

QUEERING MEMORY. ARCHIVES - ARTS - AUDIENCES.

ALMS CONFERENCE BERLIN 2019

A Conference Report by Maria Bühner (Leipzig University)

The ALMS Conference Berlin 2019 was a truly remarkable conference which brought together archivists, artists, activists and researchers from around the world for an exciting three days at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. ALMS was a large-scale conference which pushed for the visibility of queer existence in the past and the present, in archives, scholarship and collective memory. It was packed with presentations, performances, film screenings and discussions. Very impressive was the huge variety of topics. All of them highly relevant to our field which is located somewhere in between activism, preservation, political education, academia, and arts and centered around queer memories. Within this Garden of Eden it seemed sheerly impossible to choose one's apples. For this conference report I decided to focus on only a few of the many great presentations I heard.

JAN PIMBLETT (London Metropolitan Archive), who was a co-organizer of Alms 2016

London, addressed important points in her short talk during the CONFERENCE

OPENING: It is very powerful to build one's own collections and to share them. Those collections should be accessible and have the needs of different kinds of users in mind.

PIMBLETT also spoke about strategies to build a community around archives. Given that

„[q]ueer archives [...] are composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as psychic need rather than a science“ as Ann Cvetkovich beautifully put it in her book *An Archive of Feelings* (p. 268),

community building around archives should be an important practise of queering memories.

Over the course of the conference I learned about different strategies to build such

communities. Another related and highly important topic which came up during

PIMBLETT's talk were property rights. She reminded us that we should be aware of the potential commodification of these collections and the necessity to consider the implications:

Who owns the collections? Could they become an asset? During other presentations,

collaborations between grassroots archives/special collections and university libraries and public archives were discussed as one good strategy to assure that collections will be accessible on the long run. I do not necessarily share this optimism.

Given the fact that these institutions in the past were pushing for a canon that ignored and erased the existence of queers, and against the backdrop of the current rise of right-wing politics, I am not sure that these are necessarily the best places to archive queer memories and facilitate communitybuilding.

The most powerful and memorable appearance during the opening was made by SANNI EST, a multidisciplinary artist and political educator. Her question: “Whose memories have been prioritised and why?” urgently needs to be asked within the field of queer her-/hir-/history. For too long the memories of gay, white and cis-gender men have been at the center of our attention and it is time to change these foci and alter the narratives. EST suggested to use queer memories to empower marginalized groups and to make de-colonialization one of our priorities. She also critiqued the lack of diversity within the steering committee, since it was mainly white and European. But with regards to diversity she also reminded us that pushing for diversity it is not enough to create welcoming and safe spaces for Black and People of Colour and transgender as well as non-binary folk.

My choices concerning the panels throughout this conference were guided by my interest in marginalised narratives and tools to uncover them. This interest is rooted in my activism as well as in my research. I participated as a speaker in ENTERING/RECOVERING LESBIAN HISTORIES & MEMORIES #1 (Thursday). I enjoyed the panel a lot and liked

the good mix between archivists and researchers on stage which was present throughout the conference.

MAGDALENA STAROSZCZYK (University of Warsaw/Cruising the Seventies) educated us in her presentation “No one talked it. The Paradox of Lesbian Identity in pre-1989 Poland and the Absence in Archives” on the East/West-divide within the documentation of European lesbian herstory for the decades 1970s until 1990s. In the first part of her talk she presented material that illustrated the invisibility of lesbians. One example: In 1991 the polish publication *Inaczej*, mainly dedicated to gay men*, asked in the headline of an article “Are there any lesbians in Poland?”.

Behind this question, other questions line up: Who could afford to be visible? Were there any media outlets that offered a space for lesbian representation? Were there any self-identifying lesbians?

There is a historical background to the lack of lesbian visibility at the beginning of the 1990s in Poland: The oppression of homosexualities pre-1989 and the lack of democratic rights that would have enabled people to organise, to push for social change and to publish. Lacking archival material, STAROSZCZYK turned to oral history interviews as a method to uncover possible lesbian herstories in Poland. During the interviews it became apparent that lesbian was not available as a category of personhood for her interview partners. Instead there was a lack of words and selfidentifications.

This brought STAROSZCZYK to a paradox, but quite common, finding of lesbian herstory: The lack of representation sometimes created free spaces for women* to become intimate. What they shared did not have a name, but this also protected them against stigmatisation, criminalisation and persecution — at least to a certain extend. The lack of words for female* same-sex desire in Poland pre-1989 was impressively contrasted by the talk by MARGIT HAUSER, the managing director of STICHWORT, a feminist and lesbian archive in Vienna. HAUSER used German-language grassroots periodicals from the homosexual, lesbian and feminist emancipation movements to retell the story of the use of the German word “lesbisch” (lesbian). Lesbian was inevitably linked with the politicisation of gender and sexual identities during the 1970s and 1980s.

HAUSER showed how, from the very beginning the quest for linguist representation was important for the emancipation movements, and that language was and continues to be an important tool to do politics. My own talk was centered around the topic “Queering the Stasi, or What we can learn about Lesbians while Reading the Records of the East German State Security Service”. I was mainly interested in the role of the lesbian and bisexual informants who helped the Stasi to infiltrate the homosexual and lesbian activist groups which emerged during the 1980s. These informants are especially interesting because they break the seemingly clear dichotomy between victims and penetrators. A dichotomy which is very present within the wider narrative of GDR-history. The Stasi-files, to which access is restricted in several ways, are soaked in political phrases and are written in a very cold and bureaucratic language. “The” lesbians are characterised as a “criminal other”. It is important to contrast these criminalising, partly pathologising ascriptions with the experiences and self-identifications of the historical actors. That is why I strongly recommend to use egodocuments and documents by the activist groups whenever possible. This brings us to the fourth presentation within this panel:

SABINE BALKE ESTREMADOYRO, the director of the *German Digital Women’s Archive*, offered us valuable insights in the making and workings of this online archive. The archive has been online since September 2019 and is an outstanding project. It makes digitalised archival materials and essays on certain topics of the German feminist and lesbian movements freely accessible. The material comes from feminist and lesbian archives. Those archives are only able to digitalise a small part of their collections - their other work goes into small research projects and the indexing of their collections. These indexes can be searched through the *META search engine*, another project related to the *Digital Women’s Archive*. This large-scale

project is only possible due to governmental funding. Hopefully in the coming years the online collections of the archive will continue to grow and diversify.

During the very exiting panel CENTERING/RECOVERING LESBIAN HISTORIES & MEMORIES #3 (Thursday), questions of community-building and oral history interviews as an archival practise were discussed. The first panelist, LOURDES TORRES (DePaul University Chicago) focused on “Lesbian of Colour Community-Building in Chicago from the 1980s to the Mid-2000s”. Her main goal is to not only document the collective efforts of multicultural lesbian groups but also to make sure that they are written into the emerging history of queer organising in Chicago. Her methods are oral history interviews, archival research, media analysis and participant observation - or rather “observing” participation, since she was active within these networks. She introduced us to different groups and their politics, E. g. Color Triangle, a dinner group that brought people together in an informal setting, and the Latina lesbian organisation Amigas Latinas.

Her presentation was a powerful reminder of the ground work that still needs to be done for the history of queer activism by BIPoC. Community building of a different kind was also addressed by the second presentation. The artists EVA BUSCH and JULIA NITSCHKE presented “Emanzenexpress: An intergenerational room of remembrance for feminist history in Bochum”. The project title was inspired by the radical feminist magazine *Emanzenexpress* which was published in Bochum between 1986 and 1994. A frustration about what they called generational bubbles inspired their multidisciplinary art project which looked into feminist and lesbian resistance and activism in Bochum during the 1980s and 1990s. In collaboration with three independent women*s archives in Bochum, and with the support of other artists, they transformed the atelier automatique in May and June 2019 into a welcoming space in which one could dive into pool filled with leaflets and explore a giant map of Bochum highlighting significant places and events of the past feminist and lesbian activism. They also offered performative walking tours to these places. Former and current activists then were brought together during various events. A slight detour:

The performance LAVENDER SONGS by the artist IRÈNE MÉLIX (Saturday) was a great example for an artistic take on and the actualisation of lesbian herstory. Over the course of the past few years MÉLIX conducted research at the Spinnboden lesbian archive in Berlin to explore queer lesbian pasts during the roaring twenties. For her performance she combined excerpts from such famous novels like *Skorpion* (Scorpion) by Anna Elisabet Weirauch, and personals from back then and the present. Since the room where the performance took place was not advertised in the program only a few people benefited from this great artistic lecture. What makes MÉLIX work so remarkable is that she makes historic material so vivid and accessible. There is such a potential in art as a tool for archival preservation but also for making learning about queer memories a pleasurable endeavour.

Back to the panel: The archivist FRIEDERIKE MEHL presented the project *Berlin in Bewegung* (Moving Berlin). The team of the feminist archive and information center FFBIZ has conducted video oral history interviews with 23 (former) activists who had participated in the women*s and lesbian movement in East and West Berlin since 1968. To make the project visible and accessible, a website was created that not only offers excerpts from the interviews as video clips, but also additional material on the interview partners in form of portraits and photographs. MEHL reflected on oral history as an archival rather than an academic practise, the ethical questions around putting interviews online and the fact that it was very difficult to achieve diversity within the set of interview partners. The fact that BPoC-perspectives are underrepresented within the video archive mirrors, in her understanding, the societal power structures.

LENA KÜHN presented the collaborative video interview project called “Peaceful revolution.” *Lesbian-feminist perspectives on 1989*. The Spinnboden lesbian archive and the FFBIZ

collaborated for this project and did six interviews with former activists - three from East and three from West Germany. What makes these three interviews especially precious, is that they centred around Black, migrant and Jewish experiences of 89/90.

Excerpts of the videos will soon be online in META, the complete video interviews and transcripts are available at the archives. With regards to feminist and lesbian BPoC activism and perspectives in Germany I want to point your attention to two projects: The activist and academic DAGMAR SCHULTZ presented in the panel VIDEO AS A METHOD OF ARCHIVAL SELFDOCUMENTATION (Friday) the multimedia archival project “Audre Lorde in Berlin Online Journey” which consist of an interactive map with lots of additional material like photographs and videos, all freely available on the website. After the four presentations a very interesting² and critical discussion took place. Critiqued was e.g. the focus on cis-gender women and the lack of subtitles which would have make it more accessible for those who are deaf or hard-at-hearing.

Even though during the conference I learned about exciting ways to engage with queer memories deeply rooted in the (political) present, I wish we would have shared more discussions on the current political developments and the urgent question of how they will affect our work in the future. Public funding might offer great possibilities, as the creation of the *German Digital Women’s Archive* shows, but it also makes one depend on political goodwill. The stories we try to preserve, make accessible and visible are highly political, since even 50 years after Stonewall the rights queers now have in some parts of the world cannot be taken for granted. I also missed more discussions on the ongoing criminalisation of queer existence in too many countries and how this affects the preservation of queer memories there in the present. Not only the stories an archive can tell are important, but also the ones that are not in there — “in memory of the voices we have lost” as it is motto of the Lesbian Herstory Archive in New York City. It is important to reflect on this blank space. It also is highly relevant to question the metanarratives that emerged in our field during the last decades. The conference addressed several of the marginalised narratives like lesbian herstory, transgender history, activism and living realities in Eastern Europe and several countries of Africa, South America and Asia, elders and disabled queers. But in all these fields there is still a lot of work that needs to be done.

Additional feedback:

One last point: I think for the next ALMS, accessibility should be a top priority. I know all of you did a fantastic job to organise and fund this enormous conference and to support us with travel costs. Nevertheless the fact that there was this rather high conference fee and that not all travel costs were covered by the scholarships was probably a problem for some people especially those coming from small institutions or who are self-funded. Another thing: I saw no sign-language translation or live audio-description, probably because there was no money to finance this. Something that does not cost money, but would make a conference that is heavily based on spoken language more accessibly for people who are deaf or hard-of hearing: Speakers could bring transcripts of their talks and hand them out. Finally, for people with visual impairment it would be great if in the future speakers would be encouraged to aim for high-contrast in their presentations, read out quotes and briefly describe visual material instead of just showing it.

Thank you all for the work you put into this awesome conference!

It was a very enriching experience for me.

¹ Archives, Museums, Libraries, and Special Collections.

² The activist, author and political educator PEGGY PIESCHE, who did not present at the conference, is currently collaborating with the Museum Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg for the project *Labor 89: Movements and Memories – Bewegungstopografien im Kontext der fallenden Mauer*, which collects contemporary testimonies on the Fall of the Berlin Wall by BPoC-women*.