abilities.

This section will focus on the accessioning work involved in making several recent acquisitions available to patrons: the Early male tightlacing, corseting, and cross-dressing collection; the Robin Becker poetry chapbook collection; and the Queer zine and small press collection.\(^21\)

**The right to privacy and the complications of a “unified” queer history.**

The Early male tightlacing, corseting, and cross-dressing collection is an extensive collection of scrapbooks and albums of notes, small newsletter publications, and copies of the German-language publication *Das 3. Geschlecht*, widely believed to be one of the first transvestite magazines in publication.\(^22\) It became clear while assessing the collection that the creator took great pains to hide their identity, going so far as to hand crop the tops of photographs in order to remove faces.

It was also clear, given the materials collected, that they were attempting to establish a history of a community and social movement. There are at least two newsletters preserved as fully as possible within these scrapbooks that were only available to subscribers and are not well documented elsewhere. The creator put thought and effort into including other cultures in their chronicle of the community. The scrapbook titled “Eccentric Jewelry” includes hand-colored postcards of dancers in India, articles on the Indigenous peoples of Papua New Guinea, and other notes of practices similar (at least visually) to tightlacing and cross-dressing. This seemed to the accessioner to be a clear attempt to establish a broader history of the community. However, this “congealment” of practices under a single umbrella retained a western, colonialist view of its subjects: the styles of dress in Indigenous Papua New Guinea, for instance, have fundamentally different cultural roots and meaning among the tribes represented than those of western European corsets.\(^23\)

The descriptive needs for this collection were twofold: first, to respect the privacy of the scrapbooker by allowing them to remain anonymous; and second, to avoid describing all of the communities represented with the same broad brush the creator used. The first step was simple enough, as the authors had no identifying information to even speculate upon. The second provided a challenge because a thorough investigation of the various and varied cultures represented was not practical during accessioning. The accessioner decided to include a content advisory in the scope and contents note by naming the culture which could be identified while naming the western European cultural perspective of the materials as a whole. This both identified the biases inherent in the materials and allowed members of those communities to find themselves in the collection.

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22 Wimblett, “Gender Nonconforming Lives in Interwar Germany.”
23 Miller, “The Life and Death of Modern Homosexuality.”
Making local queer communities accessible.

While collections pertaining to national and international queer movements are important to the archive as a whole, local collections are vital. The archivists wrestled with the challenge of inviting local communities to donate their materials when there was a history of distrust and underrepresentation in our collections. As part of community building, the curator acquired the Robin Becker poetry chapbook collection. Its description required collaboration with the curator and a creative approach to access.

Robin Becker is a professor emeritus at PSU and a poet known for her mentorship of queer and lesbian poets. Between 2000 and 2015, Becker taught a graduate-level seminar dedicated to poetry chapbooks and she amassed a diverse collection of teaching samples. Included were chapbooks given to Becker by friends and mentees; zines published by Ugly Duckling Presse; and poetry published by Becker’s seminar students. The curator expressed an interest in creating a finding aid and individually cataloging the chapbooks. Her reasoning was to create as many access points as possible, however this was not possible due to PSU’s systems. The authors compromised by creating an item level finding aid with a section of collection highlights. This meant that patrons could find specific authors and titles via a keyword search, and folks interested in the collection as a whole would be able to see the chapbooks with original context.

The accessioner discovered Becker had outlined three series in her description of the collection: chapbooks used in the seminar, student publications, and Ugly Duckling Presse publications. However, an inventory that matched the description was not included. This meant creating an inventory and sorting the material into each series as best as possible. This took additional intentional time to consider the subjectivity of the accessioner and potential impacts on access. They chose highlights based on CDP criteria such as highlighting Black, Latino/a/x, and queer poets. While intended to elevate these voices, this raises questions of how to better represent these communities in the finding aid. In this case, we prioritized imperfect action over inaction. This was especially prudent, as Becker’s collection connects local, statewide, and national queer poets and highlights the artistic history of PSU’s queer community.

Creating constructed collections.

Materials produced by and for queer communities often do not take the form of traditionally archived materials. Our curator for LGBTQIA+ history intentionally sought out and purchased published queer materials to build out archival collections of queer experiences. In conversations between the curator, head of Collection Services, and accessioner, we decided that the best approach would be to create artificial archival collections which collated similar materials for access and described them at the item level. This allowed us to continue adding to the collection as new materials arrive and provide easier reference use and preservation for small, delicate objects such as zines and fliers. For example, a researcher could request a single flier, however collating materials together allows for easy browsing of similar contexts for other items in the artificial collection.

The Queer zine and small press collection represents an initial attempt at creating such a collection. The accessioner chose to organize the collection chronologically, as that arrangement seemed to
make the materials more accessible at the time of the collection’s creation. They wrote specific scope and contents notes for materials that required additional contents, as well as biographical/historical notes for newsletters, fliers, and broadsides created in the early days of the Gay Pride movement. For the zines, descriptions were added from the small press where available, though many of the zines were reprints of zines no longer in circulation. This was intended to provide context that might otherwise be lost due to the archivist’s processing decisions and reference additional resources where appropriate.

As this collection is still growing and the accessioner expected future processing may reevaluate and alter this arrangement as necessary, they added a note to researchers to make it clear that the arrangement was imposed and subject to change. This is part of ongoing efforts to make the accessioning and processing labor more transparent to researchers by spotlighting archivist interventions. This is especially important in constructed collections, as the difference between “traditional” and artificial collections is not always clear to patrons.

Redescription of LGBTQIA+ collections at Pennsylvania State University.

In prioritizing the redescription of PSU’s LGBTQIA+ collections, archivists wanted to elevate the experiences of queer lives and stories in ways that were recognizable to and discoverable by potential researchers. Archivists were also concerned with honoring how queer experiences and language of self-identification have evolved over time. We needed to create a balance between making collections which documented LGBTQIA+ experiences more accessible and respecting the right of these creators to self-identify in ways which were accurate and appropriate during their own lifetimes. However, we were also deeply concerned with how archival silence can be an act of violence in and of itself as it perpetuates legacies of heteronormativity. These layers of silencing contribute to what Gracen Brilmyer calls “anticipatory erasure,” or “being aware, unsurprised, and prepared for partial or absent representations of disabled people in records.” Although Brilmyer’s article studies the experiences of disabled archival users, this term is relevant to LGBTQIA+ user experiences, whose histories have been similarly hidden or under-documented in archives. We wanted to remove the deleterious impacts of anticipatory erasure while also respecting the right of creators to self-identify and the ambiguities inherent in identifying queer histories. This section will focus on the recent redescription of several archival collections in line with these principles: the Grace M. Henderson papers, Delpha Wiesendanger papers, May Sarton collection, Marie Corelli collection, and Anthony R. D’Augelli collection on lesbian, gay, and bisexual activism.

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The dean and her “roommate.”

The Grace M. Henderson papers and Delpha Wiesendanger papers were examples of both absent and obfuscating descriptions which erased the queerness of collection creators. Dr. Grace Henderson was the first woman to be appointed dean at Pennsylvania State University, serving as the dean of the College of Home Economics from 1953-1965. Dr. Delpha Wiesendanger served as both professor of home management and housing and the assistant dean of the School of Home Economics at Pennsylvania State University. These two women also lived together for the majority of their professional lives. However, their long-term relationship was almost entirely absent from their original description. On the first pass of the finding aid audit, the auditor overlooked Henderson’s history with Wiesendanger entirely as Wiesendanger was not referenced in the Grace M. Henderson papers finding aid. She was spurred to conduct additional research when the Delpha Wiesendanger papers finding aid referred to her as the “longtime companion and house mate” of Henderson. Because this is frequently used as a coded euphemism for lesbian relationships, she prioritized these two collections for redescription.

Further research identified considerable evidence of their relationship. They mutually owned their home and shared at least one bank account. As Dr. Henderson neared the end of her life, she created a trust to protect Dr. Wiesendanger’s interests. In correspondence with colleagues and friends, the other is openly discussed and referred to, indicating an established, known, and accepted relationship (although not openly queer). Following Henderson’s death in 1971, Wiesendanger received a voluminous amount of condolence letters as well as a similar number of congratulatory letters when the Grace Henderson building was dedicated on PSU’s campus in 1975. Lastly, when Wiesendanger died in 1986, their papers were donated to PSU’s archives together and were later separated by archivists. While both women are indelibly part of each other’s papers and exist throughout their correspondence and notes, only one letter exists from Wiesendanger to Henderson in both collections and no photographs of the two are extant. These two collections chiefly document their working lives and nearly all material relating to their personal lives is noticeably absent.

Despite this evidence, neither woman openly identified as a lesbian during her lifetime. Doing so was likely impossible as Henderson passed away at the beginning of the modern LGBTQIA+ civil rights movement and being an openly lesbian woman would likely have made it impossible to achieve the status of dean at a major university. As archivists, we were torn between elevating such an important aspect of PSU’s queer history, the fact that both creators expressly hid their private lives, and the erasure of their personal relationship from their surviving papers. Therefore, archivists were caught between respecting their silence and perpetuating silences which obscure or erase queer histories from the archival record. To facilitate studying an accurate history of LGBTQIA+ experiences at PSU, archivists decided to compromise. They chose not to explicitly identify either woman as queer or lesbian in the collection description, but instead used the biographical/historical note to outline the evidence of their relationship as known. In addition, the processor utilized the processing information note to include a contextualizing note on archival description and creator agency, which outlined the decision not to label their relationship but to otherwise attempt to highlight otherwise potentially undiscoverable LGBTQIA+ histories at PSU.

26 deGraffenreid and Special Collections Library faculty/staff, “Guide to the Grace M. Henderson papers.”
27 deGraffenreid and Special Collections Library faculty/staff, “Guide to the Delpha Wiesendanger papers.”
In doing so, we hope to elevate the discoverability and accessibility of these two women’s collections, while also respecting both their relationship and agency.

**Author collections and self-identification.**

Pennsylvania State University’s collections include two small collections of early 20th-century European authors May Sarton and Marie Corelli. May Sarton wrote openly about her romantic relationships with other women, however resisted the term “lesbian” in favor of discussing the “universality” of love.\(^{28}\) In contrast, Marie Corelli was not open about her romantic relationships but lived with her “companion” Bertha Vyver for over 40 years. After Corelli passed away, Vyver served as Corelli’s literary executor, inherited her estate, authored a biography of Corelli, and was ultimately buried with Corelli.\(^{29}\) During the audit, the auditor discovered that the original finding aids contained none of this information. The May Sarton collection finding aid briefly mentioned “passionate” letters with Valeria Knapp and the Marie Corelli collection was nearly completely undescribed to the extent that the collection’s connection to LGBTQIA+ history was overlooked until SCL received a small accrual in fall 2020.

Although these two collections posed similar questions to the Grace Henderson/Delpha Wiesendanger case study, they differed in very important ways. For Sarton, she was very open about her romantic relationships with other women in her lifetime, but she also explicitly did not self-identify as a lesbian. To respect Sarton’s agency in her own self-identification, the processor chose to summarize Sarton’s relationships with other women in the biographical/historical note without identifying her as a “lesbian” and intentionally noted Sarton’s resistance to that term. This permits potential patrons to discover the collection while also respecting Sarton’s refusal to adopt the term as an insight into the conflicted history of language use by non-heteronormative persons to describe themselves.

In contrast, Corelli’s relationship with Vyver was more ambiguous. From a modern queer history perspective, their history appears queer and the use of “companion” between female partners is a known coded reference for lesbian relationships. However, the use of “companion” perpetuates historical silences around LGBTQIA+ histories by sustaining language used to obscure historically queer relationships for safety in openly homophobic cultures. Neither Corelli nor Vyver self-identified as “lesbian” or “queer” as those terms were used derogatively during their lifetimes. Nor can archivists know how either woman would self-identify using modern terminology, as they passed away prior to these terms being reclaimed. Although evidence suggests a long-term homosexual relationship, the processor was uncomfortable assigning identities which would not have been current at the time. However, she also wanted to elevate Corelli and Vyver’s lifelong relationship and not further obscure that history from potential researchers. As such, the processor chose to utilize descriptive notes to contextualize their relationship and used the processing information note to explain why we chose not to identify Marie Corelli as lesbian in the finding aid despite her long “companionship” with Bertha Vyver.

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\(^{28}\) deGraffenreid, “Guide to the May Sarton collection.”

\(^{29}\) deGraffenreid, “Guide to the Marie Corelli collection.”
Queer histories at Penn State and acknowledging harmful materials.

Anthony D’Augelli is the associate dean for undergraduate programs and outreach in the College of Health and Human Development and a professor of human development and family studies at Pennsylvania State University. His research focuses on the experiences of young LGBT community members.30 As part of his work, Dr. D’Augelli collected material about lesbian, gay, and bisexual activism at PSU throughout his tenure. What resulted is a rich collection about the LGBTQIA+ student experience, activism, and the administrative response to LGBT issues on campus. However, this collection also captures the evolving discourse on how the LGBTQIA+ community self-identifies, anti-gay discrimination, and anti-gay hate incidents on campus. As a result, although this collection contains a rich history of PSU’s queer communities, it also includes significant evidence of offensive language and homophobia.

In redescribing this material, we wanted to both respect the previous perspectives of PSU’s LGBTQIA+ students and to openly acknowledge the potentially harmful nature of some materials. To that end, we chose to utilize the original folder titles which included the outdated names of the student advocacy organizations (such as HOPS: Homophiles of PSU). We further used the biographical/historical note to outline the history of LGBTQIA+ student organizations and their name changes at PSU to demonstrate the evolution of language over time. We also chose to use the abstract and scope and content notes as a content advisory to provide researchers with a forewarning of the topics and themes represented in the collection. In creating a baseline description that acknowledges the painful experiences reflected in the collection, we aim to provide more accessibility to the long history of queer experiences at PSU, as well as raising awareness of potentially disturbing content.

Discussion

As these case studies demonstrate, more inclusive practices can be embedded at every stage of an archival collection’s lifecycle, from the point of accessioning through to processing. In order to be responsive to the needs of diverse research communities, archivists cannot wait for specialized projects or processing to use inclusive description. With staffing shortages, backlogs, and competing priorities, archivists must use every available opportunity to ensure that collections are ethically accessible and discoverable. Although this case study is limited to PSU’s accessioning and processing workflows throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and cannot address larger structural questions such as building a program that directly engages with communities or creating an advisory boards, the authors hope it demonstrates how more inclusive practices can be worked into existing archival workflows. All aspects of these workflows involve active choices that can include, exclude, or marginalize the perspectives of others. By intentionally choosing inclusivity, archivists can expand access to underrepresented perspectives, even for minimally processed collections. This is particularly necessary when collections relate to communities that have been historically marginalized, hidden, or excluded from archival repositories.

For collections documenting LGBTQIA+ histories, implementing more inclusive description is particularly challenging, not only due to shifting language but because queer identity is very personal to the subject or creator of a collection. While ostensibly part of the same community,
folks have different relationships and reactions to commonly used community terms—as evidenced by the ongoing discussion around the use of LGBTQIA+ versus queer to describe the community at large. In addition, many terms that seem more inclusive may actually represent trans- and homophobic dog whistles in the current sociopolitical climate. Even for the authors, who have strong ties to the LGBTQIA+ community, the complexities of identity language are a lot to track. Describing LGBTQIA+ lives is very nuanced and there are no single, simple solutions for all cases. That being said, archivists should not shy away from this complexity but should balance respect for individual lives and preferences with archival praxis. Through better, not best, practice that emphasizes the iterative nature of archival description, we can resist the symbolic erasure of queer experiences in archival collections by employing intentional, nuanced, more inclusive praxis.

Conclusion

Descriptive labor is inherently a balancing act between providing sufficient description, respecting the rights of the creators and subjects of collections, and creating points which are accessible to modern researchers. In this case study, archivists approached this work collaboratively in order to elevate voices and eliminate silences in PSU’s archival collections. PSU’s archivists attempted to recognize the humanity and positionality of the people involved in each collection, including the subject, archivists, and patrons. While redescription looked different for each collection, the authors relied on common guiding principles, namely: respecting self-identification; providing historical and cultural context when possible; and utilizing processing notes to highlight archival interventions. By balancing the right to self-identify with the need of archival description to elevate the voices of LGBTQIA+ persons within our collections, we aim to create more ethical, responsible, and discoverable access to our collections moving forward.

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