
LEXICON FOR AN AFFECTIVE ARCHIVE

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Ann Cvetkovich

EPHEMERA



What happens when a grassroots lesbian feminist archive finds its way to the special collections of a major university research library? Does it lose its counterarchival aura, or can it carry its powers of critical intervention into new spaces? With these questions in mind, I arrived at UCLA (University of California, Los Angeles) to do research in collections from the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives that have recently been housed and catalogued at the university as part of a partnership that began with digitizing some of the Mazer collections in order to make them more accessible. I have been following the collaboration for some time out of interest in how a new wave of queer collecting by universities and public libraries can transform archival practice.

The Mazer Archives emerged from the West Coast Lesbian Collections founded in Oakland, California in 1981 with the mission of collecting “anything a lesbian ever touched,” a sensibility that also inspired Brooklyn’s steadfastly independent Lesbian Herstory Archives. Faced with economic and logistical challenges, the collections were rescued in 1987 by June Mazer and Bunny MacCulloch, lovers and activists with a strong interest in archives, whose Altadena home was open for tours of the collections. In 1989, the archives were given space in a building donated by the city of West Hollywood and since then have been maintained primarily by dedicated volunteers; UCLA’s resources are now giving them further stability.

On a previous trip, I had visited the Mazer’s home base and appreciated its informal and welcoming atmosphere. This time, I wanted to see what it would feel like to access lesbian lives in a more conventional archive with its bureaucratic rules and regulations. Such visits sometimes require tedious advance preparation, including tracking through online finding aids and catalogues in order to figure out what boxes to request so that they can be retrieved from storage in time for your visit. It’s very different from the community-based archives, where you can often roam the stacks freely, ask questions of volunteers who are deeply familiar with the collections, and browse buttons, posters, and other miscellany on display. Unlike the more impersonal reading rooms where special collections boxes are only available one folder at a time, the space itself becomes integral to the research. I decided to begin with June Mazer herself, whose name was given to the collections as a posthumous memorial in 1987. After her death, June’s lover Bunny, an avid archivist, devoted her time to building and organizing the collections before her own premature death, also from cancer, in 1988, and it’s possible that she assembled the two boxes of June Mazer materials.

When looking at queer archives, I gravitate towards ephemera, not just the occasional paper documents for which archivists use the term, but also the material artefacts that press up against the conventional boundaries of the archive and hint at ephemerality as that which escapes it. I was thus particularly intrigued by the following list in the finding aid:

“Box 2, Folder 1: Ephemera. 1970–78. Physical Description: small knife, jewelry, ribbon, two bound books.”

I request the box with the ephemera but am mistakenly given Box 1 rather than Box 2 and thus begin with the more conventional overview of June’s work as an activist and a professional. The paper documents bring to life her work as an occupational therapist, and I am intrigued to discover that she was interested in somatic approaches to healing, including a workshop called “Exploring How A Think Feels” [*sic*]. Scattered amidst the folders that contain copies of her article publications and workshop notes is personal correspondence, including love notes between her and Bunny. I pull out a batch of paper Valentines—the kind that children give each other in grade school. I carefully remove the coloured paper clip that holds them together and see that they are all from Bunny, who wrote funny messages inspired by the animal images on each one—“Leos love Crabs,” says the lion. After spreading them out across the manila folder in order to take a photograph, I put them back as carefully as I can but little sparkles of glitter have been deposited on the bright orange paper provided by the library for taking notes. A queer form of archival dust, the glitter leaves a material trail of testimony to my intimate contact with June and Bunny’s exchange.

As I make my way through the two boxes, there are many other discoveries that provide evidence of queer affects and intimacies. One folder contains a lengthy transcript of an astrology reading for June, who was a triple Cancer with “oceans of feeling.” In addition to her involvement with drama therapy, June’s creative activities included sketches of her domestic life with Bunny—their garden and hot tub, Bunny milking their pet goat, and their beloved cats and dogs. Things take a more sombre turn in the final folders, which document June’s illness—medical records and caretaking logs, condolence letters from friends, receipts from her funeral, and more signs of dust—the plastic plaque that identified her ashes. Although it is sad to read of a life and love cut short, it is also in the lesbian feminist spirit of the Mazer to make this ordinary life special; by testifying not only to

June's accomplishments but to her daily activities, the boxes also make a case for the value of every lesbian life.

When I finally get to the ephemera folder, I take the silver butterfly necklace out of its tiny plastic bag, unsheathe the pearl-handled knife, open up the address book that includes a photo of June, and place them alongside the other objects to take a picture of the resulting collage. The mute objects and their odd juxtapositions speak to me, providing a sense of a life that lies beyond the folders. Personal and affective value is what matters in this mini-collection—the award ribbon for the beloved dog is as important as the name tag that represents June's professional status and the address book that reveals her wide circle of friends and contacts. Even though I can't really know what they mean, the necklace and the knife—gifts perhaps—no doubt represent other significant relationships and memories. To touch these objects is to receive a personal message from June about what she thought was important. Ephemeral objects have that power—gesturing to affective meanings that are attached to objects but not fully present in them, while also making immaterial ephemerality material. Here in UCLA's Special Collections where I can only handle one folder and one box at a time, and where the materials thus remain sometimes quite literally remote, I am gratified to be able to touch the strange and random objects that have found their way into this space and thus feel that June Mazer's simultaneously humble and remarkable life still matters. As concrete as a pearl-handled knife, the ordinary lives of the lesbian feminist archive remain intact in the research library.