

Proceedings from the Document Academy

Volume 10
Issue 2 *Proceedings from the 2023 Annual
Meeting of the Document Academy*

Article 10


2023

What Is a Lesbian Document? Platforming Archival Description, Documents, and History in Sweden

Rachel Pierce

KvinnSam, Humanities Library, Gothenburg University, rachel.pierce@ub.gu.se

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam>

 Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), [Cataloging and Metadata Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Pierce, Rachel (2023) "What Is a Lesbian Document? Platforming Archival Description, Documents, and History in Sweden," *Proceedings from the Document Academy*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/10/2/10>

Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol10/iss2/10>

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by University of Akron Press Managed at IdeaExchange@Uakron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Proceedings from the Document Academy by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@Uakron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

What Is a Lesbian Document? Platforming Archival Description, Documents, and History in Sweden

Cover Page Footnote

Thanks to the anonymous review for comments. An additional thanks to KvinnSam for providing time and support for this work. And finally, thanks to Martin and Oona.

Introduction

Adrienne Rich's now famous essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" was, as she later wrote, an attempt "to sketch, at least, some bridge over the gap between *lesbian* and *feminist*" within feminist scholarship (2003, p. 11). Subsequent decades of research have filled in this history with theoretical and historical literature that troubles the categories women, feminist, heterosexual, lesbian, and feminine, along with other identity-based classes historically built into these categories, such as mother and family (Wallach Scott 2011). Building, maintaining, and describing archives is also a politically fraught process. Recent literature on participatory archives concretizes concerns about the perspectives and feelings of historically misrepresented or marginalized groups, proposing archives by and for these groups as a counterweight to the minoritizing rhetoric and practices documented in the collections of public archival institutions (Bastian & Flinn 2020).

The relationship between feminist and lesbian history is built into theoretical texts, but classification and description practices for archival institutions demand a parsing of these politics. Platforming documents to both describe archival collections and individual pieces of archival material (digitized or not) requires new levels of classificatory labeling. Classification solutions have traditionally erased lesbian existence in precisely the way Rich describes erasure within feminist scholarship (for archives, see Caldera 2013; for digital materials, see Schwartz & Crompton 2018). This paper will investigate the way the concept "lesbian document" is and could be defined within the Alvin platform¹, with particular attention given to the relationships between archival description documentation (finding aids), the elaboration of individual documents within these descriptions, and digitized archival documents.

Research questions

The paper centers Adrienne Rich's understanding of the visibility of lesbians and lesbian politics, which defines these terms broadly and flexibly within a historical and academic set of traditions dominated by the study of women's history and feminist theory. Also central is an understanding of the concept "document" as context-specific, an "indexical sign" that points to and represents something in the world (Briet 2006). The research questions are thus:

1. What is Alvin's definition of a "document"?
2. What are the search routes to materials that fall within and define "lesbian cultural heritage" within the Alvin platform? What relationship does this grouping of materials have to materials that fall within feminist and women's history in Alvin?
3. How do the various definitions of "lesbian," "document," and "archive" operate in Alvin to make lesbian and feminist histories more or less visible and findable?

¹ <https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/home.jsf?dswid=-1341> (accessed April 14, 2023).

The feminist politics of (a)historicity in archival documentation: A literature review

A core principle and goal of the modern feminist movement was the recapturing of history from (white, upper- and middle-class) men, in no small part in order to provide inspiration for the women-centered politics of the 1970s. Storytelling about the histories of feminism and feminists themselves is central to current feminist work (Hemmings 2011). But these stories have always been multiple and contested. Who gets to call themselves a feminist? This discussion has been tightly interwoven with a history of punchy discourse around who is “represented” in archival collections, often centering the need for bottom-up archives that prioritize groups that are harder to find (though often far from invisible) in traditional archives.

The uses of history and the uses of the archive are intimately interconnected, as Michel-Ralph Trouillot (2015) so convincingly argues. A mapping of the history of lesbian, queer, and feminist archives reveals their politics—the majority were founded during or just after the height of movement activity, as a way to elaborate and cement a historical legacy (for firsthand accounts of this process from queer activist and academic perspectives, see Joan Nestle 1995 and Gayle Rubin 2011). These archives have spawned theories of the archive; Ann Cvetkovich’s seminal text *An Archive of Feelings*, published in 2003, spawned a wave of scholarship devoted to the concept “archive of feelings,” a wave that continues to influence scholarship across the disciplines of literary studies, queer studies, feminist studies, history, and archival science.

Scholars at the nexus of sexuality studies and subaltern postcolonial critique have been particularly influential in forging new approaches to the archive, archival materials, and the roles of “evidence,” silences, and narration in scholarly practice. So too has this conversation directed attention to the role of archives (and sometimes archivists) in defining and enacting a kind of panopticon approach to history (Arondekar 2005). Yet solutions are not easy. How to make these fragments findable, how to facilitate research about women’s and LGBTQIA+ histories without destroying the messy contexts that make such sources legible, complicated, and infinitely reinterpretable? Beyond the collection of new bottom-up archives—certainly popular, and more varied in format, structure, and descriptive approach—scholars have focused on archival research methods and the need to read what is there alongside what is not there within the systems of power that produce “evidence” of the past (Trouillot 2015).

Digital tools have brought historical archival practices and queer theorization of the archives and identity into focus, almost always separately. The need to label and classify is central to this conversation, which is focused on the concrete construction and application of metadata and thesaurus practices. Ascribing contemporary, ahistorical identities to people in the past is a consistent problem within both History and Library and Information Science. And as Ethan Kleinberg (2017) notes, this discussion is a trap: “It is the obsession with the fixity of identity that leads us to posit a definitive, knowable, and stable past—one that is in fact presented as ontologically stable in ways that the present never is” (p. 128).

How does the definition of the concept “document” influence the findability of materials? Cvetkovich’s arguments about the “traditional archive” centered on the inability of certain kinds of documents to contain “intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism” because of the hierarchical and exclusionary histories and structures of these institutions, which privileged collecting governmental and bureaucratic documentation over materials from queer people (2003, p. 241). The assumption here is that text—especially certain kinds of text—cannot convey the lived experience of queerness. This is only a fair point insofar as no document can fully convey lived experience of any kind. And yet as Catherine Lord (2011) has noted, “Culture requires memory. Memory requires an archive” (p. 639). Built into this statement is an assumption that an archive is a certain thing, a collection of mostly textual documents that have historical weight. The documentality question is left largely untouched, as the focus here is on what *kind* of documents can best represent historically underrepresented groups.

The arguments concerning interface design have also been untouched in this discussion. Yet these interfaces are, increasingly, how scholars and members of the public find their way into (documents within the) archives. Platforms for digitized materials and finding aids have proliferated, but there is little research on what the online format of “posts” means for the differences between these two categories, archival document and document describing an archive. Drucker (2014) has observed that standardization is in itself an argument, based on “The humanistic aspiration to imitate scientific systematization” which “is linked to a modern attempt to develop universal principles, tenets that would obtain in all cultural and historical circumstances” (p. 48). What is standardized and how standardization is implemented—these are both the result of choices that require analysis, as well as how interfaces do or do not alter the “ghostliness” of certain groups in the archives.²

Alvin as empirical object

This paper deals in particular with the platform Alvin, which stands for Archives and Libraries Visual Image Network and was initially created to facilitate cross-institutional search for handwritten historical materials, first and foremost letters. Current development plans prioritize the implementation of linked data, largely in order to include Alvin materials in Europeana and facilitate their reuse potential. The platform is used by numerous cultural heritage institutions, almost exclusively within Sweden.

Methods: Looking for lesbian documents

I first examined the interface for Alvin, employing Johanna Drucker’s (2014) approach to human-computer interaction that sees platform design as a kind of argumentation that constructs subjects (rather than users) via structure and navigational options (see especially p. 138–179). In order to understand underlying, unarticulated rules for the platform, I performed multiple searches using broad, middling, and narrow search terms. I focused on the visual structure of results, what categories were included in

² Ethan Kleinberg (2017) uses the metaphor of ghostliness and haunting to discuss the relationship between the past, the present, and historical research and writing.

search options and results and what was left out, and how results were presented. There are no established guidelines for searching for documents by and/or about lesbians, oppression of homosexuality, and queer feelings, a broadly defined overlapping of “intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism” (in the words of Cvetkovich 2003, p. 241) that sits at the heart of Swedish lesbian history, though there are research guides for collections in other countries (see Shopland & Leeworthy 2018, for instance). There are several search strategies that have been applied here in order to develop a way of triangulating between search terms that stretch across feminist and queer history, library and archival description.

Terms were gleaned from Queerlit³ (the Swedish subject list for LGBTQIA+ Terms, based on Homosaurus⁴), KVINNSAM⁵ (the Swedish subject word list for women’s and gender terms), and SAO⁶ (the general Swedish subject word list). I have searched using truncated versions related to the identity group “lesbians” alongside related larger terms: lesb*, HBT*⁷, and queer*. Broader terms related to sexuality were included: sex* and sexualitet*⁸. Finally, I also searched for broader terms like kvinn*⁹, kön*¹⁰, feminis*, and genus*¹¹. This array was designed not just to illustrate underlying patterns but to get at the relationships (if any) between searches for archival material related to feminist and lesbian histories. Given that the platform is available in both English and Swedish, I searched for the English-language versions of these terms, but these searches were not successful.

The various classifications applied to these items were then documented, in order to determine whether these kinds of materials exist in the same kind of documentary context that is represented by the Alvin homepage. The first page of each set of search results was saved and data and metadata information summarizing the results was transferred to a table to identify patterns in the results across search terms (see appendix B). A word cloud with stop words for various institutional functions (library, university library, and the Swedish equivalents) was created to identify centers and peripheries of the search terms promoted by Alvin (see appendix C). I then examined the first few relevant posts for each of these searches in order to determine what kinds of characteristics and definition a document may take within the confines of Alvin.¹²

³ <https://queerlit.dh.gu.se/subjects> (accessed June 27, 2023).

⁴ <https://homosaurus.org/v3> (accessed June 27, 2023).

⁵ <http://www2.ub.gu.se/kvinn/kvinnsam/listor/amnesord.html> (accessed June 27, 2023).

⁶ <https://id.kb.se/find?q=%2a&inScheme.%40id=https%3A%2F%2Fid.kb.se%2Fterm%2Fsao> (accessed June 27, 2023).

⁷ Swedish for LGBT.

⁸ Swedish for sexuality.

⁹ Swedish for woman.

¹⁰ Swedish for sex.

¹¹ Swedish for gender.

¹² Searches were performed on June 30, 2023. As Alvin is constantly expanding, search results may have changed since then. However, general patterns remain consistent.

Results: Serendipity and frustration in Alvin

Alvin as argument

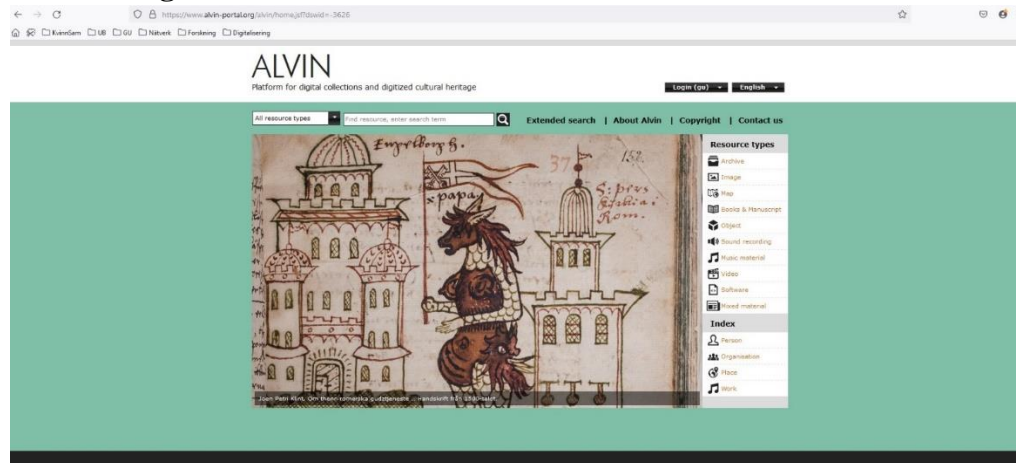


Figure 1: Alvin's homepage

Alvin itself is a platform designed for visual materials—there is a tipoff in the subtitle for the site: “platform for digital collections and digitized cultural heritage” (see Figure 1). This focus is enhanced with the large, most often colorful and text-less, close-up images from digitized items within Alvin that are featured on a loop. The search options that are most visible also underline assumed visuality of materials in Alvin—all ten Resource Type options (Archive, Image, Map, Books & Manuscript, Object, Sound recording, Music material, Video, Software, and Mixed material) and the four Index options (Person, Organization, Place, and Work) are exemplified with a thumbnail illustration.

This visuality is quite misleading, since most of the information in Alvin is text, rather than visual material. There is also an inbuilt individualization of documents through classification—it is not immediately clear whether an “item” can fall within multiple classes of resource type, for instance. In particular, finding aids or any other kinds of collection description do not seem to be at home here—finding aids are not archives but highly structured descriptions of archives. They are not items that fall within the definition of “digital collections” or “digitized cultural heritage” but rather descriptive documents meant to represent collections of physical archival materials. They are also remarkably un-visual in the way that Alvin uses and defines visuality—they are typically long textual documents.

There are other choices that center use, both of which embed a kind of market-driven visually centered understanding of the materials presented via the platform. Information about copyright highlights an assumption that visitors to the platform are interested in using and reusing Alvin's “materials,” and the default categories of copyright are Creative Commons options, in the public domain, and in copyright. None of these options are relevant for archival finding aids, which are reference documents, or archival materials, which often are publicly available in

physical form but are governed by an array of legal restrictions on use that vary within individual archives. Most revealing is the role of quantities. Running the cursor over each of the resource types reveals a number—presumably of items within each category. Here, the “Image” and “Books and Manuscript” categories dominate, with 197,931 and 143,600 “items,” respectively. The next largest category is “Object” with 47,685. The numbers then decline sharply again, to the 4,000s for both “Archive,” “Map,” and “Music material,” before falling again to 1,585 items for “Mixed materials.” Lastly, “Sound recording” and “Video” have 200-some posts, with “Software” coming last at 3. Similarly, unbalanced numbers appear for the Index categories, where “Person” encompasses 84,832 options and the next largest category—“Place”—encompasses 7,914 options. “Organization” has 6,386, while there are only 18 kinds of “Work.”

These structuring principles radically reshape what a “document” signifies within Alvin: primarily an image, text, and/or object that has been digitized. The number of physical materials represented via the “Archive” posts vastly outnumber the “digital” materials published on the platform, but Alvin has embedded assumptions that construct a couple subject categories and eliminate others. Perhaps the primary constructed subject is a member of the general public who is looking for visually compelling digitized documents within the Swedish cultural heritage sector that are by or about particular individuals. The other subject whose searching is prioritized is the researcher, who is used to navigating databases like Alvin, knows what they are looking for, and is familiar with the varying description practices of archival institutions. Thematic, exploratory search is, working from the homepage, a difficult row to hoe.

In search of the “lesbian document”

I have translated the results into numbers of documents within prioritized metadata categories (see Figure 2) in order to emphasize the way in which Alvin understands documents. Results fell into two camps: too many and very few. Some search approaches such as “kön” (sex) returned far too many irrelevant materials to be useful on its own. Despite the platform being built for Swedish cultural heritage, Swedish letters are not recognizable to the search engine. This means that searching for kön* turned up materials about kon (the cow) from a veterinary museum. Similar issues plagued results for sex*, though the results numbers fell substantially to 2,142 – the majority of the results were due to the frequency of “sex” in latin and the fact that “sex” is also the number six in Swedish. With these searches, the best way to find relevant results was to limit search results to KvinnSam, where the collections are defined by and have been developed around these terms.

term	hits	free online	text	archive	object	still image	notated music	map	mixed material	sound recording	software/multimedia	moving image	person	organization	archive institution	country	language
lesb*	13	6	5	4	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	14	3	5	5	12
HBT*	3	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	1	2	1	11
LGB*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
queer*	3	2	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5	0	3	2	2
homo*	209	169	158	9	16	12	2	0	11	0	0	1	20	5	18	18	13
homosex*	14	11	10	3	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	16	0	4	1	5
sex*	214	1787	152	3	66	164	327	44	12	6	0	1	20	20	20	20	20
sexual*	435	395	375	11	1	48	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	8	8	18	9
sexualiter*	3	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	2	0	1
sexueli*	19	16	14	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	17	0	6	4	5
kön*	110	258	154	16	737	151	08	77685	389	57	2	258	16	2	11	20	20
samkönn*	3	3	0	0	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	1	0
kvinn*	205	61	7032	131	36	400	267	6743	2	2	11	1	20	20	20	20	
genus*	747	677	728	7	2	7	2	0	1	0	0	0	20	10	12	20	15
femin*	209	162	173	16	5	14	1	0	1	0	0	0	20	17	11	18	11
feminis*	24	10	6	14	0	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	9	4	2	11

Green: Resource types

Figure 2: Search results numbers for Alvin’s prescribed metadata fields

More identity-based search terms (lesb*, HBT* (LGBT), queer*, homosex*, samkön* (same sex)) predictably produced smaller result groups, related to individuals and groups from the 1900s onwards, when many of these terms were in broader use within society, in part because of identity group formation and political activism around sexuality and sexual oppression, often in response to targeted societal persecution. Because of the way that results are presented, it is often impossible to see whether a resulting post is relevant unless the post is clicked upon and the description expanded—precisely why material has been returned is not immediately evident. Instead, Alvin displays information on the material’s title, author, year(s) of production, repository, resource type, and location. No one is cleaning or standardizing this information, leading to some posts that place the entire description in the title space, which can take over a page of results.¹³

As indicated with the homepage, numbers structure and limit the availability of materials in ways that are not visible unless multiple searches are conducted and search return patterns are analyzed carefully. The most important observation here is that bigness drives visibility. This is somewhat evident on the homepage, as previously described, but the largest search results reveal that the options for refining results in the lefthand menu (see appendix X) is ordered from most to fewest. What an investigation of cross-search results also reveals is that these suggestions are limited to 20 per category, meaning that many named persons, organizations, and other institutions and categories exist within the results but cannot be chosen after an initial search has been conducted.

¹³ An example is https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?dswid=1377&searchType=EXTENDED&query=sex*&aq=%5B%5B%7B%22A_FQ%22%3A%22sex%*%22%7D%5D%5D&aqe=%5B%5D&af=%5B%5D&pid=alvin-record%3A442716&c=45#alvin-record%3A442716 (accessed August 16, 2023).

This is an organizing and display principle that weights all instances of a phrase equally, a blunt and very simple definition of relevance. This ordering process that renders smaller categories invisible may have an impact on the findability of documents on historically oppressed individuals and groups, who often exist at the margins of archives and collections (Caldera 2017). Bigness-driven affordances also mean that canon people and materials creep their way into the queerest corner of search. The searches for homo*, kvinn*, and genus* return the results that prominently feature Carl von Linné, a central figure in Swedish classification and biology but hardly a towering character within LGBTQ+ or feminist history. While any subject can be queered, it is problematic that current search prioritizes materials that (1) can be freely made available on the web, (2) connected to individuals who had the resources to create huge systems of documentation around themselves, (3) and have already been the subject of decades of research.

This numbers game has implications for the implementation of current feminist theory, which distinguishes between and problematizes the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. Hilariously, and confirming instances of metadata misogyny elsewhere (Block 2020), the results for genus* (gender) and femin* (female/feminine) under the category person are all men; in order to find women in the collections, it is necessary to search for the more biologically determined kvinn* (woman/women). It is worth noting here that the returned documents for kvinn* are dominated by materials from KvinnSam, while genus* features archives of gender research, be they centers for research or gender research journals. More worrying is the need to label and publish as much as possible to make visible. Many groups and individuals are wary of donating their materials to and opening their archives, given the sensitivity, and the immediately international reach of documentation on a platform like Alvin worsens this set of fears (Gray White 1987).

This ordering principle may also, if Alvin expands much further, eliminate KvinnSam itself from easy accessibility, even within searches where KvinnSam has highly relevant materials. It is noteworthy that smaller and more resource-strapped institutions may be rendered invisible in these kinds of environments, simply because more data and metadata are immediately translated into more visibility and accessibility. Such infrastructural argumentation makes keeping up with the cultural heritage Joneses an existential problem for smaller institutions, especially in an era when numbers elsewhere—of money brought in, of books cataloged, of patrons serviced—are more directly tied to budgeting decisions. And women's, gender, and queer institutions almost always fall within this category of smaller, already resource-strapped institutions (Withers 2015).

It is also a structuring approach that rewards accidental misuse of the site. The Arboga City Library has not edited down titles for its digitized photographs, meaning that the titles can run several sentences long. The first several pages of search results for sex* were dominated by digitized materials from the Veterinary Museum in Skara and digitized photographs from Arboga, precisely because these posts included more searchable text. This textual and post dominance cannot be gotten around easily. The structure of Alvin enables positive choices while making negative choice (for

example, removing Arboga documents from materials returned) impossible. To find more obscure materials, one must know what one is looking for in order to find it—precisely the same situation researchers found themselves in before the advent of digitalization (Caldera 2013).

Some “lesbian” “documents”?

Examining a few obviously relevant documents reveals a number of built-in definitions of documents within Alvin. In particular, the broader searches tend to return dozens of digitized documents, most of which are at best highly tangential to lesbian history. The materials returned in the narrower searches are far more likely to be relevant—and far more likely to be very brief, thus their invisibility in the broader searches. A post becomes less ghostly and more representative of a defined document the more metadata it has attached to it. This is obviously a problem for materials within a history that is often described as shadowy, where the use of metaphor, signs, and hiddenness itself is not incidental but central (Tortorici 2015).

What definitions of “lesbian” are here? The trauma of homosexual life and identities through history is certainly visible in these results. Indeed, results can be grouped into two main categories – pride and trauma. Notably, these materials are not the kinds of materials that Cvetkovich and Halberstam assume to populate public archives. Indeed, these are all materials that record (a small number of) voices and perspectives of members of the lesbian community over time (mostly the late 1800s through to today), in different circumstances. They range from literary works featuring lesbian main characters¹⁴ to transcripts of oral histories with Holocaust survivors¹⁵ to finding aids for posters from the 1970s lesbian liberation movement¹⁶. The trauma-related documents extend to the finding aid for Social Democrat Sigrid Gillner, which contains writings on homosexuality, tucked away in an archive characterized by Nazi “influences.”¹⁷

The definition of “lesbian” as somehow based in sexuality and/or activism sits underneath description and, thus, returned results as a whole, but these

¹⁴ https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?dswid=-7733&searchType=EXTENDED&query=h%C3%A5rdt+mot+h%C3%A5rdt&aq=%5B%5B%7B%22A_FQ%22%3A%22h%C3%A5rdt+mot+h%C3%A5rdt%22%7D%5D%5D&aq=%5B%5D&af=%5B%5D&pid=alvin-record%3A499325&c=2#alvin-record%3A499325 (accessed August 18, 2023).

¹⁵ https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?dswid=-6048&searchType=EXTENDED&query=homo*&aq=%5B%5B%7B%22A_FQ%22%3A%22homo%*%22%7D%5D%5D&aq=%5B%5D&af=%5B%5D&pid=alvin-record%3A101543&c=28#alvin-record%3A101543 (accessed October 24, 2023).

¹⁶ https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?dswid=-7733&searchType=EXTENDED&query=affischsamling&aq=%5B%5B%7B%22A_FQ%22%3A%22affischsamling%22%7D%5D%5D&aq=%5B%5D&af=%5B%5D&pid=alvin-record%3A511208&c=1#alvin-record%3A511208 (accessed August 18, 2023).

¹⁷ https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?dswid=-7733&searchType=EXTENDED&query=sigrid+gillner&aq=%5B%5B%7B%22A_FQ%22%3A%22sigrid+gillner%22%7D%5D%5D&aq=%5B%5D&af=%5B%5D&pid=alvin-record%3A10990&c=4#alvin-record%3A10990 (accessed August 18, 2023).

definitions are hard to see. This situation is due to Alvin programmers prioritizing certain links and keywords through platform design. The ability to click around in Alvin is severely limited but especially so with documents linked explicitly to lesbian history, which are often under-described compared to other materials in Alvin. Once a “document” (archival finding aid or digitized item) has been chosen, the only routes to other documents are linked names and associated collections, which often trap the user within a small subsection of the archival collections of a single institution. Oddly, subject words are not operationalized, meaning that they cannot be used to make searches more precise or find materials that fall within the same subject area. Documents are, in this world, often dead ends, with no option but to return to the larger search results.

Hit 6 of 12

◀ ◀ 3 4 5 **6** 7 8 9 ▶ ▶
Link to record
◀ Share

Andra vågens kvinnorörelse

 (Archive)

Collector	Schmitz, Eva, 1949-
Extent	9 volymer
Format	Non digital
Archive institution	Göteborgs universitetsbibliotek, KvinnSam
Shelfmark	B 77

Contents

Arbetsmaterial rörande Andra vågens kvinnorörelse Vol. 1: Homosexuella/Lesbiska grupper Vol. 2: Diverse publikationer, sånghäften Vol. 3: Kvinnoligan Lund +? Vol. 4: Kvinngruppen Borlänge Vol. 5: Kvinngruppen Oskarshamn, Sölvesborg, kristianstad Vol. 6: Grupp 8 Stockholm +? Vol. 7: Grupp 8 Inför kongressen, Södertälje, Malmö, 1972? Vol. 8: Grupp 8 Linköping, Uppsala Vol. 9: Mapp med 9 st affischer (Foliantyllorna)

Notes

Materialet använt som underlag för texter till KvinnSams portal Kärlek, makt och systemskap

Contact

[Contact us](#)

Identifiers (general)

urn:nbn:se:alvin:portal:record-115249 (nbn)

Identifiers (local)

572 (local id)
alvin-record:115249 (alvin)

Figure 3: The Second Wave Women’s Movement archive at KvinnSam, which includes a box (Vol. 1) on “Homosexual/Lesbian groups”

The relationship between feminism and lesbian histories is visible, though the stuff of these overlaps is decidedly located in the 1970s forwards. This structure fits with the narratives women’s and gender researchers have constructed (Hemmings 2011), which place the movement for gay liberation at the center of lesbian history and positions lesbianism and lesbian history as a subcategory of women’s and gender history. The “Second wave women’s movement” archive returned with searches for “lesb*” is thus perfectly typical, combining documents from “Homosexual/lesbian

groups” with materials from various local feminist groups (see Figure 3).¹⁸ Historiographical trends do not stop there. The whiteness of the corners of the Archive that are revealed through these navigations within Alvin are revealing. There could be multiple reasons for this issue, but the total separation between documents about Sweden’s indigenous Sami community, materials relating to in-migration, and other “periphery” groups is worth noting.

Contextualizing material in queer and feminist historiographies is key to ensuring the findability of “lesbian” “documents” within Alvin. A comparison of two “lesbian” “documents” is revealing here. The results for both “queer*” and “lesb*” returned materials that have been placed at the center of contemporary Swedish queer historiography—a text by 19th century author and reformer Fredrika Bremer and the “Second Wave Women’s Movement” archive (see Figure 3). The former has been interpreted by scholars. The latter is a list of materials. Research here creates metadata, which increases findability through pliant interpretive description. This structuring reflects rather than challenges longstanding dynamics that push scholars towards the already researched and increases the difficulty levels for finding under-researched materials. Items that exist outside of this neat historiographical structure are under-described, ghostly.

Discussion: Feelings and documents, belonging and archives

Archivists Michael Moss and David Thomas (2021) have written of their concern that “having moved away from the ‘great man’ view of history, we are now being pushed towards a ‘great document’ view of history” (p. 14). This is a reasonable worry, and feminist historians in particular are keenly attuned to the dangers of a potential “new era of ultra-empiricism” that digitization and the rise of the digital humanities have encouraged if not initiated (Hunter 2017, p. 204). But it is important to highlight that the definition of “document” as “metadata-filled post” in digital contexts is problematic in itself, as many documents can be signified by a single post. Greater findability for digitized items from archives (as opposed to their description in finding aids) encourages an individualization of archival materials that results in decontextualization given the enormous resources required to individually describe archival documents. Further, as this study demonstrates, the great document view of history is the great man view of history to a large degree, and it is being built into the argumentation of platforms that provide access to archival collections.

The promotion of a particular kind of bigness is key here, and not just in the geographical Global North and South terms employed by Moss and Thomas. An emphasis on quantities of documents (default digitized items) and easily produced metadata privileges certain kinds of descriptive information, a tendency visible in Alvin’s emphasis on names (of people, organizations, and institutions), numbers (years), and locations. This situation very likely influences digitization decisions,

¹⁸ https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?dswid=-652&searchType=EXTENDED&query=andra+v%C3%A5gens&aq=%5B%5B%7B%22A_FQ%22%3A%22andra+v%C3%A5gens%22%7D%5D%5D&aqe=%5B%5D&af=%5B%5D&pid=alvin-record%3A115249&c=1#alvin-record%3A115249 (accessed August 28, 2023).

resulting in even less access to under-described and less well-researched documents, archives, and collections. Simultaneously and somewhat ironically, the descriptions of archives themselves are less findable, largely due to their frequent under-description and reliance on standardized language and formatting, as well as their definition as representative of one document rather than many thousands of documents.

For lesbian and feminist archiving and researcher communities, the dangers inherent in this are obvious. Catherine Bishop (2016) notes that digitized document collections “lend themselves to dealing with the public rather than the private lives of individuals” (p. 7–8). This tendency reduces the number and findability of female-coded documents, which archives and women themselves have often understood and described in terms of the private, even the erotic (see Rich 2003, p. 53). What she and other scholars miss is the role of platform design that is built for and focuses on certain kinds of documents (which are stand-ins for information and interpretation) while making other kinds of documents less findable, even if they exist. This approach, which positions the searcher as simply needing to find the right phrasing or search route, makes research across terminologies and through metaphor and allusion impossible.

Networks are a central component of many digital platforms and databases, and Alvin is no exception here. Relationships between individuals and connections between individuals and organizations are elaborated, even if Alvin does not center this functionality. Here, there is opportunity for queering the nature of relationships, friendships, and networks. There is information about same-sex “life partners”—where Rich sees “*nascent* feminist political content” (Rich p. 36)—a phenomenon that threads through the KvinnSam collections and provides access to the alternatives to “compulsory heterosexuality” within the historical record. Similar, complicated friendship networks and webs of communication undergird feminist movements; work across the personal-political divide is central to community-building (Jolly 2008). This approach avoids the dangers of labeling individuals who may not have called themselves lesbians or feminists, while also pointing to a historical trend of women living with and relying on other women for emotional, financial, political, and social reasons. This is also an approach that decentralizes the importance of individual archival documents or Alvin-posts in favor of visualizing connection—between individuals, groups, and the archival materials that they have created over time.

But what is an archive in this milieu? This is a well-trod question, and the rise of digital and digitized archives has only heightened this definitional debate (Dekker 2017). Within Alvin, an “archive” is digitized representation of a document that represents a physical archive, defined by its creator (provenance). This definition needs reimagining. Rich’s observation that partnerships and networks undergird the politics and lived experience of lesbianism has meaning for archival structuring and accessibility of archived instances of this broadly defined lesbian history. As Maryanne Dever (2014) notes, such histories render traditional archiving distinctions between personal papers and organizational archives moot (p. 29). Certainly, the relationships between archival institutions do not matter here. Yet overlaps are concealed via

available search routes for lesbian histories in Alvin. Feminist strategies for elaborating archival provenance multiplicity (Lapp 2023) might be combined with the possibility of multiple authorship within Alvin. More options for peopling archival finding aids and establishing various kinds of relationships between archival collections, beyond the current “See also” and hierarchical “Part of” options, would be of use. What digital/digitized archival finding aids might be is a set of remixable digital entryways into the archives—the vast, incomplete, evolving patchwork of documents upon which we base studies of the past.

Research practices based in triangulating between various kinds of sources (across formats, historical and archival contexts, and author/audience configurations) with an eye to what is not there, what has not been documented—these research methods are simply not supported within the archival search and presentation structures of Alvin (and other digital platforms and databases for archival materials). Platforms for archival documents and collections need to develop methods for making visible heterogeneity, connection, and incompleteness as both practice and digital “product” in order to represent non-static materials and concepts. In its emphasis on counting “documents” and imposition of a set of chosen metadata categories on diverse materials and description approaches, Alvin boxes in and further isolates materials from one another. This kind of platform design purposely makes it difficult to see the edges, contours, geography, and constant incompleteness of a digital Archive that has been created via design and search functionality.

In the end, the debate (rather than answers) about how to find queer histories must be part of the conversation about platform design. Gayatri Spivak (1999) long ago cautioned researchers against reading archived materials as evidence or signs of an objective, concrete past. Further, the search and struggle with archival materials should not be straightforward; the closet has epistemological meanings that researchers and activists alike are still sorting out, and the journey to relevant documents has meaning (Stone & Cantrell 2015). But so too with many other kinds of history that are easier to “find” in the Archive. Sven Speiker’s (2008) observes that “Archives do not record experience so much as its absence; they mark the point where an experience is missing from its proper place, and what is returned to us in an archive may well be something we never possessed in the first place” (p. 3). This attention to absence and not-documents, archival ghosts, is critical to the writing of feminist and queer histories; this is a point that has been stated and re-stated for decades (Hunter 2017). It is this approach that is actively resisted by platforms like Alvin, where what is there is designed to be presented in a way that overwhelms the seeker and what is not there is hard to pin down. This is by design.

Conclusion

Johanna Drucker (2014) argues for a humanistic approach to digital infrastructure design that problematizes the meaning-making of platform design. This paper has been an attempt to begin this problematizing in a Swedish context. While the article has looked at search and platform design with sex, gender, and sexuality in mind, it would be worthwhile to examine the issue of race and ethnicity more closely. But more

pointedly, given all of the chatter about digital archives, it is worth asking—has digitization really improved access, or are its practitioners simply reshaping and perhaps worsening hierarchies of access? The answer likely depends on where you look and what you are looking for. But a suspicion here is that the overinflated language of widespread accessibility is altering research practices. Researchers no longer believe that they will need to devote a great deal of time to finding relevant materials for their study—they should be able to find everything of relevance via a small number of databases. In this sense, the most problematic aspect of Alvin is its emphasis on bigness outside of context. The question of how to create flexible, pedagogical context for digital and digitized archives and archival materials is still unanswered.

References

- ArkAD sammanfattning (summary). (2012). KvinnSams local files.
- Arondekar, Anjali. (2005). Without a Trace: Sexuality and the Colonial Archive. *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 14, no. 1/2: 10-27.
- Bastian, Jeanette A. and Andrew Flinn, ed. (2020). *Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, Memory and Identity*. London, Facet Publishing.
- Bishop, Catherine. (2017). The Serendipity of Connectivity: Piecing Together Women's Lives in the Digital Archive. *Women's History Review* 25. DOI: 10.1080/09612025.2016.1166883.
- Block, Sharon. (2020). Erasure, Misrepresentation and Confusion: Investigating JSTOR Topics on Women's and Race Histories. *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 14, no. 1. Available at <http://digitalhumanities.org:8081/dhq/vol/14/1/000448/000448.html> (accessed 16 Aug 2023).
- Briet, Suzanne. (2006). *What Is Documentation?* Trans. Ronald E. Day and Larent Martinet with Hermina G. B. Anghelescu. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press. Original work published 1951. Available at <https://ella.sice.indiana.edu/~roday/what%20is%20documentation.pdf> (accessed 19 Apr 2023).
- Caldera, Mary A. (2017). The Lesbian in the Archives: An Overview of the History, Themes, and Challenges. In: *Perspectives on Women's Archives*, ed. Tanya Zanish-Belcher and Anke Voss, p. 215-245. Chicago, IL: ALA Editions.
- Cvetkovich, Ann. (2003). *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Durham University Press.
- Dekker, Annet. (2017). Introduction: What It Means to Be Lost and Living (in) Archives. In: *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, ed. Annet Dekker. Amsterdam: Pia Pol, Valiz.
- Dever, Maryanne. (2014). Archiving Feminism: Papers, Politics, Posterity. *Archivaria* 77: 25–42.

- Drabinski, Emily. (2013). Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction. *Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 83(2): 94-111. DOI: 0024-2519/2013/8302-0002\$10.00
- Drucker, Joanna. (2014). *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Edenheim, Sara. (2014). Lost and Never Found: The Queer Archive of Feelings and Its Historical Propriety. *Differences* 24, n. 3: 36-62. DOI: 10.1215/10407391-2391950
- Gray White, Deborah. (1987). Mining the Forgotten: Manuscript Sources for Black Women's History. *The Journal of American History* 74, n. 1: 237-242.
- Hemmings, Claire. (2011). *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hunter, Katheryn M. (2017). Silence in Noisy Archives: Reflections on Judith Allen's "Evidence and Silence – Feminism and the Limits of History" (1086) in the Era of Mass Digitisation. *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 91-92: 202-212. DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2017.1357009
- Jolly, Margaretta. (2008). *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kleinberg, Ethan. (2017). *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lapp, Jessica. (2023). "The Only Way We Know How:" Provenancial Fabulation in Archives of Feminist Materials. *Archival Science* 2, n. 1: 117-136. DOI: 10.1007/s10502-021-09376-x
- Lee, Jamie Ann. (2017). A Queer/ed Archival Methodology: Archival Bodies as Nomadic Subjects. In *Critical Archival Studies*, eds. Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan, and T-Kay Sangwand. Special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1(2). DOI: 10.24242/jclis.v1i2.26.
- Moss, Michael, & Thomas, David. (2021). *Archival Silences: Missing, Lost and, Uncreated Archives*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Nestle, Joan. (1998). "The Will to Remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York." *Journal of Homosexuality* 34(3-4): 225-35.
- Rich, Adrienne. (2003). Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence. *Journal of Women's History* 15(3): p. 11-48.
- Ruberg, Bonnie, Boyd, Jason and Howe, James. (2018). Toward a Queer Digital Humanities. *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities*, ed. Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press.

- Rubin, Gayle. (2011). *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Schwartz, Michelle and Constance Crompton. (2018). Remaking History: Lesbian Feminist Historical Methods in the Digital Humanities. In: *Bodies of Information: Intersectional Feminism and Digital Humanities*, ed. Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont, p. 131-156. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shopland, Norena and Leeworth, Daryl. (2018). *Queering Glamorgan: A Research Guide to Sources for the Study of LGBT History*. Glamorgan Archives.
- Speiker, Sven. (2008). *The Big Archive. Art from Bureaucracy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Spivak, Gayatri. (1999). *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Stone, Amy L. and Jaime Cantrell. (2015). *Out of the Closet, into the Archives*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Tortorici, Zeb. (2015). Archival Seduction: Indexical Absences and Historiographical Ghosts', *Archival Journal*, <http://www.archivejournal.net/essays/archival-seduction/> (accessed June 6, 2023).
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. (2015). *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Wallach Scott, Joan. (2011). *The Fantasy of Feminist History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Withers, Deborah. (2015). *Feminism, Digital Culture and the Politics of Transmission: Theory, Practice and Cultural Heritage*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wright, Kirsten. (2019). Archival Interventions and the Language We Use. *Archival Science* 19, n. 4: 331-348. DOI: 10.1007/s10502-019-09306-y