



Open Letter: How Paris Can Support the Preservation of LGBTQI History and Culture

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Over the past 50 years, a movement has emerged in many parts of the world to recover the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) past and to preserve the intangible culture of LGBTQI people. The movement is necessary because the experience of LGBTQI people has been excluded from the record by the traditional institutions that establish the history of our societies, resulting in a loss of historical understanding for both LGBTQI people and society in general. Initiatives seeking to repair this erasure reflect the specificities of their individual countries and regions, but they share common objectives: documenting queer experience in the past and present; making this documentation available to researchers of all kinds; supporting the production and diffusion of queer historical knowledge; and creating queer public memory through exhibitions, programs and other cultural activities.

An undertaking central to this movement is the creation of organizations conceived and directed by the LGBTQI community itself to gather and interpret primary sources of queer history and culture. As individuals involved in creating, maintaining, supporting and using such organizations, we are in a position to attest to features that are vital to their success. We know they are effective precisely because their foundations are built directly in the LGBTQI community: The impetus for their establishment, growth and use comes not from elected officials, government agencies, political parties or academic institutions, but rather from the very people whose past they are committed to recording. They respond to the queer desire for claiming a place in time that is felt deeply by those who have been exiled from history. They do this by combining groundbreaking collections development and critical scholarship with sensitivity and responsiveness to evolving community needs.

This intimate link between LGBTQI communities and queer public history organizations is crucial to the production of original, credible and richly detailed knowledge of the queer past. The organizations' connection with the community empowers them to look beyond traditional concepts about the kinds of stories and the types of material that are historically significant. It inspires them to rethink traditional boundaries between archives, libraries and museums—boundaries that further scatter the fragments of the queer past. It enables them to build and sustain relationships with LGBTQI individuals and groups, making it possible to identify and acquire collections that state-run and other traditional archives have failed to find or fail to see as important. And it permits them to recognize that archives which may appear inconsequential to mainstream institutions often are rich sources for understanding the history of LGBTQI people.

Equally important to the success of community-based LGBTQI public history institutions is their clearly demonstrated commitment to independence and neutrality. Their mission statements, collections, programs, exhibitions and publications do not reflect the positions of any elected official, the line of any political party or even the point of view of any other LGBTQI group. Instead, they seek to document the history of all perspectives on policy matters, movement struggles and experiences of everyday life that involve LGBTQI people. They likewise seek to make this documentation available to researchers free of partisan considerations. Working in this manner nurtures trust among LGBTQI people that our queer public history institutions will safeguard their memories whatever their own political and movement affiliations. At the same time, it reinforces the legitimacy of the institutions as contributors to the history of society as a whole.

None of this is to say the state and the academy have no role to play in efforts to document the LGBTQI past and to assist in the production of queer historical knowledge. In many countries, public history organizations created and run by the LGBTQI community benefit from funding, resources and technical assistance from governments and state agencies. Furthermore, institutions of higher learning have established innovative partnerships with LGBTQI organizations by providing the space and staff needed to maintain queer archival centers while the tasks of cultivating archival donations and creating public programs remain largely in the hands of the community. Such approaches help establish productive dialogue between the state, institutional archives, the academy and community organizations.

Despite the international significance of its LGBTQI heritage, Paris has yet to open an archives center to document this history. Fortunately, an association founded in 2017 has laid the groundwork: The Collectif Archives LGBTQI has brought together associations and individuals with the necessary knowledge, networks and commitment to the task. The members of the Collectif have developed a proposal for a center reflecting best practices in the field that will give the LGBTQI community the leading role in reconstituting its own history. Taking the next step will require respectful engagement by the public sector of the sort we see in a number of countries. Officials in Paris, in the Île-de-France and at the national level are now in a position to reinforce their own commitment to sustaining civil society by fully supporting the project of the Collectif Archives LGBTQI. In doing so, they will help ensure that Paris takes its rightful place alongside cities that are home to organizations devoted to recognizing the queer past as a meaningful aspect of public memory for all of its residents and visitors.

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