

MIGRATING ARCHIVES by E.G. Crichton

Published in Art Journal, summer 2013, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 50-54

Archives most of the time sit on shelves, waiting to be wooed by the occasional researcher. They sit there, fixed in a stasis that is broken only when someone takes them out past the temperature controls, through a locked door - a chance to spread out and receive some attention. The luckiest get to spill their secrets onto written or virtual pages, vicarious wings that connect them to unknown places and people. Archives seldom change; their contents are indexed to larger systems, and so each item must obediently retain its shape and form.

People wander, sometimes by choice, sometimes by necessity or force. Queer people seem to wander in particular ways. We find each other still through underground routes of site and recognition. Sometimes we migrate to strange cities, looking for signs, sometimes we are free, sometimes in grave danger. We might nestle into safe zones, with others or alone; we might live publically, or we might create elaborate masks and risk everything. We have nothing to declare, yet everything. We look for references, we look for a past, sometimes we invent one.

Since 2008, in the role of Artist-in-Residence, I have been creating frameworks for interaction with the historical archives housed at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco. My first inclinations were toward fostering a form of *lineage*. This comes from a deep need in my own life trajectory, but also from a desire to connect people to the archives in tangible and meaningful ways. My first project, *Lineage: Matchmaking in the Archive*, has involved a process of matching living individuals to the archives of the dead, asking each participant to invent a response. The resulting relationships have spawned a body of creative work that is quite amazing, so far exhibited and performed on 4 continents.

In this queer process, *Lineage* started at home but before long grew complicated by patterns of migration made evident in the archives. Jiro Onuma immigrated

to San Francisco as a young gay man and in 25 years was forced to migrate to the Topaz, Utah Japanese Internment Camp. Silvia Kohan emigrated with her family from Argentina to end up as a Bay Area lesbian chanteuse. Larry DeCaesar wandered from Alaska to Mexico playing and singing in piano bars. As this project mushroomed, I started to wander too, taking *Lineage* across national and international borders.

When I presented *Lineage* in Australia, I met writer and academic Karen Charman and soon matched her to a 500-page unpublished memoir about lesbian lovers Ruth and Kent who met during the 1930s. In a long-distance collaboration, Karen and I wrote about our different connections to Ruth and Kent, weaving a textual and visual performance that we carried to a conference in Evora, Portugal. There - in a coincidence that seemed posthumously generous to our couple - gay marriage had just been legalized.

In Manila for an exhibition called *Nothing to Declare*, I carried 8 creative archives in a suitcase to build an installation called *Mga Sinupang Lagalag (Wandering Archives)* at the Vargas Museum. This work was based on the relationships of 7 artists and myself to the artifacts of a queer person in our past. While there, I met Manila archive enthusiasts, and brought back photographs and correspondence between two gay Filipino men from the early 20th century.

Back in the U.S., a correspondence with archive performance group **John Q** in Atlanta, Georgia is unfolding as *Collaborative Practice and the Future of Memory*, a kind of archive and idea exchange performed first in San Francisco and then at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. As one aspect of this work, my collaborator Barbara McBane and I carried the San Francisco archive of Crawford Barton, born in Resaca, Georgia, back to his home terrain where John Q is now hosting his artifacts.

At this point I should explain that the archive exchanges I develop do not leave empty slots on their home shelves. If that were the case, my status as Artist-in-Residence and subsequent invitation to join the Board would quickly be revoked!

While proud to be an archive nerd, I am not an archivist. As artist, I create situations in which archives can morph into multiple forms, migrate through social exchanges, and be returned to their shelves intact. I have carried archives through customs, created archive pieces and curated interpretations that include film, sculptural installation, photography, performance, painting and an operatic aria. There is movement, a flux as archives are fleshed out, visualized and enacted by passionate intention. The normally stable historical artifacts of the archive box morph with a slippage art can engender. Crawford Barton's blond braid, cut off in his transition from Haight Ashbury hippy to Castro Clone, became an oversized coil fashioned from a hair extension and sent to Atlanta in a film canister. Jiro Onuma's artifacts now include a "Gay Bachelor's Japanese Internment Camp Survival Kit" created by Tina Takemoto. Nomy Lamm brought her band to the History Society for a jam session based on Silvia Kohan's songs. Luciano Chessa wrote an aria with libretto based on a handwritten prayer found in Larry DeCaesar's box. One by one these archives are spilling out their contents into a stream of new, alive forms.

In August, 2012, I traveled to Amsterdam for a conference about queer archives and collections. 100 representatives from organizations around the world met to exchange information, ideas and support: from Budapest, Milan, Johannesburg, Melbourne, Prague, Minneapolis, Los Angeles, Taiwan, Lebanon, and many other cities. Again in my suitcase, I carried an exhibition called *Migrating Archives* for which 23 archives around the world sent me "Delegate Archives" to represent their community. The display at the beautiful Openbare Bibliotheek showcased photographs of the artifacts of about 35 widely diverse individuals and became a kind of portrait of both people and organizations.

In a current traveling exhibition called *Migrating Archives: Delegates from LGBT Collections around the World*, I reversed the direction of migration. Once again, delegate archives traveled across borders, this time as guests of the GLBT History Museum in San Francisco. Collectively, they form a portrait of individuals and of the archive institution where those individuals are

remembered, and - perhaps most important – a record of a relationship *between* archive communities. This *Migrating Archives* project builds a *Lineage* between grassroots efforts in Paris, LGBT collections at the British National Archive, a lesbian-owned restaurant/history museum in Manila, GALA in Johannesburg, Labrisz in Budapest, ALGA in Melbourne, and many others, including the lonely archive I created as tribute to Ugandan gay martyr David Kato. My idea is to put the archives that are precious to each institution into motion as they become guests and hosts, sometimes crossing national borders more easily than we can. Currently, the Migrating Archives exhibition is being hosted by the James Branch Cabell Library at Virginia Commonwealth University. Future plans include a trip to Melbourne as guest of the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, and to Budapest as guest of the Labrisz Lesbian Association.

Queer lives are (still) frequently invisible, in life and in death. Immigration/emigration patterns affect us in particular ways: repression leads to migrating while government prejudices put up barriers to entry and exit. In Queer communities where notions of lineage often reside outside bloodlines and marriage contracts, an archive can provide a different kind of *lineage*. For people whose collective and individual traces are so often erased by our own families, omitted from institutions, or just lost, the archive is a way of taking charge and imagining a future - a process that is never static.