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The Rhetorical Power of Archival Description: Classifying Images of Gender Transgression

K. J. Rawson

Furthering the field's attention to the rhetoric of archives, this article offers an extended consideration of archival description as an information infrastructure that provides powerful, although often invisible, orientations to the past. This article examines three stages of the archival process—selection, organization, and labeling—by focusing on a handful of historical objects, held in two separate collections, that depict transgressive gender presentations. Taken together, these examples demonstrate that archival description functions not only for bureaucratic and access purposes, but for epistemological ones as well.

Keywords: *archives, classification, description, gender, transgender*

> The power to describe is the power to make and remake records and to determine how they will be used and remade in the future. Each story we tell about our records, each description we compile, changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them. (Duff and Harris 272)

Since the early 1990s, the field of archival studies, influenced by postmodernism, has been increasingly attuned to power relations in the archival process (Cook; Cook and Schwartz; Jimerson). Capturing this line of inquiry, Cook and Schwartz argue, "Archives have always been about power, whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations" (13).

While the field of archival studies became increasingly attuned to archival power, our field's longstanding commitment to archives became increasingly focused on the rhetorical dimensions of archives—what Charles E. Morris III referred to as "the archive's rhetorical (re)turn" ("Archival Turn"). Typifying this body of work, Wendy

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B. Sharer argued in 1999 that "we cannot afford to ignore the various material processes—acquisition, appraisal, collection management, description, indexing, preservation, oxidation, and deaccession—that affect the corpus of historical records" in archives (124). Particularly over the past ten years, rhetoricians have built up a wide-ranging body of scholarship that presents a compelling case for the benefits of approaching archives from a rhetorical perspective.[1] This scholarship has focused on both archival research methods and archival theory, and it has deepened our field's understanding of archives, including what qualifies as an archives, how we conduct research while we are there, how we make use of that research, and how we understand the nature of archiving more broadly.

These parallel trends, in two fields that have been largely independent from one another, provide the groundwork for a generative intersection of rhetorical studies and archival studies where we can more deeply investigate specific dimensions of the rhetorical power of archives. Indeed, this work has already begun, as evidenced by Heather MacNeil and Jennifer Douglas's three-part series of articles focused on archival description through the lens of rhetorical genre studies (MacNeil; MacNeil and Douglas, "The Generic"; MacNeil and Douglas, "Generic"). Another exemplary intersection is the collaboration between archivist Sammie L. Morris and scholar Shirley K. Rose, who teamed up to discuss what researchers can learn by understanding the invisible labor of archivists. The connections between archival studies and rhetorical studies are further deepened when rhetoric scholars create digital repositories that require archival and rhetorical knowledge (Graban, Ramsey-Tobienne, and Myers; Potts; Ridolfo).

To advance our field's treatment of archives as rhetorical institutions and to explore the power of archives with an archival studies lens, this article will offer an extended consideration of one specific aspect of the archival process—description. Archival description refers to the "retrospective description of records in archival custody" (MacNeil 90). For the purposes of this article, I will approach "archival description" in an expansive sense to include descriptions found in formal finding aids as well as other forms of descriptive metadata (or, data about data), which can be found both within and outside of finding aids.[2] As this article's epigraph explains, archival description involves telling a story about records, which both "changes the meaning of

[1]See: Alexander and Rhodes; Bessette; Biesecker; Enoch and Gold; Enoch and VanHaitsma; Finnegan; Gaillet; Glenn and Enoch; Graban, Ramsey-Tobienne, and Myers; Hayden; Kirsch and Rohan; L'Eplattenier; Morris, and Rawson; Narayan; Ramsey et al.; Ramsey-Tobienne; Rawson "Accessing"; Rawson "Rhetorical History"; Ridolfo; Solberg; VanHaitsma.

[2]While some archival scholarship uses a broadened definition of "finding aids," throughout this article I will use "finding aid" to refer to the specific genre of archival description that I expect most readers will be familiar with—a document, often following a particular schema, that describes certain aspects of a collection of materials, such as collection title, dates, physical description, access terms, scope and content, and so on (MacNeil and Douglas, "Generic").

the records" and "determine[s] how they will be used and remade in the future." Such transformations evidence the rhetorical power of archival description. It relies on language that can change the meaning of historical materials; it is created to suit particular audiences and needs; and it can have tremendous influence over the reception and use of the materials that it describes.

It is important to note at the outset that my use of the term "archives" does not neatly match that of professional archivists. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) provides the following definition of archives, denoting a very specific type of collection and a process that is contingent on adherence to professionalized principles:

> materials created or received by a person, family, or organization, public or private, in the conduct of their affairs and preserved because of the enduring value contained in the information they contain or as evidence of the functions and responsibilities of their creator, especially those materials maintained using the principles of provenance, original order, and collective control. ("Archives")

Reinforcing this definition, Kate Theimer has persuasively argued that scholars, particularly those in the digital humanities, are widely using "archives" incorrectly and should, at the very least, "understand the distinctions and meanings it has beyond their own borders." Indeed, according to the SAA's definition of "archives," and following Theimer's critique, the Digital Transgender Archive project that I direct should not be considered an archives at all.

But like many scholars, I often use "archives" in what the SAA refers to as a "vernacular sense"—"used to refer to any collection of documents that are old or of historical interest, regardless of how they are organized"—which does not require the organizational logics of "provenance, original order, and collective control" ("Archives").[3] However, I strive to be careful to note that the archives I discuss often depart from the domain of professional archivists. The Digital Transgender Archive, for example, adopted "archive" in its title to nod to uses of "archive" as a verb in the computing world, to acknowledge the influence of the archival turn in the academy, and to clearly indicate the historical nature of our holdings to a broad public audience.

I have belabored this discussion of "archives" for several reasons. First, few in our field's archival (re)turn have grappled with the critiques leveled by professional archivists against academics who neglect to attempt to understand the archival profession.[4]

[3]This definitional murkiness is further complicated by the distinction between the singular use of "archive" as a noun, common in the academy and used in the titling of the Digital Transgender Archive, and the mandate in the archival profession for the plural usage. The SAA's glossary separates the two terms and explains that "archive" as a singular noun is generally "deprecate[d]" by archivists ("Archive"). Within our field, Debra Hawhee and Christa J. Olson have expressed concerns about the distinction between the plural and singular forms, noting that the use of "archive" in the singular "seems to arise when authors are at their most theoretical, at which point 'the archive' tends to recede a notch from material spaces" (99).

[4]In "Delivering Textual Diaspora: Building Digital Cultural Repositories as Rhetoric Research," Ridolfo offers a helpful example of what this engagement can look like.

Second, attending to the differences between what professional archivists consider to be archives and what academic researchers do is a critical first step in any rhetorical consideration of the collections of historical materials that we treat as archives, particularly given the finely tuned professional standards for archival description that impact our research. Finally, this expanded notion of "archives" parallels my expanded treatment of "archival description" to include information far beyond formal finding aids.

This article's approach to archival description will focus on a handful of historical objects depicting transgressive gender presentations, which are held in two separate collections—Cornell University's Human Sexuality Collection (HSC) and the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA). These two vastly different contexts—one a brick-and-mortar collection maintained in a university-based special collections and the other a digital repository maintained entirely online—instantiate the spectrum of what I am referring to here as "archives," which is consistent with what rhetoric scholars generally treat as such. The HSC, while it is perhaps more accurately named a "collection," is precisely the type of site that is signified by most scholarly uses of "archives"—it is a university-based collection of unique and rare historical materials that are held in closed stacks, are maintained by professional archivists, and are accessed in a carefully controlled reading room. The DTA, on the other hand, is the type of digital context where our research is increasingly taking place—it is an online, publicly available repository of primary source materials compiled by people without professional archival training. Launched in early 2016, the DTA currently includes more than 2,000 items that have been contributed by more than 30 archives from around the world. Most of these items have been processed in the DTA Lab that I run at the College of the Holy Cross, where student researchers digitize and create metadata for materials that are added to the collection. Juxtaposing these two sites allows for a comparison of the descriptive practices in two dramatically different contexts, which is helpful for bridging the gap between digital and physical collections and will offer more widely adaptable strategies for readers who may want to apply this type of analysis to other archival contexts.

It is a testament to the successful professionalization of the archival field that in many cases, researchers are able to move quickly beyond archival infrastructures in order to focus their attention on historical materials. Indeed, archival description can be so seamless that our access to the past has an illusion of proximity and coherence. Of course, rhetorical scholars have challenged that seamlessness and several special issues of journals and edited collections on archiving from our field discuss ways to approach archives more critically and creatively.[5] As Nathan R. Johnson argued in 2012, scholars of rhetoric are particularly well equipped to "start looking at infrastructure instead of through it"; thus, rather than approaching archives as inert containers, rhetoricians have demonstrated that we are well positioned to reveal the archival logics that render historical materials legible for particular audiences,

[5] See: Donahue and Moon; Kirsch and Rohan; Morris, "Archival Turn"; Ramsey et al.

positioned to be used for particular purposes—what I am here referring to as the rhetorical power of archives.

This approach to archival description enacts a queering of rhetorical historiography. Not only does this article recover complex traces of historical gender transgressions that have thus far been absent from rhetorical histories, but, perhaps more importantly, it also identifies and destabilizes normative archival practices. In her queer critique of rhetorical theory, Erin J. Rand describes the normative as "maintain[ing] its flexible and consistent power precisely by not announcing, and at times by explicitly denying, its heteronormative foundations—by taking on the guise of the noncontroversial, the nonpolitical, the self-evident" (534). The ongoing work of queer archives, including the HSC and the DTA, challenges the longstanding privileging of heteronormative and gendernormative histories in archives. Yet even within queer collections—just as within all archives—the normative logics of archival description, the seemingly "non-controversial, the nonpolitical, the self-evident," warrant closer examination and continual queering.

Toward that end, my aim is to provide an extended consideration of archival description as an information infrastructure that provides powerful, although often invisible, frameworks for our orientations to the past. I will draw on my roles as a researcher who critically considers informational infrastructures in brick-and-mortar archives and as the director of a digital archive for which I have constructed information infrastructures. Generated through archival description, such infrastructures function as classification systems, which Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star define as "set[s] of boxes (metaphorical or literal) into which things can be put to then do some kind of work—bureaucratic or knowledge production" (10). My argument is that archival description enables classification systems to work on both sides of these "or"s—as metaphorical and literal, practical and epistemological. I will move through three different moments of archival description—how materials are selected for inclusion, how materials are organized, and how materials are labeled to facilitate access. These moments are significant steps in the archival process as archival infrastructures come to bear on historical objects with powerful rhetorical effects.

Selection: Becoming Archival

Rather than immediately turning to obvious sites of archival description, such as finding aids and metadata, I will instead begin with selection, which I would argue is the first step in any archival description process. Since archives only include a small sliver of materials that are deemed relevant to the historical record, the process of selecting those materials requires an evaluation and interpretation of historical objects that forecasts how they will be used in the future. Randall C. Jimerson explains in *Archives Power* that, "The selection of some records for archival preservation necessarily means that other records will not be preserved, and the documentation of certain aspects of society means that others will not be documented" (11). As Jimerson reminds us, archives are necessarily selective, a process that always involves exclusion as well as inclusion. To determine what to include in an archives, the selection process requires archivists to evaluate the significance of historical materials irrespective of their monetary value (Jimerson 12). Such subjective measurements of "significance" are precisely how archives came to reinforce heteronormativity and gendernormativity, which ultimately galvanized queer archival activism. Not surprisingly, the selection process has received increasing attention in archival studies and would offer a fruitful site for further attention from scholars of rhetoric as well.

In effect, archival selection involves identifying historical materials that could function within the logic of a particular collection. When those materials are acquired, the selection process transforms historical materials into archival objects. In thematic collections, it is particularly true that the selection of materials for inclusion requires a classificatory interpretation of those materials. In the case of the HSC and the DTA, both collections help to construct and reinforce particular identities. As Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook note with respect to archivists' role in constructing identity, "notions of identity are confirmed and justified as historical documents validate with all their authority as 'evidence' the identity stories so built" (16). In this way, archives can be temporally entangled sites where identity is at once constructed as historical, reaffirmed in the present, and preserved for the future.

Archival selection is frequently guided by collection development policies, or collection scopes, which articulate the parameters of an existing collection while guiding acquisition decisions in the future. Such policies are therefore both descriptive and prescriptive, simultaneously orienting backward and forward. Some of these policies are formally codified and followed very carefully while others are more informal and developed through practice (differences that often mirror the level of professionalization of a particular archives). The best place for researchers to find general information about collection scope is often on a website or in other promotional materials that are geared toward a public audience. But unfortunately, formal policies are rarely made available to researchers. While finding aids can include helpful information about the acquisition and provenance of particular collections, any information they might have about why certain materials were collected by the archives is usually implied or implicit.

As a researcher, I have always been aware that there are both policies and politics involved in archival selection. What I did not fully realize until I began to develop the DTA, when I became the person responsible with selecting materials for a collection, is how rhetorical the process of collection development can be. In determining what to collect, I have found myself asking: who is the audience that will be using this resource? What will they be looking for? How can that be provided for them in a clear and efficient way? For most archives, these questions are generally answered by the exigence of the collection—why was it created and what purpose does it continue to serve.

The DTA's selection process is guided by the definition of transgender that we have adopted for our scope statement, which is available on our policies webpage:

> The DTA uses the term transgender to refer to a broad and inclusive range of non-normative gender practices. We treat transgender as a practice rather than an identity category in order to bring together a trans-historical and trans-cultural collection of materials related to trans-ing gender. We collect materials from anywhere in the world with a focus on materials created before the year 2000. ("Policies")

We moved away from "transgender" as an identity term since it is often both historically and culturally inaccurate; it is a term that is often out of time and out of place.[6] By instead treating transgender as a practice of trans-ing gender, we dramatically widened our collection scope and put the onus on researchers to disentangle the complex identities and experiences present in the collection. In other words, given the normalizing force of classifying materials as "transgender," we queered our archival lexicon in order to create more space within an already spacious term.

On a practical level, our approach still requires us to determine what qualifies as "non-normative gender practices," a criterion that hinges on understanding the historical context in which materials were produced. While it is impossible to escape our contemporary vantage point and our current understandings of gender norms, we attempt to be culturally and historically sensitive as we make selection decisions. Being all too aware of the consequences of exclusion, we enact a firmly queer commitment to err on the side of inclusion as we try to bring in any materials that seem to relate to trans-ing gender, irrespective of the identities of the individuals involved.

Not surprisingly, the nuances of our use of transgender as a practice are often lost in the ways that materials in the collection are received, interpreted, and taken up. For example, one of the more popular collections in the DTA is "Alison Laing's Early Photo Album No. 1," which includes 36 photos of Alison Laing from 1956–1965 (https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/col/jw827b72z). Since we had no evidence that Laing referred to herself as transgender (in fact, the term would not be widely adopted for more than a decade after the photos were taken), at no point in the collection do we refer to Laing as transgender. Yet in several articles published in the media, Laing's photos were published with descriptions of her as a trans woman or transgender woman (Figure 1).

Rhetorical scholars can likely appreciate why this slippage is so concerning since it demonstrates how powerful the classificatory force of the DTA can be, resulting in an anachronistic interpretation of these images that relies on our current understandings of transgender identity. As a rhetorician directing this project, I try to be exceedingly careful in the ways that we describe people and groups represented in the collection, although we are often unsuccessful in communicating that attention to detail to researchers. For the purposes of the DTA, then, transgender is a term that both coalesces materials together and requires constant queering because it easily slips

[6]For more on the etymology of transgender, see Rawson and Williams.

Figure 1 The title and lead image for *The Advocate*'s March 21, 2016 story about Alison Laing ("PHOTOS").

back into its more commonly understood application as an identity category, irrespective of the historical or cultural appropriateness of that usage.

Cornell University's Human Sexuality Collection, while broader in scope, faces similar challenges. On their website, they explain: "The HSC seeks to preserve and make accessible primary sources that document historical shifts in the social construction of sexuality, with a focus on U.S. lesbian and gay history and the politics of pornography" ("Human"). Initially developed as the library and archives of the Mariposa Education and Research Foundation, what is now the HSC began in the late 1970s as an activist collection created to combat the erasure of lesbian and gay history and to provide a more accurate resource for information about lesbian and gay people ("About the HSC"). In 1988, the donation of the Mariposa Foundation's collection to Cornell University marked the beginning of the Human Sexuality Collection. The HSC's emphasis on "the social construction of sexuality" continues the collection's activist origins by aligning with established, although nevertheless still refuted, arguments that sexuality and gender are socially constructed.

This history and informal collection scope are pivotal for understanding how such policies function as framing devices for selecting materials to include in the collection. An illustrative example is a pair of collections that the HSC maintains—a collection of 204 French Transvestite Postcards from 1900–1930 and a collection of 62 German Transvestite Postcards from 1903–1920. These two sets of postcards were donated or sold to the HSC by different collectors almost a decade apart, but they are collections that cover the same time period and were seemingly collected as parallel holdings.

An implicit but very important connection between sexuality and cross-dressing is made by including “transvestite” postcard collections in the HSC. Should transgressive gender expression be included in a collection that focuses on sexuality? While there is certainly a kinship between these topics, the slippage from sexuality to gender cannot be presumed or accidental. Consider cross-dressing practices, for example: in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States, cross-dressing was frequently critiqued as a perverse sexual fetish, causing many who cross-dressed to strongly argue that their cross-dressing was completely separate from their sexuality. In fairness, the HSC website does mention on other pages that they collect materials related to transgender history, but as with the DTA, “transgender” is no simpler a concept to adopt in the context of collecting historical materials.

When postcards of cross-dressed people are included in a sexuality collection, is there a presumption that cross-dressing can or should be treated as a sexual identity? Does the HSC imbue these postcards with specific evidentiary value, as objects that are “document[ing] historical shifts in the social construction of sexuality,” when they may have more relevance for other historical phenomena? And what if the postcards functioned pedagogically, if they were created to enforce gender norms in the time and place when and where they were produced? These questions are not critiques, but they suggest that archival collection scopes come to bear on historical materials in ways that effectively reinforce the archival collection and further its aims while simultaneously orienting researchers to those materials in ways that are aligned with archival collections as a whole.

For both the DTA and the HSC, the founding exigence of the collections and their continued collection scopes demonstrate that, at the level of archival collections, description has both bureaucratic and epistemological functions. The very titles of both the DTA and the HSC work as rhetorically powerful classification infrastructures that communicate with (generally unspoken) certainty that the materials in these archives are relevant for transgender history or the history of sexuality, respectively. Thus, as archives take shape as containers, both including and excluding materials, selection functions as a largely invisible and unavoidable transformational force that imbues historical materials with evidentiary value. As historical materials become archival objects, they are transformed to be aligned with the scope and purpose of the archives as a whole. To invoke the epigraph again, the story that is told about archival objects is necessarily, even if implicitly, always also the story of archives themselves.

Organization: Containers within Containers

After historical materials are determined to be worth collecting and they are transformed into archival objects, they are then organized into collections that fit into the existing organizational logic of an archives. Just as archives as a whole function as powerful rhetorical infrastructures that frame materials for researchers in particular ways, a similar framing occurs at the collection level after materials are acquired. Collections hold their shape—often thanks to boxes—by functioning on both metaphoric and bureaucratic levels, to recall Bowker and Star's definition of a classification system. Like all functioning classification systems, collections tend to be invisible when they are working well. Frequently, when researchers find themselves in front of boxes of archival materials, the boxes tend to recede to the background as we focus on their contents. But the invisibility of the containers—which function akin to archives as a whole to establish parameters for inclusion and exclusion—can obscure the normativizing logic for how those objects came to be formed into a cohesive unit.

Professional archives are generally ordered based on the principle of *respect des fonds*, and the sub-principles of provenance and original order, which dictate that the original collector's materials must be kept together as a whole, separate from other records, in the original order created by the collector. These principles are generally motivated by the archival commitment to preserve the context of records (itself a complicated and vexing practice), which archival researchers in rhetoric should especially appreciate (Duff and Harris 271). Consequently, most special collections are organized by the logic of the creator, which is reflected in collection titles (e.g., "The Records of…" or "The Papers of…").

Yet even in professional archives like the HSC, there are many occasions when materials are sorted into containers based on other organizing logics and collections are created based on some topic or theme. Five related postcard collections at the HSC, two of which I discussed in the previous section, provide an interesting example to consider (table 1). These five collections were accessioned over an 11-year period and

Table 1 HSC Postcard Collections Related to Gender Transgression

Collection Title	# of Items	Year Processed	Finding Aid URL
Cross-dressed French prisoner of war postcards, 1915?–1916 November 9	4 postcards	2014	http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM07795.html
French transvestite postcards, circa 1900–1930	204 postcards	2011	http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM07778.html
German transvestite postcards, 1903–1920	62 postcards	2003	http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM07636.html
Photographs and postcards of gender collection, circa 1900–1960	3 postcards	2003	http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM07717.html
Photographs and postcards of women collection, circa 1900–1960	50 photographs 1 album	2004	http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM07678.html

appear to include some collections that were purchased and others that were donated. Both the "Photographs and Postcards of Gender Collection" and the "Photographs and Postcards of Women Collection" are from "various sources," the two French collections are from collector Gerard Koskovich, and the source of the German postcards is unclear. All five are aggregate collections that have been compiled by more recent collectors rather than by the subjects in the images or their contemporaries; thus, they are named by topic, not by the creator or collector.

To the extent that it is possible, understanding who compiled a collection and why can reveal some of the invisible organizational logics of a collection, particularly for collections that are intentionally created to be archived. For these HSC collections, I am fortunate enough to be acquainted with archivist Brenda Marston and collector Gerard Koskovich, and both have shared valuable insights with me about the formation of these collections. Koskovich generously shared four prospectuses that he wrote to facilitate the sale of four smaller collections of French postcards, which were eventually combined into the 204-item collection currently in the HSC. Although it is incredibly rare to have access to this type of back-end information, Koskovich's exhaustive research is extraordinary and his prospectuses convey a great deal about the postcards themselves, how they came to be a collection, and why they should be of interest to researchers (and therefore an archives).

There are many things worth discussing from these documents, but one striking thing to note is that although these collections would become the "French Transvestite Postcards," there is not a single mention of the word "transvestite" in more than 30 cumulative pages in Gerard Koskovich's prospectuses. Instead, Koskovich favors "male and female impersonators" and "cross-dressing." For example, Koskovich opens one prospectus by introducing the collection in the following way: "an exceptional collection of 80 postcards of female and male impersonators and cross-dressing dating from the late 19th century through the mid-1920s" ("Female & Male Impersonators in French Music Hall"). The term "impersonator" is more closely aligned with theatrical expressions of gender, which have been a longstanding and often acceptable form of entertainment by people who were not presumed to be transvestites. Cross-dressing is also a carefully chosen term, distinct from cross-dresser, because it indicates a practice, rather than an identity.

Yet in the HSC, these materials have become categorized as "transvestite" postcards—a term whose first definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, when used as a noun, is: "A person, typically a man, who derives pleasure from dressing in clothes appropriate to the opposite sex." Defined in that way, transvestite becomes an identity that is based on the sexualization of cross-dressing, predominantly done by males. While the term is generally taken to be offensive today, it was fairly common in the early 1900s when the postcards were printed. In fact, Magnus Hirschfeld published his seminal work *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* in 1910. Interestingly, the postcards in the transvestite collections include a range of male and female impersonators and the most frequent suggestions of

Figure 2 One of a series of 10 hand-tinted gallant scene photographs titled "Les Cherises." Circa 1900 (Koskovich 2011). Courtesy of Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

eroticism (and they are always just suggestions) can be found in gallant scenes in which cross-dressed women court other women (Figure 2). The titling of this collection illustrates the bind many archivists face in describing collections—should one use a contemporaneous term that is more historically accurate but is now offensive, or use a more modern term that matches today's language, may be more politically correct, but is anachronistic? And how does one describe individuals that we may know very little or nothing about beyond their appearance in an image? No matter how an archivist approaches these questions, collection-level descriptions exert rhetorical power by framing historical materials in significant ways.

By bringing these postcards together under an organizing rubric of "transvestite postcards," that titling effectively creates "transvestite postcards" as a meaningful category and unit of organization. "Transvestite postcards" is a pairing of a theme and a format, which together, become a container that functions in ways that are both overt and concealed. What is gained and what is lost by bringing these materials together? There is a tenuous coherence among these postcards because all of the subjects are, we are to presume, "transvestites." Yet even for the transvestite post-cards, there are two separate collections that are specified by nationality—German and French—which suggests that the differences between German and French transvestites are sufficient to warrant their own collections, while the differences among transvestites (such as gender, class, race, etc.) or even differences in the medium of the postcards, are not significant enough.[7]

The separation of these collections is even more fascinating to consider when juxtaposed with the four items in the "Cross-Dressed French Prisoner of War Postcards" collection, which were also from 1915–1916. Notably, the soldiers in those postcards are not presented as transvestites, nor as cross-dressers, but as "cross-dressed" (indicating a practice rather than a lasting and sexually motived identity, implicitly suggesting that prisoners of war [POWs] could not be transvestites). The postcards are still classified as French (in an interesting twist, the soldiers pictured were in internment camps in Germany), but they are separated from the other French postcards, despite being from the same time period. In this way, collection-level containers accrue meaning as much by what is excluded as by what is included. Although there are only four postcards in this collection, they were accessioned at two different times—two initial postcards were sold by Koskovich, at which point the HSC created the collection. Then, the two additional postcards were culled from one of the larger collections that was acquired later, although other World War I postcards were left with the larger "French Transvestite Collection" (Koskovich e-mail). This information is not part of the public-facing online finding aid, so it is functionally invisible, but it demonstrates how archival boxes can enlist both bureaucratic and epistemological functions.

The two remaining collections, the "Photographs and Postcards of Gender Collection" and the "Photographs and Postcards of Women Collection," have a more extensive temporal coverage of roughly 1900–1960. The gender collection only includes three nondescript photographs, an unexpected combination, meant to "give visual documentation of how gender has been expressed by body language, dress and other visual clues" ("Guide to … Gender"). As with the parallel yet distinct transvestite collections, it appears that the "Photographs and Postcards of Women Collection" was the initial holding and the gender collection was developed as a parallel collection to capture the few photographs that included men (all three do).

What is fascinating about the "Photographs and Postcards of Women Collection" is that a number of the postcards depict cross-dressed "women." For example, Figure 3 depicts a seemingly genuine and heart-warming domestic scene; it appears staged but authentic. Written by the seated subject, Ella, the note on the back of the card is addressed to a "dear friend," to whom the author comments, "I make a pretty good looking boy don't I?" Unlike some of the staged gallant scenes in the transvestite postcard collections, this postcard has a casual tone and domestic setting, which Ella explains on the back—"[A girl friend of mine and I] had them taken on our porch just for the fun of it." It is unclear whether the two are a romantic couple, although the tone

[7]Although I am not certain, I would venture that since the German collection was initially titled "transvestite" in 2003 (when the term was perhaps less offensive), the French collection was titled similarly in order to connect collections within the HSC—another example of the impacts of archival infrastructures and even the history of archival collections themselves.

Figure 3 "Circa 1905. Photographic postcard showing a woman in man's clothing sitting on a porch rocker with her arm around another woman in more traditional female clothing" ("Guide to…Women"). Courtesy of Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

is similar to Figure 2. Yet the individuals in Figure 3 are classified as "women" while the people (or at least one of the two people) in Figure 2 are classified as "transvestites." I would not venture to argue that one classification is more factually accurate than the other; however, this presents a telling example of how archival classification infrastructures come to bear on archival objects in ways that impact how those objects are organized, accessed, and, we can imagine, interpreted.

In my role as director of a digital archive, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of classification infrastructures and the blurriness between the bureaucratic and epistemological functions of archival containers. When I first conceived of the DTA, I will confess that I imagined the collection as a digital replica of a traditional archive, complete with neatly organized "shelves" and virtual acid free boxes (such is the originary power of brick-and-mortar archives). You can catch glimpses of that logic from the options to browse by institution and collection (although some collections are made up of materials from multiple institutions). This framework is not only privileged for browsing, but it informs our workflow as well—when we accept materials, we organize them first by institution and then by collection, essentially replicating a traditional archival context, which serves an important bureaucratic function.

But I have discovered that one of the most significant differences between analog archives and digital ones is the way materials are stored—not just in terms of boxes versus servers, but in terms of logic as well. Rather than organizing archival objects by containers or even folders, digital archives are designed as databases where information is put into one large container. Within the logic of a digital archive, metadata is free floating until called on to be organized in a particular order and format. We add metadata to objects, such as the institution that the object belongs to, and when we query the database asking for a list of institutions, we are presented with the neat containers of our imagination. But ultimately, databases are inert repositories of information that are conjured into legible form through our interactions with them. Wolfgang Ernst suggests that the interaction that multimedia storage elicits from users is a "re-activating [of] the archive," which is "a significant departure from the "read-only memory" of traditional archives (121). Digital archives thus provide an avenue for queering traditional archives by decentering organizational logics and flattening hierarchies of containers within archives.

In effect, the nature of databases positions the user of a digital archive as an active agent in creating archival containers that organize materials based on predictable, but nonetheless individualized, interactions with a database. James P. Purdy captured this experience with his emphasis on customization as one of the "Three Gifts of Digital Archives." While the DTA does not yet allow users to save search results, each user encounter with the database becomes customized based on user input and the state of the database in the moment of the encounter. Search results change as the database grows and queries are repeated over time (as with traditional archives, we cannot expect that archives will remain static and unchanged). But what is perhaps more interesting to consider with respect to digital archives is that as users interact with the database in any particular session, the database is organizing and reorganizing information to accommodate a particular use.

For example, the DTA currently includes finding aids for all of the HSC postcard collections mentioned above, although we do not have any digitized item-level objects. When some of those objects are included, we will include metadata that will indicate that the HSC is the institution that holds the objects and they will be organized into "collections" in the DTA that mirror the physical collections (which, in this case, will also mirror the boxes in which the physical artifacts are stored, since each collection has its own box). But functionally, the postcards will be included in various collections that are adapted to user queries—a single postcard would surface alongside other postcards, other materials from Germany, with other cross-dressers, with contemporary drag kings, or countless other shifting contexts that are created through researcher engagement with the database.

Given that rhetoricians are only just beginning to exhume queer and transgender lives from archives, shifting digital research contexts can offer dynamically queer approaches to the past. In both digital and brick-and-mortar archives, the archives themselves serve as primary containers that are constituted by many other containers, the flexibility of which depends on the context (digital versus brick-and-mortar). When researchers are successful in finding the materials they are looking for in an archive, the containers have proven functional and effective and they typically recede to the background. Yet as Wendy M. Duff and Verne Harris argue, "No approach to archival description, no descriptive system or architecture, can escape the reality that it is a way of constructing knowledge through processes of inscription, mediation, and narration" (275). As I hope to have shown in this section, the creation of archival collections is a form of knowledge construction and rhetorical power which results in containers that are neither simple nor static; their purpose is always both functional and epistemological.

Labeling: Interpretive Metadata

While I have been arguing that archival description begins at the level of archival institutions and continues as materials are organized into collections, I will now turn to the most visible stage of archival description—the generation of metadata to label materials and facilitate researcher discovery. Archival description at this stage happens in a number of different formats in archives, but it all functions as metadata. Metadata, or data about data, are pieces of information that are generated about archival materials in order to allow researchers to search and find those materials.[8] Common metadata fields include things such as title, date created, and subject terms.

In professional brick-and-mortar manuscript archives, detailed metadata are often provided in finding aids for archival collections, which can conform to a number of different professional schemas (such as Encoded Archival Description). Top-level metadata (i.e., general collection information) can also be provided in library catalogs and collection guides. Digital archives—which are as diverse as their analog counterparts—often create database-specific metadata application profiles (i.e., schema that structure metadata in a given database), which are used to normalize metadata for objects in a database. While rhetoricians need not be terribly concerned with the nuances of specific schemas, it is helpful to understand that in most archival contexts metadata are highly structured, which has broad implications for the types of metadata that can be affiliated with objects (e.g., is there a shared vocabulary used for subject terms, such as the Library of Congress Subject Headings?). While digital and physical archives employ a wide range of metadata practices, and norms vary with respect to preferred schema and depth of description (describing collections versus describing items, and with how much detail), all archival description shares the same function of making archival objects discoverable.

What makes archival description such a rich rhetorical process is that, not surprisingly, metadata creation is often a highly subjective practice—it involves close reading, analysis, interpretation, and description through language, all while attending to the anticipated needs of future users. MacNeil suggests that a rhetorical approach to archival description "provides a starting point for analyzing the social actions performed by finding aids—what they do rather than what they are" (497). In a similar vein, I am

[8]Although I will not discuss it in this article, there are also administrative metadata that generally remain on the back end for the purposes of archival administration.

interested in the effects of archival description—in what ways do metadata exert interpretive force on archival objects, shifting their nature and framing them for researchers in particular ways?

Unlike brick-and-mortar archives where archivists provide researchers access to materials and often support their research, discovery resources for digital archives usually stand alone as researchers access materials remotely. As a result (and for a few other reasons including data harvesting and interoperability), metadata creation and standardization is a central element of digital archiving. For the DTA, we ingest metadata from all of our collaborators—more than three dozen institutions, all with their own metadata schema and unique applications—into a single metadata stream. We follow our own adaptation of the Qualified Dublin Core elements (a popular schema that includes fields such as "Title," "Creator," "Date," and "Subject"), and our data are further structured by several controlled vocabularies and data formats.[9] Standardization of metadata is not only necessary for large-scale collaboration, but it also ensures more effective searches and allows for faceting and browsing.[10]

As rhetoricians will likely expect, metadata creation is often a highly political act. On the DTA's Policies page, we provide a brief explanation our practices:

> Whenever possible, we adopt language that is already provided in an object. For non-textual objects such as photographs, we do not attempt to over-interpret visual cues related to individuals' identities (such as race, ethnicity, ability, etc.) given the likelihood of misinterpretation. Researchers should note that this practice causes some themes to be less apparent in search results. ("Policies")

This policy was created after an extended debate in our lab and after I had grappled with this issue for many months. One photograph that was a touchstone in our debates was a snapshot of Dawn Wilson and Marisa Richmond, taken at Fantasia Fair (an annual conference that has been held in Provincetown, Massachusetts, every October since 1975), likely sometime in the 1990s (Figure 4).

The students in the lab were quick to discover from online searches that Wilson and Richmond are both well-known African American transgender activists. However, there is nothing inherent in this photograph that allows us to discern how they identified when the image was taken. Even if we are relatively certain that we know how they identify now, at what point in each of their lives did they begin identifying in that way? What are each of their preferred terms for describing their racial identity and their gender identity, both now and when the image was taken? What other identities would they claim? By even asking these questions, we are queering the archive by carefully approaching the power involved in archival description and by recognizing

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[9]Our complete metadata application profile can be made available by request. More about the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative can be found at http://dublincore.org/.

[10]Most people may already be familiar with faceting from other databases or popular sites like Amazon, but it means that after you have completed an initial search, you can use limiters (often presented in a lefthand column) to narrow your results in order to more easily find the materials you are looking for.

Figure 4 "Dawn Wilson and Marisa Richmond." <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/2v23vt38m>. Courtesy of the Digital Transgender Archive and the University of Michigan.

the imbalance that exists as an unnamed and invisible force is tasked with classifying named and visible people.

When presented with an image that does not include its own descriptive information, our lab is faced with the challenge of interpreting what we see. In this case, we might add subject term tags such as "African American," "Black," "People of Color," "Transgender," "Crossdresser"—each term exceedingly complex and all potentially inaccurate and politically charged descriptors. If we did apply a few of these terms, yet did not use parallel terms for other objects, we would also be effectively only describing "difference" and leaving privileged identities—such as white, cisgender, heterosexual—completely unmarked. On the other hand, if we do not indicate certain differences, we render them unsearchable and invisible within the collection, which is certainly not ideal either. Here we face a paradox of queer archiving—how do we resist and transform normative archival description practices without recreating newer but still equally damaging or silencing practices?

For this particular photograph, the students opted to add two rather broad and innocuous subject terms, "events" and "photography," and they did not include any other subject terms. Instead, they added the following description to the image: "Dawn Wilson and Marisa Richmond, both activist trailblazers for transgender people of color, pose for a photo." This description shifts the focus from Wilson and Richmond's individual identities to their activist efforts, which allows this image to be discoverable with a search for "people of color," but not any other related terms. As a whole, the record does not have much metadata to lead researchers to this artifact, but the metadata also do not rely on overly subjective interpretation beyond what is presented in the object.

Archival scholars such as Anthony W. Dunbar have argued that Critical Race Theory (CRT) is "useful in raising consciousness about bias … within archival discourse" and is helpful in identifying counternarratives, microaggressions, and the place of social justice in archival epistemologies (127). Yet even with the lens of CRT, it remains unclear to me whether the DTA's solution to this challenge, outlined in the policy included above and enacted in this example, is the best approach. As the DTA progresses, we are planning to explore how we might implement social tagging and other ground-up folksonomies (user-generated vocabularies) to queer the power dynamics involved in top-down archival description. Admittedly, however, those systems will create further complexity and will not allow us to fully escape the fundamental challenge of using contemporary language to describe the past for a future-oriented audience.

The politics of metadata creation are obviously not limited to racial and gender identity, either. Early in 2016, shortly after our launch, we were processing a small batch of photographs that were already hosted online by one of our collaborators, the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California Libraries. This collection included 10 photographs of Reed Erickson, a prominent female-to-male transsexual philanthropist and activist, which were taken between 1928 and 1969. These photographs include one of Erickson with his wife at their wedding and another of him and his pet leopard, among others. As we were about to post the collection online, one student noticed that the leopard had been named in the metadata ("Henry") while the wife had not been named at all (and the students were unable to determine his wife's name). While this could have been an inadvertent omission, or perhaps might be chalked up to the fame of the leopard, it could also be taken as a form of sexism that crept into the descriptions of the photos.

As with most archives, our process of creating metadata for these photographs is not part of the public-facing records; indeed, aside from my brief discussions of our process here in this article, it is not recorded anywhere. Yet as Stacy Wood et al. argue, "when one re-envisions archival activities, including description, from a human rights framework, it becomes impossible to separate the record from the politics of its origins, as well as from its consequences, affects, or most importantly, the human life to which it is related" (398). How do we keep a human life connected to archival records? What would it look like to make visible the politics of the origin of archival records? And how might archival records and human lives be foregrounded by queering the archives?

From a researcher's perspective, one of my favorite archival objects, drawn from my experiences researching in the HSC, offers an example of why answering these questions could be so important. The first time I worked with the HSC's collection of "German Transvestite Postcards," in 2009, I was struck by one particular postcard, pictured in Figure 5. As I studied the image, I wondered how the subject could be included in a "transvestite" collection when there was no writing on the front or the back of the card and it was not immediately obvious that this was a person who was assigned female at birth and was presenting as male. How had it been determined that this person was a "transvestite"?

When I turned over the postcard, in its plastic protective cover, I found a small slip of paper that read "♀dressed as man?" (Figure 6). I was shocked to find this note—not

Figure 5 "Woman dressed as man?" Circa 1903–1920. Courtesy of Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

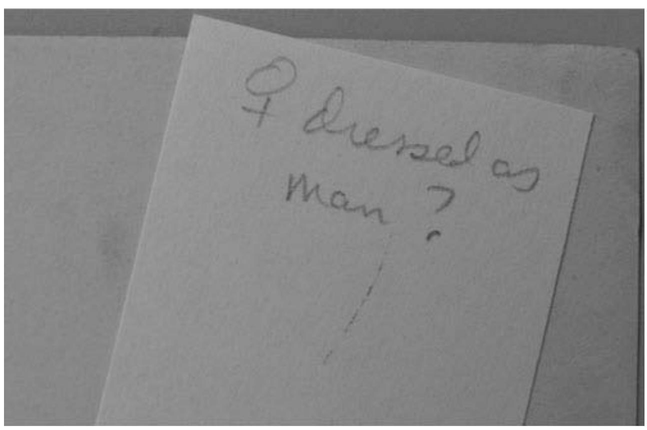

Figure 6 Note reading "♀dressed as man?"

because the question was unexpected (after all, I was wondering the same thing)—but because it brought to light the foundational problem of describing the past. How do we really know that the subject of this postcard is a woman dressed as a man? Even if we know they are cross-dressed, would we not need to know if they derived erotic pleasure from their cross-dressing in order to label them a transvestite? Without knowing these things with certainty, without even knowing if this is a woman dressed as a man, how could this postcard be included in a "transvestite" collection? And what is it doing in an archive documenting the "social construction of sexuality"? This question mark thus calls into question the fundamental work of archival description. Representing those in the past through our contemporary lenses is inherently vexing given our temporally and culturally specific language use and our current understandings of identity.

I later learned that the slip of paper had been left there accidentally by archivist Brenda Marston—it was a note to herself that she intended to remove. With this forgotten slip of paper, I was given a rare glimpse of the "invisible hands" of the archivist (Morris and Rose 51). The slip of paper was an important reminder that historical materials in an archives are put there by people and, even the structures that enable us to find these objects are crafted and implemented by subjective interpretations that transform historical materials into archival objects (given my work with the DTA, this is something I no longer need to be reminded of).

I have returned to the HSC twice since 2009—once in October of 2013 and again in May of 2016. In 2013, Brenda Marston recorded a video of me retrieving the postcard in the box, showing the slip of paper, and discussing why I found it to be so interesting; the video is posted on YouTube ("K.J. Rawson"). When I returned in 2016, I was surprised to find that the collection had been re-processed and the slip of paper had been removed (presumably thrown out). As with the ephemeral and undocumented conversations in the DTA lab about processing our materials, this article is now the only mechanism for preserving the uncertainty of the interpretation that transformed this postcard into an archival object. After studying this image for years and consulting with Koskovich about it, I am convinced that the individual pictured is actually not a woman dressed as a man, but is instead a cisgender man (a person who was assigned male at birth and who continued to present as male). Nonetheless, this individual has entered the historical record as a transvestite.

The rhetorical power inherent in the labeling stage of archival description hinges on the power to name and identify, which exerts a tremendous interpretive force that not only orients researchers toward materials in particular ways, but can also render those materials visible or invisible for researchers. As is the case for both the DTA and HSC, archivists typically engage in a rigorous process of interpretation, which involves the application of professional practices and standardized schema in order to describe archival objects. Yet too often, the uncertainty and subjectivity of this process is left out of the final metadata and, like the discarded slip of paper, researchers often lose those tremendously important traces of ambiguity.

Conclusion

Is it ever really possible, or even desirable, to mitigate the rhetorical power of archival description? As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this article, I believe the answer on both counts is "no." Like all stories, the stories that archival records tell are delivered from a particular perspective and they invite us to share their view. The rhetorical power of archival description stems from the ability of those records to persuade us to see historical materials as they are described, to share their orientation to the past.

In response to an overwhelmingly heteronormative and gendernormative historical record, queer archival projects have capitalized on this power by using archives as a key site of political activism. Yet while queer archival projects can "distur[b] the logic of the archive," queer archives can also "seem like a contradiction in terms," between the fixed categories of identity that are "essential for an archival order" and queer theory's "continual pushing and troubling of such categories and definitions" (Danbolt 34). As I have spent years laboring over the standards and norms that determine the DTA's metadata practices, I frequently worry that archival description can be decidedly unqueer as it requires stabilization, categorization, and normalization along an axis of power that I am often uncomfortable with. But as a scholar of rhetoric, I am committed to ongoing calls from our field to "queer the archive," to "utilize the tools of rhetorical criticism and theory to enhance navigation of archives and produce rhetorical histories of archives that will warrant and arm our queer scholarship, pedagogy, and activism" (Morris, "Archival Queer" 147). Queering the archive is precisely what this article, and my work with the DTA, has endeavored to accomplish.

While archival research always demands our focused attention on the historical materials we seek, rhetoricians would be well served by keeping an eye out for that forgotten slip of paper, that small trace of the archival process that fractures the seamless veneer of objective and inert archival structures. Scholars of rhetoric are particularly poised to unveil the invisible workings of archives so that we can continue to pursue not only the rhetoric in archives but the rhetoric of archives.

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