



7-2018

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.27.14>

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### Recommended Citation

Zepeda, Lizeth (2018) "Queering the Archive: Transforming the Archival Process," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 27, Article 17.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.27.14>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol27/iss1/17>

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# Queering the Archive: Transforming the Archival Process

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*The purpose of this work is to recognize the lack of queer of color lens within the archival profession that determines the appraisal, preservation, and impeding access. Queering the archive transforms the institution with possibilities of inclusivity for social justice and the rewriting of histories. Traditionally, the archival institution has reaffirmed hegemonic power structures by erasing and ignoring histories of marginalized communities. A way to disrupt this is to queer these archival institutions to confront these power dynamics and make interventions against the racist, sexist, classist and heterosexist structures that maintain them. Thus, this paper focuses on how processing through a queer of color lens can transform archival institutions by contextualizing and uncovering erased archival histories. Specifically, I will discuss the Sarah S. Valencia Collection, a manuscript collection of a Mexican-American woman and her family dating back to the 1860s in Tucson, Arizona. As a queer Chicana feminist archivist with a queer of color lens, I read many of the contents of the archive differently. Through a visual representation of photographs, a seemingly heterosexual woman, shows moments of queerness that could have only been discovered through a queer of color lens.*

Queering the archive changes how we define lives and allows for infinite possibilities of inclusivity for social justice and reframing of history. Some archivists have a difficult time with the concept of what queering can mean because it disrupts the fundamentals of what processing archival collections represents. Traditionally, in theory, processing remains neutral and unbiased to allow for future research to interpret the collections. This stance on neutrality reinforces marginalization for those that are deemed 'queer' to society. By adding a queer of color lens while processing archival collections, one will be able to change traditional structures and make interventions against racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist systems that maintain them. Queerness is complex and is often not expressed explicitly

in communities of color or in general. In other words, there are factors at play that can inhibit someone from expressing their desires or gender identity. Hence, a queer of color lens is crucial for an archivist to participate in the contextualization of materials for a more adequate documentation of those communities that have been under-documented. This paper focuses on how queer of color lens in processing archival collections can transform archival institutions by contextualizing and uncovering erased archival histories. Specifically, I will discuss the *Sarah S. Valencia Collection* housed at the Arizona Historical Society in Tucson, Arizona.<sup>1</sup> Sarah Valencia was a Mexican American woman who lived in Tucson where her family history dates back to the 1860s, shortly after the Gadsden Purchase that ceded control of southern Arizona from Mexico to the United States.

### Queer of Color Lens in Processing Archival Materials

When actively describing materials and collecting people's past experiences, biases will nevertheless be present. There is a need to have a deep reflection and acknowledgement of who is being excluded from these narratives. With a queer of color lens, archival materials can be a site to dismantle white supremacist and heteropatriarchal structure in the archive. Queer is a complex theoretical framework that can take up many shapes. Queer theorist, Nikki Sullivan (2003) states, "[...] queer is a positionality (rather than an innate identity) that potentially can be taken up by any who feels themselves to have been marginalized as a result of their preference, then one might argue that the majority of the world's population is (at least potentially) queer" (49). The act of queering is to actively complicate traditional notions of how stories are told and documented. Patrick Steorn (2012) suggests going beyond "homosexuality" or "queer" in databases because one will not find hits using these terms, but instead to look into 'contextual research,' in places that could be read as queer. Steorn also brings up a reminder that "[t]he term 'queer' was coined to destabilize homogenous identity categories, so to insert it as a static label in a museum [or in this case archival database] would be to work against its disruptive power" (359). Categorization and cataloging are problematic but they contribute to providing access in the archival field. Queer theory provides the tools to rethink this presumption.

Roderick Ferguson (2004) for instance defines a 'queer of color analysis,' "[as interrogating] the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices" (149). In his book, *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique*, he begins with a description of a photograph he found in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. He painstakingly describes the photograph taken in 1938 of four men at a railroad station in Jim Crow Manchester, Georgia. These photographs are undoubtedly part of the nation's memory, but Ferguson affirms, "I know as well that there are subjects missing who would be accounted for – the transgender man who worked at Levi's and wore a baseball cap and chewed tobacco; the men with long permed hair who tickled pianos; the sissies, and bulldaggers who taught the neighborhood children to say their speeches on Easter Sunday morning" (viii). These stories are hidden between the lines in these collections, however, archivists do not necessarily have the tools to identify them. Ferguson's account significantly contributes to thinking about how to queer archives, specifically looking between lines for clues, adding historical and personal context, as well as contesting heterosexuality as default even when there are hints that suggest other possibilities.

## Sarah S. Valencia Collection

Using the tools provided by queer scholars and interpreting the lens through a ‘queer of color critique’ is putting theory into practice in processing archival collections. Within archival institutions, archivists are forced to follow and reinforce a culture of neutrality, access, and preservation at the center of their work. To counter this, Elizabeth Kaplan (2000) states, “[t]he archival record doesn’t just happen it is created by individuals and organizations, and used, in turn, to support their values and mission, all of which comprises a process that is certainly not politically and culturally neutral” (147). Stating that biases are not present in the collecting process of archival materials by the collectors is putting too much faith in an individual. Archivists should instead be conscious of this and participate in the interpretation of these materials.

The *Arizona Archive Matrix* was a project carried out by archival repositories, which created inventories and surveyed what was collected in the state of Arizona.<sup>2</sup> Fifteen archival repositories participated in the project and in 2012, it was discovered that there were only four archival collections identified statewide as LGBTQIA.<sup>3</sup> The statistics of how many collections are considered LGBTQIA in Arizona is alarming. The Arizona Historical Society has only one collection identified as LGBT and the majority of the materials are periodicals from various parts of Arizona. Some topics include Same-Sex Marriage, HIV/AIDS, and different organizations around Southern Arizona dating from 1991 – 2010.<sup>4</sup> These periodicals and newspaper clippings tell an important history of LGBT communities in Arizona, but the documentation of these communities continues to be a small percentage. With such a massive backlog of unprocessed materials, severe budget cuts, and no direct collection, there is little hope that the Arizona archivists will prioritize collecting materials from queer of color communities. However, there has been positive changes in the state of Arizona. For example, in 2012 Dr. Jamie Lee from the University of Arizona began the Arizona Queer Archives, a community archive documenting the LGBTQIA community.<sup>5</sup> The efforts made by the Arizona Queer Archives are changing Arizona statistics, but more work needs to build on these initiatives to end these cycles of under-documentation.

I received my first hands-on archival education at the Library and Archives Division at the Arizona Historical Society in Tucson, Arizona. The organization was founded on January of 1884, by a group of men who called themselves the *Society of Arizona Pioneers*, where membership was only granted to men who had “settled” in the Arizona territory before 1870. It was later renamed the Arizona Historical Society (AHS), and now focuses on including the histories of others in the area.<sup>6</sup> Since the scope was historically narrow, there has not been a traditionally inclusive space for non-heteronormative identities. It is for this reason that it is crucial to disrupt dominant notions of heteronormative practices at play within these historical archival institutions. Archivists are trained to resist contextualizing historical artifacts in an effort to maintain “neutrality.” However, it is naïve to think that processing a collection will remain an objective process. This is precisely why it is important to forgo this presumption and affirm the significance of contextualizing materials so as to not foreclose any interpretations.

While processing the *Sarah S. Valencia Collection* at the Arizona Historical Society, I immediately noticed various moments of queerness.<sup>7</sup> The collection has four linear feet, or about eight boxes of materials, ranging from personal records, genealogy, family photographs and artifacts. The materials are in both English and Spanish with most of the correspondence

being in English. Valencia was born in Tucson, Arizona on May 4, 1908. She also went by “Sara” or “Sally” (depending who she was corresponding with). She grew up close to the downtown area and attended Davis Elementary School where she received a bilingual education. Later in life, she became a counselor and worked in the tribal communities in Arizona. She was briefly married to Ernesto “Henry” Parra. Religion was an important part of Valencia’s life. Even in the description of her grandfather, Alcario Valencia, she writes with an emphasis in capitalization, “ALL MY AUNTS AND UNCLES AND THEIR CHILDREN BAPTISED AND CONFIRMED EACH OTHERS’ CHILDREN and our family get together were here and later in California.”<sup>8</sup> She seemed to have held on to everything related to her family history, including photographs and letters, until the death of her parents.

While processing Valencia’s letters, I came across love letters and poems from her former husband stating that he wanted them to reunite and one of the letters was even written on a napkin. She sent him prayers in the hope that he would stop drinking but they never remarried and there was no evidence that she ever had a romantic relationship with anyone else. She never remarried and lived with her father until he passed away in the 1960s. There was no information about Valencia’s life in the control file (where information about the donation inventory is recorded). All we know is that the materials were never claimed and if the AHS had not taken them, they would have been thrown away. I spent the summer of 2013 reading Valencia’s letters and looking through her photographs to piece her life together. The materials were donated in boxes with no identification or visible order. Included in the collection is a single black photo album with photographs dated from the 1920s. Within the pages of this album, Valencia can be seen cross-dressing. She has short hair hidden under a cap and is wearing pants with a stripe on the side and a white-collar shirt and sweater (See Appendix A).<sup>9</sup> Her hands are in her pockets and she has her mouth closed tight and she appears to be looking down. Another photograph shows Valencia wearing the same outfit but is standing with a friend in an endearing manner (Appendix B).<sup>10</sup> In the third photograph, it could be argued that the pose shows Valencia about to kiss her friend (Appendix C).<sup>11</sup> In this same album, there are also photographs of what looks to be a wedding of a couple outside of a home surrounded by rocking chairs and plants. Upon closer inspection, I noticed that “Katie and Josie” is written in pen on the photograph. The two women are posed in this photograph like a traditional wedding couple (Appendix D).<sup>12</sup> It could be that this performance of a wedding is merely the two women playing dress-up in a suit and wedding dress with a bouquet from the garden but it can also be read as a queer moment or the desire to be married to another woman. These intimate moments are scattered in several pages of the album alongside photographs of different family members and could have easily been overlooked.

This is not the only instance that lends itself to queer readings. I further closed the gaps within Valencia’s life thanks to a conversation I had with a former archivist who collected the materials back in 2006. This former archivist stated that a disagreement of an unknown nature left Valencia ostracized and living alone without any contact from family until she passed away at 99 years old. Kwame Holmes (2015) alludes to the importance of gossip within the histories of queer bodies. Holmes states, gossip “[...] could function as an archive on experience even as it resists recognition and institutionalization” (56). If there is an attempt to create linear stories within archival institutions, specifically with archivists,

documenting how collections are acquired and then processed, so much will be lost. Leaving these stories out of the narrative is a disservice especially when users access the collection and are not provided the whole story.

The conversation with the archivist changed the way I looked at the photographs of Valencia. I read her lack of remarriage or any reference to any other relationship in her letters as something significant to add to this narrative. There needs to be an allowance for these moments to exist and it is crucial to document them. A queer of color lens is important during the processing part of the archivist role but it should also be considered in other parts of the position. For example, during a research consultation, the archivist or reference librarian may stumble upon materials that might have not been cited or marked as potentially queer. This is a unique point of view because outside of the original location, the archivist processing the collection will be one of very few to touch every single piece of material.

The possibility that Valencia may very well have been a lesbian is not necessarily important in this sense. Rather, what is important here is reading her life as open to the possibility of queerness without presuming an identity. Valencia's cross-dressing and the other photographs break the heteronormative narratives and speaks to why it is necessary for archivists to stop assuming a neutral stance and challenge the protocols that discourage additional information in the archival process.

## Conclusion

It is important to incorporate a queer of color lens in processing archival materials to ensure that processing archivist do not disavow queer possibilities. The act of queering has provided the opportunity to disrupt fixed archival institutions that have the power to erase and ignore histories of those who do not fit white and heteronormative practices. Within such institutions as the Arizona Historical Society, there have been legacies of erasure of underrepresented groups and creativity is needed to reimagine what transformative spaces can look like. In this case, through a visual representation of photographs, a seemingly heterosexual woman exhibits moments of queerness that could only be uncovered through a queer of color lens. Although, I did not label the manuscript collection as gay, lesbian, or queer, I considered other possibilities like adding context to the significance of those photos and Valencia's life in the historical or biographical note of the finding aid. While I no longer work at the Arizona Historical Society, I have decided to revisit this collection and request to add context to the control file as well as "cross-dressing" as a Library of Congress Subject Heading in the catalog record.

Queer archives are complex, messy, disruptive, and extremely personal because they delve into the intimacies of gender and sexuality. As Anjali Arondekar et al. (2015) state, "[q]ueer archives are all about the soiled and untidy – about leaving your dirty *chonies* [underwear] on the kitchen table" (213). Because queerness and racialized queerness disrupt the historical structure and organization of archives, they confront and often exceed the limitations delineated by "standards and best practices." Nevertheless, a queer lens offers a more flexible approach to collecting and processing in archival institutions. Adding an access point to a record that is not traditionally read as queer allows researchers to make their own interpretations. Thus, using a queer of color lens as an analytical and practical tool in archives presents archivists with opportunities to change what accessibility looks like for under-documented communities and researchers alike.

## Endnotes

- 1 Sarah S. Valencia Collection, MS 1467, Arizona Historical Society – Tucson.
- 2 Arizona Archives Matrix. nd. Accessed January 5, 2018. <https://azarchivesmatrix.org/>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender, MS 1437, Arizona Historical Society – Tucson.
- 5 Arizona Queer Archives. nd. Accessed January 5, 2018. <http://azqueerarchives.org/>.
- 6 Arizona Historical Society. n.d. Accessed January 5, 2018. <http://arizonahistoricalociety.org/ahshistory/>.
- 7 Sarah S. Valencia Collection, MS 1467, Arizona Historical Society – Tucson.
- 8 Sarah S. Valencia Collection, MS 1467, Arizona Historical Society – Tucson Box 1 Folder 2
- 9 Ibid., box 5, album page 17.
- 10 Sarah S. Valencia Collection, MS 1467, Arizona Historical Society – Tucson box 5, album page 1 box 5 album page 26.
- 11 Ibid., MS 1467, box 5, album page 1.
- 12 Ibid., MS 1467, box 5, album page 1.

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## Appendices



Appendix A  
MS 1467 Box 5 Page 17



Appendix B  
MS 1467 Box 5 Page 26



Appendix C  
MS 1467 Box 5 Page 26



Appendix D  
MS 1467 Box 5 Page 1

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