

Preserving Transgender History in its Own Right: A Case Study of the Trans Equality Archive

Thomas J Billard

is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication and, by courtesy, the Department of Sociology at Northwestern University. They are the founder and Executive Director of the Center for Applied Transgender Studies and Editor-in-Chief of the *Bulletin of Applied Transgender Studies*. Dr Billard is the author of *Voices for Transgender Equality: Making Change in the Networked Public Sphere* (Oxford University Press, 2024).

✉ billard@northwestern.edu

As transgender people have become more salient in American society, there has been a commensurate increase in interest in transgender history. However, archival collections currently have weak holdings in transgender history and materials pertaining to the history of the transgender movement remain under-collected. This brief report examines the Trans Equality Archive, a new archive of primary and secondary materials pertaining to transgender political history at the National Center for Transgender Equality in Washington, DC. Challenges pertaining to scope, born-digital records, and organizational priorities are considered as they relate to the preservation of neglected transgender histories.

KEYWORDS archives; National Center for Transgender Equality; Trans Equality Archive; transgender history; transgender rights

DOI [10.57814/956r-p303](https://doi.org/10.57814/956r-p303)

LICENSE Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives ([by-nc-nd](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/))

In her post to the National Center for Transgender Equality's (NCTE) *Medium* page on January 6, 2018, Executive Director Mara Keisling reflected on the impressive array of accomplishments the organization had achieved in the fifteen years since its inception. These achievements, alongside those of other transgender activists and organizations, have altered the course of transgender history and advanced the political status of transgender people in the United States. As Keisling recounted in the article, "a Pennsylvania state senator [once] told me that I should be pleased to meet with him, because five years earlier he wouldn't have even let me in his office" (Keisling 2018). Now, roughly 20 years later, transgender Americans have a seat at the table, whether in the DC congressional offices of their representatives, as representatives in their own right on city councils and school boards across the country, or as legislators in the Colorado, Delaware, New Hampshire, and Virginia General Assemblies. In many

ways, these changes are directly traceable to the important work done by the relatively young transgender movement. However, in both popular discourse and academic research, these changes are often celebrated as the achievements of an expansive “LGBT” movement, even though the L, G, and B portions of that acronym had little to do with them—and often did much to hinder them (see, for a basic introduction, Billard and Gross 2020; Devor and Matte 2006; Murib 2015; Stryker 2008; Vitulli 2010).

Despite the historic nature of the transgender movement’s many achievements, documentation of those achievements has struggled to find its way into historical archives. But perhaps this should not surprise us. There is an overall underrepresentation of transgender history in historical archives, and what little transgender material has been collected has generally been acquired as a niche subgenre of “LGBT” history (Rawson 2015; Wagner Webster 2016; Wakimoto, Hansen, and Bruce 2013). This is a problem in both the archival literature, which regards the collection of transgender materials as necessary for the diversification of sexual histories (rather than the development of transgender-specific histories; e.g., Stone and Cantrell 2015), and in LGBT archives themselves, which generally have strong holdings about white cis gay men and, to a lesser extent, cis lesbians, but in which holdings about transgender people are scarcer and of secondary concern (Vecoli 2015). In both cases, there is a clear “secondary marginalization” (Cohen 1999) of transgender history occurring.

This approach to the archiving of transgender history has two main consequences. First, this approach encourages a focus on particular kinds of historical materials that produce a distinct vision of “transgender” as derivative of gay and lesbian identity. That is to say, when “LGBT” is the central collection parameter for transgender history, the materials collected are limited to those in which transness relates explicitly and exclusively to queer sexuality. Transgender-specific archives, in contrast, produce a distinct vision of “transgender” as autonomous and independent. In the words of trans archival theorist K. J. Rawson, “as the central collection parameter, ‘transgender’ becomes legitimated as an identity through the rich historical lineage that the archive evidences” (Rawson 2014, 25).

Second, and relatedly, archiving transgender history as LGBT history encourages the production of certain misguided historical narratives—especially about the origins and development of the transgender movement. Two recent histories of the transgender movement evidence this perfectly: those by Anthony Nownes (2019) and by Jami Taylor, Daniel Lewis, and Donald Haider-Markel (2018). Though they arrive at fundamentally different arguments about the history of the movement, both position the emergence and evolution of the transgender movement *vis-à-vis* the gay and lesbian movement. Per Nownes’ (2019) narration, the transgender movement emerged as independent only in recent years as transgender activists “spun off” from the LGBT movement they previously participated in. Per Taylor and colleagues’ (2018) alternate version, transgender individuals and issues were slowly incorporated into the existing LGB movement structure over a number of decades, only recently becoming fully subsumed into a singular LGBT movement. However, neither version of this history accurately characterizes the independent origins and development of the transgender movement (see Aultman 2021; Billard forthcoming; Stryker 2017), and both are an obvious byproduct of the tendency to archive transgender history as LGBT history; this is the story that LGBT archival materials tell.

The Trans Equality Archive was incepted to intervene into this state of affairs by systematically collecting previously inaccessible materials documenting the historical activities of the US transgender movement. Beyond preserving these materials for members of the transgender community so that they might discover a fuller and richer history of their predecessors and the work that went into shaping the cultural and political environment for transgender people, the Archive fits into a broader, cross-disciplinary push in the academy to understand transgender issues and identities on their own terms, rather than in the context of the LGBTQ “umbrella” (Adair, Awkward-Rich, and Marvin 2020; Billard et al. 2020; Keegan 2020; Stryker 2020). Against this backdrop, this brief report narrates the founding and development of the Trans Equality Archive, discussing both the opportunities and the challenges of preserving transgender history in its own right.

THE CASE: THE TRANS EQUALITY ARCHIVE AT THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR TRANSGENDER EQUALITY

The Trans Equality Archive was established at the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) in Washington, DC over the course of 2018. NCTE is “the dean of transgender rights organizations” (Nownes 2019, 40), which is to say it is the largest and most influential transgender advocacy organization in the US, and the only one to operate at a truly national level.¹ I first began working with NCTE in May 2017 as a Consortium on Media Policy Studies Fellow. In that role, I worked closely with the Communications and Outreach & Education teams, which together coordinate all of NCTE’s communicative activities. As a trans scholar of media and social movements, I used this Fellowship term as an initial foray into ethnographic fieldwork in the transgender movement. Yet, while my primary research focus was the contemporary media practices of the movement (see Billard 2019, 2021, 2022, 2024), it quickly became evident through my conversations with staff, with NCTE’s coalition partners, and with media outlets interested in the transgender movement that some of the most significant empirical gaps in understanding of the movement were *historical*. Even among those who were currently working in the movement, there was little awareness of how the movement came to be and little acknowledgement of the organizations and individuals who had achieved much of the movement’s successes, but who had done so without public visibility. It became clear to me, as it had been to NCTE’s executive leadership, that unless someone preserved primary documentation of this history soon, it would be lost to the sands of time.

Before I departed from my first round of fieldwork at NCTE in August 2017, the organization’s Deputy Director Lisa Mottet and I discussed under what auspices I

1 Technically, NCTE is one of three transgender rights organizations that operates nationally un the US as of the time of writing. The other two are the Transgender Law Center (TLC) in Oakland, California and the Transgender Legal Defense and Education Fund (TLDEF) in New York City. However, both organizations differ from NCTE in focus; TLC and TLDEF both focus primarily on litigation, rather than advocacy, and TLC focuses heavily on California politics, though it operates outside the state occasionally. Moreover, neither TLC nor TLDEF has as extensive connections to broader civil rights movements or as robust public programs as NCTE.

might return for a second, longer-term round of fieldwork to inform my ongoing book project. Given our shared concern about the preservation of the movement's history, Mottet suggested one auspice could be the creation of an historical archive at NCTE. As she said, the organization had myriad uncatalogued documents sitting in boxes both in the office and in present and former staff member's homes, which she feared may become lost or ruined. She also expressed interest in collecting oral histories from some of the organization's departed founders and key staff before their memories faded or they passed away. Though the development of an historical archive was somewhat outside my domain of expertise and would require me to develop new skills, it was an important project for the organization (and the movement), and one NCTE's staff lacked both the capacity and the skill set to do. Per Mottet's suggestion, I prepared a formal proposal for such an archive, which was approved by NCTE's leadership.

I returned to NCTE in June 2018 with a charge to draft the founding documents for what would become the Trans Equality Archive, including a statement of mission and mandate, an admissions policy, an access policy, and short- and long-term staffing plans. Additionally, I was tasked with researching which institutions NCTE may eventually choose to house the Archive with. Over the seven months from June to December 2018, in parallel to my ethnographic research, I completed these tasks and undertook the collection and organization of materials for the Archive.

The first challenge I encountered in my tasks related to the scope of the Archive. The Trans Equality Archive was, fundamentally, a business archive (albeit of a non-profit corporation, rather than a for-profit one). As a business archive, it needed to include materials that would document the origins and development of the organization, immortalize the organization's greatest achievements, and provide insight and inspiration to future employees and leaders. It also, of course, needed to serve as a repository to which future employees could turn when preparing promotional materials, funding appeals, annual reports, and so on. In short, as a business archive, it needed to support a range of *business functions* (see Hull and Scott 2020). At the same time, the Trans Equality Archive was an archive of a movement—or at least the national policy wing of a movement. As such, it needed to include materials that would document events and activities (both within *and outside* of the organization's direct work) that were of broad significance to the political history of the transgender community. These various materials included working documents from coalition partners, conference programs, press clippings, and drafts of policy proposals—materials that would evidence the work of a broad network of actors involved in making transgender history. The competing demands of a business archive and a movement archive affected every decision regarding the Trans Equality Archive, from who I solicited materials from to which individual records were admitted into collections. The ultimate strategy developed to balance these demands was (1) to collect materials both in the core collection, which focused on organizational history, and in auxiliary collections, which included materials not created by the organization and its agents, and (2) to exclusively focus auxiliary collections on NCTE's coalition partners and the organizations that directly preceded them. For example, when the personal papers of NCTE's founders were collected, I retained documents from their earlier activism, such as those from the National Transgender Advocacy Coalition, which had been founded in 1999 as a loose network of local transgender organizations that shared information and coordinated

advocacy strategies. While these decisions limited the scope of the archive significantly by excluding materials documenting important histories outside of NCTE's sphere of influence, they balanced the need to serve NCTE's corporate interests with the aim of situating NCTE's work in within a larger national movement, all while maintaining a reasonable scope of work.

Oral history interviews were another means of situating NCTE's work within the wider movement and documenting the work that occurred outside of the organization. Additionally, these interviews complemented archival materials by filling in gaps in what there was documentation of (Fogerty 1983) and by providing narrative orientation to the significance of the collected materials (Saretzky 1981). In some ways, oral history was more feasible for the Archive's aims than it might have been in some other contexts because of the relatively young age of the transgender movement; many of the most significant figures in the establishment of the national policy wing of the movement are still alive and with good memory. For example, I was able to interview Donna Cartwright, who was a founding board member of NCTE, but also a board member of the organization GenderPAC that preceded it, and a veteran activist in the labor movement who did much to advance the inclusion of trans people in labor activism. I was also able to interview Masen Davis, who founded FTM Alliance in Los Angeles in the late 1990s; Shannon Minter, who co-founded the Transgender Law and Policy Institute in 2002; and Diego Sanchez, who was a prominent figure in the Democratic Party starting in the early 2000s and central to making transgender rights part of the Democratic platform. Each of these interviews documented histories that preceded NCTE, while still situating NCTE's place in the historical narratives they told. Additionally, oral history interviews were able to collect both the experiences of key staff in the organization's history (such as the organization's first Managing Director) and external figures who could speak to the organization's public standing and wider impact (such as President Barack Obama's liaison to the LGBT community, who worked closely with NCTE). These interviews provided insights that could hardly be gleaned from archival materials, but that are crucial to the history the Archive aims to document.

On a more practical level, the oral history interviews collected for the Trans Equality Archive helped identify relevant parameters for the collection of digital materials. As a relatively young organization, founded in 2003, most of NCTE's records were created and stored digitally. Archivists have discussed at length the challenges of preserving "born-digital" records (Neal 2015) and fears over an eventual "digital dark age" as current information technologies are rendered obsolete, and the materials stored on them are lost (Kuny 1997). Both issues were particularly salient at NCTE, as the sheer volume of digital records made full archiving impossible, but most of the relevant history was contained in these records. In fact, large portions of NCTE's records from their first few years had already been lost in a data migration by 2017—a problem I spent months fruitlessly trying to address. Thus, I engaged in an iterative process of moving between oral history interviews and digital materials, as interviews surfaced specific events and projects that were high priority to pull records like email correspondence and project files from and as collected materials inspired new interview questions about events and projects for which there was little documentation.

Finally, perhaps the largest challenge I encountered in my tasks was the prioritization given to the archive project within the organization. While staff and leadership

were eager to see the project completed and were generally supportive of my needs where it concerned the project, the Archive was always the first sacrifice to be made when time and attention were at issue. As was often repeated around the office, there are two timelines at NCTE: “immediately” and “eventually.” The Archive very rarely warranted “immediately,” and so it was relegated to “eventually.” This is, of course, a general issue when working in advocacy, as opposed to profitable businesses; businesses can spare the time and resources for “vanity” projects like an archive, while advocacy organizations have important public missions to fulfil on shoestring budgets. And at NCTE specifically, this state of affairs was heightened. In the face of the Trump administration, which was particularly hostile to the trans community, and which assaulted trans rights regularly and without warning, NCTE was constantly trying to put out unexpected fires (Billard 2021, 2024). These fights needed to be given priority, and they were. Thus, much of the work of the Archive for which I needed staff support was not completed until my final weeks at the organization, as my pending departure shifted the project from the “eventually” category to the “immediately” category. While the Archive was ultimately successful and its collections are solid, it is hard to imagine that they might not be more robust if staff participation was greater over the full course of the project.

DISCUSSION

The Trans Equality Archive at the National Center for Transgender Equality in Washington, DC is a one-of-a-kind archive documenting the rich history of the national policy wing of the US transgender movement. Crucially, it is an archive that documents transgender history in its own right, rather than as a subsidiary concern of LGBT history, which will significantly affect how historians (re)construct our understanding of the history of the movement (e.g., Billard forthcoming). All of the materials included in the Archive were previously inaccessible to historians and the general public, and its original oral history interviews preserve the insights and perspectives of some of the modern transgender movement’s founding figures. However, despite the relative merits of the Trans Equality Archive, a number of key issues remain unresolved at this time and will need to be addressed with future work.

The major unresolved issue at this time is the accessibility of the Archive. During my time at NCTE, I spoke with archivists at four candidate institutions with relatively strong holdings in transgender studies: the Special Collections Research Center at the University of Michigan; the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies at the University of Minnesota; the ONE Archives at the University of Southern California; and the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria. On the basis of these conversations, I narrowed down my recommendations to the Tretter Collection and the ONE Archives, and I presented NCTE leadership with a memo outlining the relative benefits and limitations of both choices. When I left NCTE in December 2018, the archived materials were still being stored in the organization’s offices until a final home for the Archive was selected. The following year, NCTE’s Executive Director Mara Keisling visited me in Los Angeles and toured the ONE Archives, but still no decision came. In the intervening time, Mara has retired from NCTE and been replaced as Executive Director. The new Executive Director, Rodrigo

Heng-Lehtinen, has not responded to inquiries about the status of a decision on the Archive's ultimate home—likely because of the volume of other matters that require his immediate attention. Thus, at present the Archive's materials are accessible only to the organization's staff.

A second issue of accessibility remains, which is much stickier. That issue is how to balance NCTE's desire to preserve and make public documentation of their history and their need to keep matters of advocacy strategy confidential while facing political opponents who seek the elimination of the community they advocate for. While this issue is addressed to a certain degree in the Archive's access policy, which details restrictions on access to certain materials, the concern that opponents may find strategic weaknesses to exploit in the historical record is never eliminated.

Finally, the Trans Equality Archive has one major objective for the future that remains uncertain: expanding the scope and value of the Archive by including materials from the other national organizations in the transgender movement. Shortly after I left NCTE, Mara secured verbal agreements from the leaders of the Transgender Law Center and the Transgender Legal Defense & Education Fund, among others, to jointly archive their organization's records with NCTE's. However, no progress has yet been made on this front due to the organizational resources that need to be dedicated to the archiving process. Given the high immediate demands on these organizations' resources as they pursue the work of the movement, pushing the archiving project forward remains a major challenge for preserving transgender history.

REFERENCES

- Adair, Cassius, Cameron Awkward-Rich, and Amy Marvin. 2020. "Before Trans Studies." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7 (3): 306–20. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8552922>.
- B. Lee Aultman. 2021. "The Rise of Transgender Social Movements: Narrative Symbolism and History." In *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, edited by William R. Thompson. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1322>.
- Billard, Thomas J. 2019. "Out of the Tower and Into the Field: Fieldwork as Public Scholarship in the Face of Social Injustice." *International Journal of Communication* 13: 3512–3528.
- Billard, Thomas J. 2021. "Movement–Media Relations in the Hybrid Media System: A Case Study from the US Transgender Rights Movement." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26 (2): 341–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161220968525>.
- Billard, Thomas J. 2022. "Deciding What's (Sharable) News: Social Movement Organizations as Curating Actors in the Political Information System." *Communication Monographs* 89 (3): 354–375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637751.2021.1999998>.
- Billard, Thomas J. 2024. *Voices for Transgender Equality: Making Change in the Networked Public Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Billard, Thomas J. "The Origins and Development of the National Transgender Rights Movement in the United States of America." *Journal of Social History*, forthcoming.
- Billard, Thomas J, Traci B. Abbott, Oliver L. Haimson, Kelsey N. Whipple, Stephenson

- Brooks Whitestone, and Eriqre Zhang. 2020. "Rethinking (and Retheorizing) Transgender Media Representation: A Roundtable Discussion." *International Journal of Communication* 14: 4494–507.
- Billard, Thomas J, and Larry Gross. 2020. "LGBTQ Politics in Media and Culture." In *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, edited by William R. Thompson. New York: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.1263>.
- Cohen, Cathy J. 1999. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Devor, Aaron H., and Nicholas Matte. 2006. "ONE Inc. and Reed Erickson: The Uneasy Collaboration of Gay and Trans Activism, 1964–2003." In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, edited by Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle. New York: Routledge.
- Fogerty, James. 1983. "Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives." *The American Archivist* 46 (2): 148–57.
- Hull, Andrew, and Peter Scott. 2020. "The 'Value' of Business Archives: Assessing the Academic Importance of Corporate Archival Collections." *Management & Organizational History* 15 (1): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449359.2020.1769676>.
- Keegan, Cael. 2020. "Against Queer Theory." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7 (3): 349–53. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8552978>.
- Keisling, Mara. 2018. "Celebrating 15 Years." *Medium*, January 6, 2018. <https://medium.com/transequalitynow/celebrating-15-years-d98b9278c434>.
- Kuny, Terry. 1997. "A Digital Dark Ages? Challenges in the Preservation of Electronic Information." Paper presented at the 63rd International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions General Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark, September 4, 1997. <http://archive.ifla.org/IV/ifla63/63kuny1.pdf>.
- Murib, Zein. 2015. "Transgender: Examining an Emerging Political Identity Using Three Political Processes." *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 3 (3): 381–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2015.1048257>.
- Neal, James G. 2015. "Preserving the Born-Digital Record." *American Libraries* 46: 30–33.
- Nownes, Anthony. 2019. *Organizing for Transgender Rights: Collective Action, Group Development, and the Rise of a New Social Movement*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Rawson, K. J. 2014. "Archive." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (1–2): 24–26. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2399488>.
- Rawson, K. J. 2015. "An Inevitably Political Craft." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2 (4): 544–52. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3151475>.
- Saretzky, Gary D. 1981. "Oral History in American Business Archives." *The American Archivist* 44 (4): 353–55.
- Stone, Amy L., and Jaime Cantrell, eds. 2015. *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Stryker, Susan. 2008. "Transgender History, Homonormativity, and Disciplinarity." *Radical History Review* 100: 144–57.
- Stryker, Susan. 2017. *Transgender History*. 2nd ed. New York: Seal Press.
- Stryker, Susan. 2020. "Institutionalizing Trans* Studies at the University of Arizona." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 7 (3): 354–66. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8552978>.

- [org/10.1215/23289252-8552992](https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-8552992).
- Taylor, Jami K., Daniel Lewis, and Donald Haider-Markel. 2018. *The Remarkable Rise of Transgender Rights*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Vecoli, Lisa. 2015. "The Tretter Collection: What We Have, What's Missing, and the Challenges of Trans History." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2 (4): 607–13. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-3151529>.
- Vitulli, Elias. 2010. "A Defining Moment in Civil Rights History? The Employment Non-Discrimination Act, Trans-inclusion, and Homonormativity." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 7 (3): 155–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-010-0015-0>.
- Wagner Webster, Jennifer. 2016. "Filling the Gaps': Oral Histories and Underdocumented Populations in *The American Archivist*, 1938–2011." *The American Archivist* 79 (2): 254–82. <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081-79.2.254>.
- Wakimoto, Diana, Debra Hansen, and Christine Bruce. 2013. "The Case of LLACE: Challenges, Triumphs, and Lessons of a Community Archives." *The American Archivist* 76 (2): 438–57. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.76.2.kqv813v23vl24741>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Mara Keisling and Lisa Mottet of the National Center for Transgender Equality for entrusting them with the development of the Trans Equality Archive. The author would also like to thank everyone who donated materials to the archive, including oral history testimonies. The research described in this brief report was generously supported by a fellowship from the Consortium on Media Policy Studies and by the Annenberg Endowed Fellowship from the University of Southern California.