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Archival Stealth: Social Reproduction and Privacy in Trans Archives

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Library and Information Science

by

Lorel Easterbrooks

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Archival Stealth: Social Reproduction and Privacy in Trans Archives

by

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Master of Library and Information Science
University of California, Los Angeles, 2026
Anne Gilliland, Chair

Trans archives actively contribute to the reproduction of trans life and the enduring processes of gender transition. In this thesis, I argue that trans archives should be understood as critical components of the social reproduction of trans life. I do so by analyzing the communal social effects of archival repositories including the Digital Transgender Archive, the NYC Trans Oral History Project, and the artist Tourmaline's archival work to preserve the legacy of the iconic political organizer and sex worker Marsha P. Johnson. My analysis employs a transgender Marxist framework and draws heavily on existing scholarship in the fields of archival studies, trans and queer history, transgender studies, and trans political theory, while weaving writing on my personal experiences throughout in order to drive home some of the ways that these issues can manifest concretely in the lives of trans people. At the same time as I build a case for the socially reproductive function of trans archives, I also acknowledge the necessity of limited or modified visibility in trans archives to preserve privacy and safety for trans people. Archives may help preserve trans history and provide those who need it most with access to their collective trans pasts, but freely accessible digital archives like the

ones that I address also produce a heightened state of visibility for the trans people that they document, especially if those records are made freely accessible online. Running counter to more optimistic popular celebrations of trans visibility—from archives to mass media—as a political victory and a desirable end in itself, we must recognize the paradoxical intertwining of visibility and threat—cure and poison—that proliferates in all kinds of trans visibility. As transphobic threats continue to escalate, the strategic anonymity, privacy, and safety of the transgender people that these archives serve must structure their approaches to archival access alongside and in tension with a politics of visibility. Digital archives like the DTA and the NYCTOHP provide helpful examples of how trans community archives are grappling with these issues here and now through their privacy policies, missions, and collecting methodologies. In a particularly effective example, the NYCTOHP explicitly addresses the oppressions faced by most trans people and calls trans people into its project by recognizing their struggle in the records that it aims to produce of their lives. This sets realistic stakes for the privacy and safety of trans people with whom they are in community. While institutional attempts at relative neutrality are standard practice, the adoption of the NYCTOHP's solidaristic commitment to highly political trans struggles in other trans archival contexts may help to more effectively hone practices of privacy and harm reduction for trans people. These concerns should have concrete effects on institutional archival policy, but I also argue that the bulk of the labor that goes into protecting trans privacy and safety from omnipresent threats remains extra-institutional, that is, beyond the formal bounds of archives.

The dissertation of Lorel Easterbrooks is approved.

Michelle Caswell

Miriam Posner

Anne Gilliland, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2026

DEDICATION

For Palm and everyone.

Thank you Dana, Anne, Michelle, and Miriam.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender transition is a labor of communal love. It is hard to quantify the benefits of immiserating yourself by transitioning in many ways if your investment in transition is purely personal edification. Through transition, you expose yourself to a host of new threats, diminish your life expectancy, and initiate commonplace forms of social ostracization that may now be found in many places where it was once easier to just get along as you were before. But you don't have to do it alone. In fact, you are never truly alone in transition. As a scholar and as a trans woman, I understand the labor of transition as primarily a collective one that depends on interactions with and knowledge of other trans people and how we live our lives. We need points to orient ourselves toward and examples to emulate or modify to our own ends. At least, that has been my experience.

Among these examples and orientation points, trans archives actively contribute to the reproduction of trans life and the enduring processes of gender transition. In this thesis, I argue that we should understand trans archives as critical components of the social reproduction of trans life. I do so by analyzing the communal social effects of archival repositories including the Digital Transgender Archive, the NYC Trans Oral History Project, and the artist Tourmaline's archival work to preserve the legacy of the iconic political organizer and sex worker Marsha P. Johnson. Founded and directed by K.J. Rawson, the Digital Transgender Archive is a hugely significant online repository for digitized materials of largely pre-2000 transgender history. The New York City Trans Oral

History Project (NYCTOHP), another major site for my research, is a digital community archive founded in 2014 that collects, preserves, and shares trans histories. It is organized in collaboration with the New York Public Library and supported by a partnership with the Digital Transgender Archive.¹ Finally, I assess Tourmaline's archival practice that she developed on her personal Tumblr and Vimeo pages with posts containing articles, notes, news clippings, and videos related to the lives of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera who were political radicals that played a pivotal role in the Stonewall Uprising and in their organization for unhoused queer youth called Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR).

At the same time as I use these examples to build a case for the socially reproductive function of trans archives, I acknowledge the necessity of limited or modified visibility in trans archives to preserve privacy and safety for trans people. Trans privacy and safety are far from protected in the current social and political environment, where trans identities and gender deviance have become increasingly policed and subject to all kinds of formal and informal repression. Archives may help preserve trans history and provide those who need it most with access to their collective trans pasts, but freely accessible digital archives like the ones that I address also produce a heightened state of visibility for the trans people that they document. As transphobic threats continue to escalate, the strategic anonymity, privacy, and safety of the transgender people that these archives serve must structure their approaches to archival access alongside and

¹ NYC Trans Oral History Project, "About," NYC Trans Oral History Project, October 15, 2021, <https://nyctransoralhistory.org/about/>.

in tension with a politics of visibility. These are all conclusions that I draw from the following three research questions: How can we understand trans archives as critical components of the social reproduction of trans life? If trans archives socially reproduce trans life, how does strategic anonymity, privacy, and safety of the transgender people that these archives serve structure their approaches to archival access alongside and in tension with a politics of visibility? And, finally, how are these concerns for the privacy, safety, and anonymity of trans people documented by archives informed by the participation of many trans people in radical political organizing work that, like transness in general, is often the target of surveillance and state repression?

In this thesis, I draw heavily on existing scholarship in the fields of archival studies, trans and queer history, transgender studies, and trans political theory, while weaving writing on my personal experiences throughout in order to drive home some of the ways that these issues can manifest concretely in the lives of trans people. The methodological and discursive variety of my approach is born from the necessity of understanding the labor of trans social reproduction accomplished through trans archives beyond the formal academic boundaries of archival studies. The same is true of my analysis of trans privacy practices as they manifest both in and outside of archival contexts. My interest in the intersections between trans archives, the social reproduction of trans life, and trans safety are inseparable from my gender transition and the community work that allowed it to begin and still draws it on.

I never could have begun my own transition years ago without others to look up to and guide me, even when those relationships were not with personal friends but instead with people whom I followed online, whose music I listened to, or whose books I read. The musician Chuquimani-Condori was my first of these guides. In 2015, they released the album *American Drift* under the name Elysia Crampton. While I was finishing my undergraduate degree, I would listen to that album almost every day on the bus in Montreal and pore over press images of them when I got home. This was my first aesthetic encounter with transfemininity, and I was completely obsessed by it. Later, my relationship with the music of Terre Thaemlitz, a trans Marxist icon within deep house and experimental electronic music scenes, and the writing of Juliana Gleeson, an influential trans Marxist theorist and historian, carried me further. They were my guides.

Gleeson's writing and scholarship, in particular, has done so much to elaborate the specific community work of trans life that sustains and perpetuates itself. In a 2019 essay titled "An Aviary of Queer Social Reproduction," she writes:

While queers are often cast as defying the biological destiny of reproduction, in truth the demands placed on us to live openly, and the atypical needs which define our lives, both demand activity that draws itself onwards. We sift through generations of the dead, plucking at figures and scenes whose roles we will someday play in turn. To survive as a queer is to provide the basis for others to do the same. Our efforts to rewrite an ethics only fleetingly informed by the previously binding conventions of hetero private households (which reared almost all of us)

leave us not only survivors against the existing regime, but living
incubators who through our example warm and shelter those yet to come.
Nurturing those who are not yet truly our peers, but yearn to join us.
Wiping away flecks of shell and strands of albumen.²

Here, Gleeson invokes the figure of the “egg,” a trans person who has not yet recognized their own transness, as she writes of those who, through acts of care and queer and trans social reproduction, will emerge from shell and albumen to grow our ranks with tenderness and mutual recognition.³ The same acts can strengthen the resolve of those who have already begun to transition. Transition is enduring, not some teleological achievement of a surgical end or moment of complete passing. It is a state of continuous relation. In this state of communal relation, with trans kin and comrades that exceed the heterosexual private households that most of us were reared within, we may rewrite the ethics of a reactionary present to reflect our own image of liberation.

In the book *Transgender Marxism*, which Gleeson co-edited, writer Noah Zazanis describes this dynamic beautifully in the essay “Social Reproduction and Social Cognition: Theorizing (Trans)gender Identity Development in Community Context”:

Transgender identification is not inherent, or even necessarily constant. Instead, trans identities are formed responsive to their social context. We transition through the exercise of individual and collective agency. This occurs in community with other trans people, and through everyday acts of reproduction—each of which influences social cognition. To understand how trans identities are

²Jules Joanne Gleeson, “An Aviary of Queer Social Reproduction,” in *Hypocrite Reader*, no. 94 (2019). <https://hypocritereader.com/94/eggs-queer-social-reproduction>

³ “Trans* Glossary | Resource Center for Sexual & Gender Diversity.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://rcsgd.sa.ucsb.edu/transucsb/trans-glossary?letter=5>.

formed, it is necessary to examine the social relations produced and reproduced by trans people. It is these continuously developing contexts which allow for transitions to occur and identities to emerge.⁴

Transition is in the community we build. It is all about social context: the way that we as trans people care for and show up for each other; the role models we find around us at present or in our history; and the political alignments that we build together to make the world more livable. The community work of transition is evident in the acts of trans social reproduction that allow us to survive but also to recognize and learn from our collective pasts: “We sift through generations of the dead, plucking at figures and scenes whose roles we will someday play in turn.”⁵ As Zazanis notes, trans identification is not something inherent, essential, and immutable prior to the forms of trans socialization that make it possible.⁶ The communal nature of gender transition is constitutive of what I refer to throughout this thesis as *trans social reproduction*. This process is largely an interpersonal one that takes place through an immense network of the informal and invisibilized labor of trans people helping other trans people. But trans social reproduction may also be aided in some manner by the work of institutions, such as archives, with a commitment to the preservation and promulgation of trans histories and ways of life.

⁴ Noah Zazanis, “Social Reproduction and Social Cognition: Theorizing (Trans)gender Identity Development in Community Context,” in *Transgender Marxism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 33

⁵ Jules Joanne Gleeson, “An Aviary of Queer Social Reproduction,” in *Hypocrite Reader*, no. 94 (2019). <https://hypocritereader.com/94/eggs-queer-social-reproduction>

⁶ Noah Zazanis, “Social Reproduction and Social Cognition: Theorizing (Trans)gender Identity Development in Community Context,” in *Transgender Marxism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 33.

In this thesis, I use a trans Marxist feminist analysis to argue that trans archives are a pivotal institutional site for the work of trans social reproduction because they help to expand and deepen the trans identities and communities of the present by setting them into relation with those of the past. However, like other official institutional bodies, trans archives are simultaneously vulnerable to the traps of representation, the dangers of unfettered visibility for both archivists and those represented in archival collections, and the ambient and immediate threat of governmental and social repression of trans identities that continue undaunted in the United States and elsewhere. Consequently, the selective anonymity or privacy of transgender people whose lives find reflection in archival collections dedicated to the preservation of transgender history is of critical importance. I consider trans archival anonymity and privacy in dialogue with an increasingly necessary strategic opacity with regards to trans recordkeeping and the documentation of trans people across repositories of personal information that might be subject to transphobic scrutiny. I am particularly interested in drawing out the ways in which an attunement to this reality and a consequent desire for varying degrees of anonymity and privacy is informed by the participation of many trans people in radical political organizing work that, like transness in general, is often the target of surveillance and state repression. This is to say that many trans people are aware of the necessity of withholding information judiciously. At the same time, trans sociality (especially its more politically radical variants) and the archival traces it leaves must be able to serve as “living incubators who through our example warm and shelter those yet to come,” as Gleeson puts it, “nurturing those who are not yet truly our peers, but yearn to join us.”⁷

⁷ Jules Joanne Gleeson, “An Aviary of Queer Social Reproduction,” in *Hypocrite Reader*, no. 94 (2019). <https://hypocritereader.com/94/eggs-queer-social-reproduction>

To properly serve this function, trans community archives must prioritize the safety and privacy of the transgender people that they document and that comprise their broader community. While these concerns should have concrete effects on institutional policy, I argue that the bulk of the labor that goes into protecting trans privacy and safety from omnipresent threats remains extra-institutional, that is, beyond the formal bounds of archives.

ON TRANS SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND THE COLLECTIVE PAST

To better understand both the necessity and possibility for a twinned commitment to discretion and the flourishing of trans life lived in community, we must first further delineate the process of trans social reproduction. In this thesis, I use the phrase “social reproduction” a bit differently than is typical for Marxist and Marxist-feminist understandings of the concept. In those contexts, social reproduction describes the often unseen or undervalued work that goes into the reproduction of labor power within an economic system governed by capital and the law of value. In her chapter in *Transgender Marxism*, poet and scholar Nat Raha presents a helpful introduction to understandings of socially reproductive labor and social reproduction theory (SRT) within the context of historical Marxist feminisms:

Marxist feminism conceptualises socially reproductive labour as the work that reproduces both workers as living human entities and their labour power under capitalism. In this view, the latter form of labour is exchanged either directly or indirectly with capitalist employers for wages. The relationship between socially reproductive labour and Marx’s value theory

has been a source of contestation since the 1970s, primarily around the question of whether domestic labour is “integral” to capitalist production by directly or indirectly reproducing surplus-value, or if it is “unproductive” in an economic sense in that it does not create surplus-value.⁸

As Raha implies, the private family home is one of the major sites interrogated by Marxist feminists through the use of social reproduction theory. This is due to the historical role of women in the private household’s of nuclear families. In this context, it was largely the unwaged work of women (both as spouses and daughters) to stay at home to rear children, cook, and care for the wage-earning spouse (typically the husband). This women’s work accomplished the reproduction of the husband’s labor power which was then exchanged for wages to sustain both the family unit and the broader capitalist economy. In volume one of *Capital*, Marx writes, “We mean by labour-power, or labour-capacity, the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind.”⁹ In other words, labor power might be understood as one’s capacity to work. It is not difficult to imagine how this condition hinges on one’s life at home or outside the hours of one’s day explicitly structured by the wage through employment. While Marxist feminism provides a compelling refiguring of Marx’s thinking on the social reproduction of labor-power through the invisibilized care work of women and other marginalized populations on whose backs the economy keeps humming, I propose that we might also consider

⁸ Nat Raha, “A Queer Marxist Transfeminism: Queer and Trans Social Reproduction,” in *Transgender Marxism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 105.

⁹ Karl Marx, Ben Fowkes, and David Fernbach, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, V. 1*, (Penguin Classics. Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1981), 270.

social reproduction outside of the context formalized wage-labor and its social foundation. By doing so, this may potentially provide us with new insights regarding the ongoing reproduction of trans identity as a way of living in community with other trans people.

For the purposes of this thesis, I use the analytical framework provided by a more standard Marxist feminist analysis of social reproduction not to assess the surplus-value generation of trans sociality but rather to better understand how trans life reproduces itself through unseen or informal labor that in some way parallels work done largely by women in the domestic sphere to reproduce the heterosexual nuclear family unit and its labor power. While the parallels between the socially reproductive work of women in the private household and the social reproduction of trans life exceed this invisibilized commonality, both forms of reproduction share the popular diminishment and disparagement of their labors as unproductive. Trans sociality has been historically marked as deviant, criminal, and, crucially, unproductive in the US context. This is especially true of trans identities as they intersect with Blackness, with disability, with indigeneity, with political radicalism, and with other minoritized identities.¹⁰ For example, it is no accident that many archival records of trans existence in the twentieth century and before were produced by the carceral institutions and the police—tools used by the state to manage unproductive and undesirable social surplus.¹¹ Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, coeditors of *Transgender Marxism*, write, “All moral-economic parables of sound money, productive capital, productive bodies, and the (re)productive

¹⁰ Treva Carrie Ellison, “Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender,” *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 1 (2019).

¹¹ Rebekah Edwards, “This Is Not a Girl.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (2015).

heterosexual family unit necessitate unrelenting disciplinary violence directed towards 'irrational' speculation, unproductive Capital, unproductive consumption, and unproductive desires."¹² What is transness if not an unproductive desire that begets a morally dubious way of life filled with queer debauchery, radical political solidarities, and a general shift away from common decency? Unrelenting violence is found in our disciplinary interactions with the state, with medical professionals, with people we encounter in restrooms, with our parents, and on and on. Save for the always disconcerting attempts at trans respectability, which tend toward the uncritical veneration of the government, the military, and the economic system that drives them, transition as a social form is not productive in a conventional or respectable manner. Transition may increase an individual's economic participation through medical debt from gender-affirming surgeries or other costly and time-consuming procedures, but, as Gleeson, Zazanis, and others make clear, transition should be considered beyond the individual as a collective social activity that is non-normative and productive of nothing so significant as other trans people.

While approaching the distinctness of trans social reproduction as a special kind of labor critical to trans survival and flourishing, I take trans rethinkings of social reproduction found in the writings of scholar Treva Ellison and others including Raha and Gleeson as a methodological guide. Through them, I consider how certain kinds of informal work reproduce and grow trans sociality despite the threats this kind of sociality increasingly faces.¹³ In Ellison's work on "Black femme praxis," they describe the

¹² Juliana Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, "Introduction," in *Transgender Marxism*, (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 19-20.

¹³ Treva Carrie Ellison, "Black Femme Praxis and the Promise of Black Gender," *The Black Scholar* 49, no. 1 (2019).

practice of “flocking,” which I interpret as an integral form of labor for trans social reproduction. Borrowing writer adrienne maree brown’s conception of “flocking” as an “intentional collective adaptation,” Ellison elaborates the meaning of the term in the context of “Black femme praxis” as the sort of gestural and aesthetic adaptations that Black trans femmes make “with and in relationship to each other in order to move through space and survive.”¹⁴ They write, “Flocking creates the possibility for Black trans and queer aesthetics through collective practice rather than carceral capture and coercion.”¹⁵ In Ellison’s central case study used to illustrate practices of flocking, they present the story of three Black femme domestic workers who helped each other pass as cisgender women until they were arrested and outed to their employers and the public by the Los Angeles Police Department.¹⁶ While Ellison’s usage of “flocking” is very specific to black trans and queer people, especially black trans femmes, I believe the concept is useful for understanding how trans people adapt and survive with each other in general. A quote by poet and writer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha in Nat Raha’s “A Queer Marxist Transfeminism: Queer and Trans Social Reproduction” deepens the description of this dynamic:

[Y]our life as a working class or poor and/or sex working and/or disabled and/or Black or brown femme person has taught you that the only damn way you or anybody survives is by helping each other. No institutions exist to help us survive

¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹⁶ Ibid., 6-7.

—we survive because of each other. Your life is maintained by a complex, non-monetary economy of shared, reciprocal care.¹⁷

Both Piepzna-Samarasinha and Ellison describe a deeply interpersonal process of behavior mirroring, strategizing, adaptation, and reciprocal care that takes place between trans people and allows the reproduction and continuation of trans life more broadly. Put otherwise, flocking is a form of trans social reproduction.

Trans archives also enable a kind of flocking as trans social reproduction. Trans people often use trans archives to encounter the traces of trans lives throughout history, in order to help them better make sense of themselves, their pasts, their present, and the futures they may hope to build. One striking example of this can be observed in the way that Janet Mock, the notable writer and advocate for transgender rights, has discussed the importance of her access to the life of trans radicals in the movement for queer liberation Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, enabled by the archival work of the artist and activist Tourmaline, to Mock's understanding of herself as a Black trans woman. Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera were political radicals who played a pivotal role in the Stonewall Uprising and in their organization for unhoused queer youth called Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) which promoted an explicitly revolutionary anti-capitalist politics intertwined with trans liberation. While Tourmaline was working for the Sylvia Rivera Law Project in New York City, she would update her personal Tumblr and Vimeo pages with articles, notes, news clippings, and videos related to Johnson and Rivera. The content that she uploaded came from her encounters with the history of these trans icons as it was then scattered across libraries

¹⁷ Nat Raha, "A Queer Marxist Transfeminism: Queer and Trans Social Reproduction," in *Transgender Marxism*, ed. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O'Rourke, (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 107.

and the personal collections of friends and associates that knew them before they both passed. Tourmaline helped to centralize and provide broader access to archival traces of the lives of Johnson and Rivera by creating an extra-institutional archive that people like Janet Mock could freely access through social media sites that were commonly used at the time. In a 2017 article, Mock writes:

It was through Tourmaline's digital archives on Tumblr and Vimeo where I met superheroines, real-life ones, whom I didn't have access to growing up. Her archive was free, accessible, and deeply informative, and it introduced me—and my generation who didn't live through the Stonewall Riots, the formation of the LGBTQ movement and the AIDS crisis—to our radical, resistant roots. She gave us access to know our forebears more deeply: a selfless and revolutionary act.¹⁸

Mock spells out explicitly the way that trans archival access helps us to construct our collective past, connecting trans people of the present with their radical roots that are largely ignored by dominant media and popular representations of trans people, especially before the post-tipping point era. Mock continues:

Tourmaline's work is where I learned about Johnson's ideas about queer politics and her own body, and Rivera's use of searing language to check cis people. It was also where I learned about the enduring power of sisterhood as Rivera mourned Johnson, who was found dead at age 42 in the Hudson River in 1992, as she lived in a shack on the dilapidated Christopher Street Piers. But it was a video clip that Tourmaline had discovered, digitized, and uploaded (originally posted to her Vimeo account) that shifted how I saw myself.

¹⁸ Mock, Janet. "How Tourmaline Introduced a Generation to Marsha P. Johnson." Janet Mock. Allure. 2017. <https://janetmock.com/2017/10/13/tourmaline-on-marsha-p-johnson/>.

Seeing Rivera speak on that stage proved to me that we—trans people, people of color, poor people—have always been here. We have always spoken up. We have always fought back against systems seemingly intent on us not making it. Rivera's words pushed me at a critical point in my life, and Tourmaline's devotion to archiving previously ignored moments in history is what brought me to them.¹⁹

In the way that Mock describes how she was affected deeply by Tourmaline's publicly accessible archival work on both Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, one can see the process of flocking or trans social reproduction unfolding over time and between historical periods. These are the kind of linkages across time that trans archives are uniquely equipped to build. By connecting trans pasts to our trans presents, trans archives restructure our understanding of self, of what actually happened, and of what should come next. As a trans archival practice, Tourmaline's work enabled collective trans social practices of reflection, remembrance, education, aesthetic creation, and political awakening for Mock and many other trans women—trans women seeking their history as it truly was rather than in the meager pieces that passed through the charnel house of dominant archival memory.

With regards to the lives of trans people, dominant archival memory really is a charnel house. Mock's description of her archival encounters with Marsha and Sylvia stands in sharp contrast to the morbid fixation on trans death present in the archival activation present in David France's 2017 Netflix documentary, *The Death and Life of*

¹⁹ Ibid.

Marsha P. Johnson.²⁰ That film focuses on the killing of Marsha and of trans women more broadly through the examination of their archival (i.e., largely medical, legal, or carceral) records, which are marred by the violence they experienced in their lifetimes. It is telling that “Death” precedes “Life” in the title of the film. France’s film perpetuates the spectacle of Black trans death by fixating on Marsha’s passing through countless true crime tropes, offering up meager thoughts on the flourishing of the trans community inspired by Marsha. Despite the primary role of the carceral system in perpetuating violence against Black people and trans people in the United States, the film also doubles down on “more effective” policing as a desirable remedy to stem the tide of this violence. This is indicative of the ways in which many trans people have been reflected in the archival records of institutions like prisons and policing. These carceral institutions are simultaneously responsible for the oppression and disciplining of trans people but neutral and legitimate enough in the eyes of society to retain substantive records of trans lives that otherwise feel through the cracks of dominant memory. Tourmaline’s archival work on Marsha Johnson, then, is a necessary salve and an instructive alternative to the archival morbidity of carceral records dredged up to create yet another spectacle of trans death and suffering. In contrast to the Netflix documentary’s well-intentioned but regressive attempts to give a radical trans icon her due, Tormaline’s archival work instead delivers traces of Marsha’s life to those who need her most,

²⁰ It is worth noting that Tourmaline alleged, with a fair amount of evidence, that David France had benefited directly from her unheralded acts of trans archival work and capitalized on her years of independent research without reference, credit, or pay. David France denied that he had acted unethically in any way or stolen any material from Tourmaline. However, Janet Mock notes that an archival assistant named Kamran Shararay working with France on the documentary released a statement in support of Tourmaline, claiming that Tourmaline’s name appeared on a number of materials the research team were using for the Netflix documentary, and that there was no doubt that her work and research were used heavily in the creation of the film. Janet Mock, “How Tourmaline Introduced a Generation to Marsha P. Johnson,” Janet Mock. Allure. 2017. <https://janetmock.com/2017/10/13/tourmaline-on-marsha-p-johnson/>.

elevating her memory at the same time as it carries her commitment to liberation forward by strengthening the resolve of present and future Black trans women.

This archival work was critical to the process of Mock's trans social reproduction as it provided a foundation around which her Black trans identity could cohere. It accomplished similar socially reproductive work for other gender variant and sexual identity groupings seeking their historical community in the figure of Marsha P. Johnson, a Black trans radical. This coherence of trans identity through archival memory is a tool for survival, but also for the flourishing of trans life beyond merely getting by. Archival materials that attest to the lives of trans people lived beyond their interactions with forms of governmental record keeping that both evidence and enact their repression *can* exist and are important for others to see in order to be emboldened by their histories. This is how trans community archives, especially those documenting a broad spectrum of trans people, should function for those they intend to serve.

Trans community archives should also be understood within a broader landscape of community archival institutions and practices that attempt to build community and counter-hegemonic relationships between archival records and those they reflect. On the community function of real "community" archives for minoritized populations, scholar and archivist Michelle Caswell writes:

They are explicitly activist in orientation, exhibiting none of the professional pretense of objectivity or the false sense of neutrality still weighing down the practices of mainstream archives. They entail reflexivity, in which participants actively engage in self-critique with the goal of improvement. They value the affective or emotional impact of archival collecting and use, taking into

consideration how records make people feel. Most importantly, in contrast to many mainstream collecting practices, community archives value people over stuff. The stuff—what gets collected—is only as important as it enables connections between people, who use the stuff to share stories, transmit memory, and build relationships.²¹

In contradistinction to the faux-neutrality of dominant archives, Caswell's invocation of community archives marks certain archives as potential sites for activism. As Caswell describes, community archives that are truly for their communities help to preserve and reproduce those communities through forms of sociality premised on common memory, storytelling, and the building of relationships.

When working within a framework shaped by shared political struggle and a genuine commitment to activism, trans community archives function in the same manner. Their purpose is existential. Beyond their function as sites of activism and identity, trans community archives breed alternative familial networks and types of “worldmaking” that are distinct from other types of community archives. This worldmaking process of trans social reproduction through archives is also about constructing a trans political imaginary. Archival studies scholar Anne Gilliland writes the following on the critical affective functions of the imaginaries we build in dialogue with archives, especially within communities:

The act of imagining is by its nature evocative and thus imaginaries are important products and generators of affect, allowing a person or community to think and feel beyond their current knowledge state and experiences. The power of

²¹ Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (Routledge, 2021), 18.

imagining is that it allows individuals or communities to place themselves in other's positions, to play out a different version of events, and to envision a different future. Our imaginaries of the past are how we thought things were, or how we wished they were. They are what we believe happened and what we expect or long for our archives to contain. They are also what we might wish for the archives to be able to effect. Imagining, therefore, can have real consequences [...].²²

As Gilliland suggests, confronting the reality and occasional dearth of our archival pasts can draw us forward as we imagine what archives may now effect and build. A deeper, stronger, and more politically attuned trans community is one of the things I desire most when I interact with trans community archives. I have already demonstrated that trans archives can, in some instances, have this effect. They can rewrite our reality, bring us together, and help us think of the ways that we might make a new world not committed to our collective annihilation.

Discussing two different kinds of trans community archives, exemplified by the Black Trans Archive and his own Digital Transgender Archive, scholar K.J. Rawson notes that both share “the commitment to remembering trans and gender-nonconforming ancestors, the valuing of trans lives (throughout history, presently, and into the future), the support for the viability of trans subjecthood, and the exertion of

²² Anne Gilliland, “Future Perfect? Affect-Aware, History-Informed, Future-Oriented Archive-Making,” In *Archives and Emotions*, ed. Ilaria Scaglia and Valeria Vanesio (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 429.

generative control over trans stories.”²³ Concerning the way that archives can help consolidate and fortify trans social worlds, Rawson then states:

By pursuing these aims, trans archives become rhetorical actors that create coherence for otherwise disparate and inert (and sometimes nonexistent) documentations of the past that, when cohered together, support not only identification and community building, but resilience in the face of hostility and a fertile ground for future worldmaking where trans people can flourish.²⁴

Here Rawson describes the kinds of trans social reproduction that both animates archives and is made possible by archival work. For trans people, traces of trans history activated by the right archival processes, context, and accessibility create a sort of communal “coherence” that might better enable the remaking of the world to achieve flourishing trans lives. Access to trans archival materials made available by Rawson’s Digital Transgender Archive was instrumental for me coming to understand my transness in relation to those who came before me and are still here living. I know the same is true for many of my trans friends, who have shared zines, photos, and other materials digitized by the Digital Transgender Archive with each other, gleeful in the recognition of ourselves in the past. The same dynamic can be observed in Janet Mock’s self-described relationship with the archival traces of Marsha Johnson assembled by Tourmaline. Our lives are deepened, made coherent and more beautiful, and propelled forward by the historical dialogue that archival remnants of trans pasts can build with trans presents.

²³ K.J. Rawson, “The Trans Rhetorical Practice of Archive Building.” In *The Routledge Handbook of Queer Rhetoric*, 1st ed., by Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander, (Routledge, 2022), 83.

²⁴ Ibid., 83.

Rawson hammers this home once more in his discussion of how Leslie Feinberg's historical "transgender warriors" make contemporary trans identities viable:

Feinberg recounts: "As I shivered next to a bus window thick with ice, I cried with relief. I realized how important it was for me to know I had a place in history, that I was part of the human race." Feinberg's powerful testimony demonstrates how finding yourself in history can make your life livable because others like you have lived. Through this cyclical process, contemporary trans subjecthood becomes possible because trans subjects have been documented throughout history.²⁵

During her life, Feinberg was a trans radical and self-professed revolutionary communist who shaped herself and helped shape other trans radicals through historical examples of trans life lived boldly.²⁶ For Feinberg and others like Tourmaline, Marsha P. Johnson served as one of these pivotal touchstones of transgender selfhood and a commitment to radical political activity through her role in the Stonewall Uprising and work with Sylvia Rivera through Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) which promoted an explicitly revolutionary anti-capitalist politics intertwined with trans liberation. Marsha and Sylvia are now, by many measures, well-known public figures. Most notably in the case of Marsha, people celebrate her (relatively) widely as a black trans woman integral to the history of queer and trans liberation politics more broadly. People may also simultaneously acknowledge Marsha and Sylvia as radical political figures worthy of veneration, but the particular qualities of their radicalism outside of a generalized commitment to the amelioration of the lives of queer and trans people are addressed

²⁵ K.J. Rawson, "The Trans Rhetorical Practice of Archive Building." In *The Routledge Handbook of Queer Rhetoric*, 1st ed., by Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander, (Routledge, 2022), 79-80.

²⁶ Leslie Feinberg, *Self – LESLIE FEINBERG*, n.d. Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/self/>.

infrequently. They were anti-capitalists and social revolutionaries whose radical visions and actions were born from engagement with variants of Marxism developed by the Black Panther Party's Marxist-Leninist Black liberationism, the direct action tactics of the far-left Young Lords, and various US communist parties.²⁷ Feinberg's "transgender warriors" should invite us to consider these political affinities, ethics, and ways of being as inseparable from the ways that someone like Marsha lived her gender-variance. I aim to take this invitation, and further consider questions of trans social reproduction through archival access as it dovetails with the reproduction of radical political solidarities through its archival traces. This should serve to establish the ground from which we can begin to adequately address questions of trans privacy within archives as they intersect with the radical politics of many trans people. As trans community archives have such a significant impact on the social fabric of trans communities and their capacity for radical political worldmaking, these archives must play an important role in protecting the privacy and safety of those communities that they both build and are built by.

TRANS RADICALISM IN THE ARCHIVE

Transgender materials are illicit. Transgender Marxist materials are especially illicit. They are not illicit in and of themselves, but they are frequently designated as such by external governing bodies and social actors whose core beliefs are antithetical to the flourishing of trans life and the study of political economy and related radical, even revolutionary, activity incited by Marxism as a heuristic. This is to say, they are

²⁷ Abram J Lewis, "Trans History in a Moment of Danger: Organizing in and Beyond 'Visibility' in the 1970s," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Gossett, Reina; Stanley, Eric A.; Burton, Johanna (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017).

illicit in the context of transphobic capitalist societies like our own where the marginalization of these positions as illicit helps to justify the prosecution of trans existence and radical politics as linked threats to normality. Consequently, in the shadow of threats and persecution, transness and Marxisms in their myriad forms typically produce tight-knit, alternative social bonds based around the keeping and dissemination of community knowledge that reproduces the community through its continued sharing. As I discussed above, these processes of preserving and disseminating community knowledge are constitutive of the kinds of social reproduction that can develop through community engagement with archives that reflect their minoritized particularity.

Again, the issue of information access is crucial here. Trans people, Marxists, and transgender Marxist communities rise and fall with their ability to access information about their community's histories, thought, and social forms. Digital archives are one of the means by which some of this information is made more widely accessible to the broadest (but still niche) public, often outside of cloistered academic archives and special collections. Consequently, the information they steward may more easily become a source of community building through trans Marxist information access and the ensuing mutual responsibility of attending to historical memory and political education together with gender diverse kin and comrades. This is another more specific form of trans social reproduction enabled by easy digital access to the archival linking of past and present that I have already discussed. However, with greater accessibility and the clear signposting of archival contents that accompany serious efforts to make specifically trans, but also trans Marxist, archival materials accessible to those who need them the most (e.g. the trans community) comes the scrutiny enabled by clearly

tagged and searchable metadata that mirror buzzwords driving the repressive and genocidal creep of fascism into all aspects of life, but more specifically the lives of trans people and political radicals. Put otherwise, if there are ample traces of your intertwined trans identity and radical politics that can be found online through simple searches, then you become an easier target for those hostile to both your transness and your politics.

In this thesis, I address the operation of one specific digital archive that embodies the expansion of access to trans Marxist archival materials: the NYC Trans Oral History Project. While looking to the digital repository for the NYC Trans Oral History Project as a methodological guide, I discuss the fraught nature of accessing materials that are explicitly categorized as both trans and Marxist. The New York City Trans Oral History Project (NYCTOHP) embodies the expansion of access to trans and Marxist archival materials. A digital community archive founded in 2014 that collects, preserves, and shares trans histories, the NYCTOHP is organized in collaboration with the New York Public Library and supported by a partnership with the Digital Transgender Archive.²⁸ The NYCTOHP simultaneously produces and collects oral histories of trans New Yorkers and other trans people who maintain or previously held connections to NYC. Unlike the majority of records concerning trans people, which result from their fraught interfacing with the state or various medical bureaucracies, the NYCTOHP places explicit emphasis on the political situatedness of trans people who bear the brunt of the present socioeconomic order. About the scope of the project's work, they state:

Our archive documents transgender resistance and resilience in New York City.

We work to confront the erasure of trans lives and to record diverse histories of

²⁸ NYC Trans Oral History Project, "About," NYC Trans Oral History Project, October 15, 2021, <https://nyctransoralhistory.org/about/>.

gender as intersecting with race and racism, poverty, dis/ability, aging, housing migration, sexism, and the AIDS crisis. We privilege the insights of vulnerable trans communities fighting the structural dismantling of public benefits, housing insecurity and homelessness, policing, and surveillance.²⁹

This statement demonstrates the NYCTOHP's recognition that substantive trans archival work necessarily attends to this political subjugation of trans people as it contours our entire lives and is modulated by the intersections of our identities with race, class, and sexuality. The NYCTOHP also suggests that trans people are in a unique position to expand our "historical understanding of neoliberalism" as they have been disproportionately affected by its attendant "gentrification, mass incarceration, intensified policing of poor people and people of color, immigration "reform," the defunding of social services, growing wealth inequality and homelessness, and attacks on organized labor."³⁰

In a manner exemplary of the community archives that Michelle Caswell details in *Urgent Archives*, the NYCTOHP calls trans people into its project by recognizing their struggle in the records that it aims to produce of their lives. This is a mutual recognition from within the community since the archival project is run by and for trans New Yorkers. It is also a recognition of the fact that most archival records on trans people bear scant mention of their political activity as radical organizers or participation in alternative cultural spaces. Given the disproportionate subjection of trans people to the

²⁹ NYC Trans Oral History Project, "About," NYC Trans Oral History Project, October 15, 2021. <https://nyctransoralhistory.org/about/>.

³⁰ NYC Trans Oral History Project, "NYC Trans Oral History Project Oral History Handbook," NYC Trans Oral History Project, accessed June 9, 2026, https://nyctransoralhistory.org/content/uploads/2021/09/NYCTOH_Handbook.pdf.

worst of a transphobic society and the recognition that these ills cannot be separated from the political-economic logic of capital, and from capitalist social relations modulated by the varying vindictiveness of state officials responding to the “social contagion” of trans identity, many trans people find Marxism to be an essential heuristic for understanding their place in this world.³¹ It also helps many to see how they might improve their lot along with the lot of other groups marginalized by the present order of things. In their introduction to *Transgender Marxism*, Gleeson and O’Rourke reflect on this tendency of trans people to find great meaning and value in Marxism despite becoming more highly visible in mainstream culture:

What had once been strictly clandestine—or otherwise associated with political radicalism—has now been embraced outside its niche constituency.

Transgender culture has increasingly appeared as a mass culture. As such, we might expect to see a dwindling of trans politics as a subversive force. Instead, transgender communism has bloomed, with revolutionary movements around the world often enough being led by those whose lives have been reshaped around transition. Whether the struggle is liberation from prisons and policing, poverty and austerity, combating fascist street movements, or averting ecological collapse, trans people are found in disproportionate numbers, and full voice. Our unlikely prominence in revolutionary organisations and subversive circles is often as baffling to us as anyone else.³²

³¹ Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O’Rourke, “Introduction,” In *Transgender Marxism*, ed. Jules Joanne Gleeson and Elle O’Rourke, (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

³² Ibid, 1.

As the authors suggest, trans people are often found in disproportionately high concentrations in movements and spaces dedicated to collective liberation as many recognize that the flourishing of trans life depends on much more than clawing for shallow gains in rights conceded by the state. After all, a rising red tide lifts all boats.

Due to this propensity of trans people in particular to find meaning in Marxism, it comes as no surprise that the NYCTOHP is filled with a number of entries engaging both transness and Marxism. To give some idea of the importance of these records for the broader trans historical record, when searching for the topic “Marxism” within the Digital Transgender Archive (DTA), an interesting bond with the NYCTOHP is revealed. While the focus of the DTA is pre-2000 materials, the majority of the ten records with the “Marxism” tag are all post-2010 and come from oral histories created by the NYCTOHP.³³ This is evidence of the success of the NYCTOHP’s mission to elaborate the history of trans radicals, on which there is minimal documentation otherwise. It also showcases the collaboration taking place between geographically disparate (NYCTOHP operates out of NYC while the DTA is based in Boston and collects materials from diverse locations) repositories of trans history that provide welcome texture to accounts of trans experience when working in unison. This also demonstrates that the NYCTOHP is somewhat exemplary in the explicit linkages it describes between trans people and Marxism. Documentation of this linkage is not overwhelmingly present in trans archival collections more broadly. This is not entirely surprising, as gaps in archival representation of trans people and other minoritized and archivally underrepresented

³³ “Topic: Marxism - Digital Transgender Archive Search Results.” Digital Transgender Archive. Accessed March 17, 2026. https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/catalog?f%5Bdta_all_subject_ssim%5D%5B%5D=Marxism.

communities are often filled first with the most “respectable” examples of a community. Caswell describes this phenomenon in *Urgent Archives*:

Too often recuperative collecting projects fall into a trap of respectability that is ultimately counter to the aims of liberation. A politics of respectability insists on collecting records that conform to dominant expectations about what a minoritized community should be. This is true of many university-led projects that seek to recuperate the history of minoritized communities by documenting their prominent “firsts”—the first politician from a given community, the first business leader, the first actor. Filling archives with celebratory success stories from prominent leaders can reinforce harmful stereotypes that blame oppressed people for their own oppression; many Asian American community archives, for example, can undergird “model minority” myths that thinly veil anti-Black racism. Such collections, whether they are in dominant or community-led archives, are about inclusion within oppressive structures rather than about liberation from them. They pander to dominant groups instead of resist domination.³⁴

Caswell’s assertions about the regressive nature of such simplistic representational salves adopted by many archives seeking only to build a respectable image of minoritized communities rings especially true in the archival documentation of transgender lives. Too many of us are not success stories. Trans people often die prematurely, do survival sex work, lack economic power, maintain radical politics, or do a host of other things that make it hard for us to serve as examples of success by most normative measures. But this is not the case with the NYC Trans Oral History Project

³⁴ Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (Routledge, 2021), 84.

and other digital trans archival repositories like the Digital Transgender Archive.

Representation is not an afterthought in these instances, something that needs to fix an already-built archival collection that documents and preserves the histories of people who have historically held power. This allows these repositories to present a much broader range of trans experiences, more thoroughly accounting for our struggles, our particularities, our shortcomings, and the real beauty of our lives.

But how do the intersecting specificities of our lives become discoverable through archives? One important way this happens is through metadata creation. Metadata concerning these particularities of identity are frequently indicated through subject headings or topic tags linked to controlled vocabularies like the Library of Congress Subject Headings or the Homosaurus (which includes more expansive terms for various trans identities). On the NYCTOHP “interviews” page, one can search and sort through the entire archive with individual names and relevant keywords that function as subject headings (e.g. “Marxism,” “Islam,” “Two-Spirit,” “HIV/AIDS,” etc.).³⁵ From there, users can access the various metadata tags the site provides for its oral history transcriptions. While they do have a subject tag for “Marxism,” this only yields five results.³⁶ However, as I’ve already discussed, the DTA maintains more records than this on their own site that they pulled from the NYCTOHP and tagged with “Marxism” (nine in total).³⁷ This

³⁵ NYC Trans Oral History Project, “Interviews,” NYC Trans Oral History Project, September 17, 2021, <https://nyctransoralhistory.org/interviews/>.

At some point in the past year, the NYCTOHP changed the way that oral histories appear on their site. They are no longer accompanied by the same subject headings and topic tags that they previously featured. I can only speculate why this may be the case.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ “Topic: Marxism - Digital Transgender Archive Search Results.” Digital Transgender Archive. Accessed March 17, 2026. https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/catalog?f%5Bdta_all_subject_ssim%5D%5B%5D=Marxism.

discrepancy is interesting. It may be accidental, or simply the result of different standards for metadata tagging employed by the volunteers who created the documentation for each of these oral histories. While it's unlikely that this is the case in this particular instance, as there are ample digital records connecting the subjects of these oral histories to the term "Marxism" and other mentions of connections with radical politics, might this instead be the result of a stringent enactment of precautionary operational security? The archive or the individuals whose information is stewarded by it may have purposefully limited the public accessibility of information confirming that they are trans, Marxists, or otherwise involved in radical politics at the same time as they are members of an increasingly repressed member of a gender diverse minority. This has clearly been a longstanding concern for some: at least one of the entries on the NYCTOHP relevant to this discussion features no photo of the subject and is attributed to an alias.³⁸

I believe this concern for privacy and anonymization to be an unfortunate necessity, especially as the targeting of trans people for anything that will stick has become common practice for the United States federal government and a host of state legislatures hostile toward anything trans short of explicitly genocidal policy targeting "gender ideology." For example, Florida has steadily been building a registry of all trans people within their state, harvesting data on college-aged trans people from state university medical clinics that have diagnosed them with gender dysphoria.³⁹ Numerous

³⁸ Michelle Esther O'Brien and Barms, "Barms Oral History - Digital Transgender Archive," 2019, Accessed June 10, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/tq57nr26q>.

³⁹ René Kladzyk, "Policing Gender: How Surveillance Tech Aids Enforcement of Anti-Trans Laws," *Project on Government Oversight*, June 28, 2023, <https://www.pogo.org/investigations/policing-gender-how-surveillance-tech-aids-enforcement-of-anti-trans-laws>.

other states have looked to harvest the same kinds of data by varying nefarious means. As anti-trans legislation continues to proliferate and intensify, it's not too difficult to imagine what destructive ends this data could be put toward. The same could be said for many other groups targeted at different points in history by the United States government, and as it has shown time and time again (most notably from the Red Scare to the present), America loves few things more than anti-Communism. It's no accident that contemporary anti-trans sentiment often is marked by evocations of "Marxist gender ideology."⁴⁰ Many liberal defenders of trans rights would deny the innate connection of transness and Marxism, but the fact is there are many trans Marxists, and their trans identity and experiences with and commitment to Marxism are mutually constitutive. As the same "allies" will never rush to defend Marxists while they bemoan attacks on LGBTQ+ people, leaving trans Marxists without supporters bearing any major political power within the state, trans Marxists must consider the potential misuse of information connecting their gender identity to Marxism and radical politics.

There are countless precedents that demonstrate how concerns about the threat posed by the misuse of sensitive personal information wrested from private community spaces proliferated in trans and queer communities well before our present. For example, on early digitally networked lesbian feminist information systems, scholar Cait McKinney writes, "Lesbian feminists evaluating their representation in 1980s computer databases raised unique privacy concerns, including fear of antifeminist backlash and wariness about the stigma that could result from personal information falling into homophobic hands. To address these concerns, the Women's Information Exchange

⁴⁰ Jonathan Butcher, "'gender,' Marxism, and the Search for Power," The Heritage Foundation, accessed March 21, 2026, <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/gender-marxism-and-the-search-power>.

promoted a burgeoning feminist data politics based on user control and transparency about how and why information about individuals would be collected and stored.”⁴¹ McKinney describes the healthy skepticism that certain lesbian feminists brought to the prospect of the digital accessibility of information connecting them to their marginalized sexuality and politics during the era of the early internet. The parallels to the situation of contemporary trans Marxists in the archives is clear. Marginalized groups of all kinds, especially trans Marxists, should of course be cautious about the traces of their identities and lives that are digitally documented potentially falling into the hands of those hostile to their very existence. While this might not be the impetus for the inconsistencies I demonstrated between the categorization of archival entries with the the “Marxism” metadata tag across the NYCTOHP and the DTA, this line of thinking should not be separated from efforts to make Trans Marxist materials digitally accessible at present. The question of “access” is critical in this context.

As I have described in the case of Leslie Feinberg and others, access to trans Marxist archival materials is an absolute necessity for the substantiation of trans Marxist life, sociality, and its reproducibility. In the United States, the general repression of Marxists as well as queer and trans people (especially Black trans femmes) is continuously evident in the violence of archival records that remain from the interactions that these groups are forced to endure with the administrative and carceral state. Rawson, the founder and director of the DTA, has detailed the barriers to access that even trans people accessing trans materials within nominally trans archives face, stemming from many forms of conscious, unconscious, or inherited modes of

⁴¹ Cait McKinney, “Introduction,” In *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

transphobia.⁴² In Rawson's own experience and observations, these barriers include lack of access to bathrooms that reflect one's gender at brick and mortar archives and the failure of archive staff members to use the correct pronouns for trans people among other things.⁴³ Considerations of this dynamic have clearly influenced platforms like the DTA and the NYCTOHP that allow users (trans or otherwise) to remotely and anonymously access their digital archival holdings on transgender life and history.

Digital archival materials that attest to the lives of trans people as Marxists lived beyond their interactions with forms of governmental record keeping that both evidence and enact their repression *can* exist, as the NYCTOHP and the DTA prove, and are important for others to see in order to be emboldened by their histories. At the same time, however, the types of digital access enabled by the digital hosting of these materials on platforms that do not vet their users, like academic researchers in brick-and-mortar university archives, leave some sensitive data hanging out in the wind. On the one hand, this is necessary to make it truly accessible to those who need it the most. On the other hand, it renders this data vulnerable for harvesting by state, federal, and private actors hostile to both trans life and Marxism. These countervailing forces must be attended to honestly for any substantive consideration of what access means in this context.

OPERATIONAL SECURITY

⁴² K.J. Rawson, "Accessing Transgender // Desiring Queer(Er?) Archival Logics," *Archivaria*, No. 68, 2009.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 127-130.

Now that we have more fully established the stakes for trans people generally and transgender Marxists more specifically when it comes to their linked repression enabled by their visibility as archival data, I will discuss the current security practices of trans archival repositories. Using these examples will help to describe the tension between popular desires for trans visibility, including visibility in the historical record and the archives that help to maintain it, and the practical need for privacy, discretion, and operational security. These are practical needs born out of the risks of real misfortune wrought on the lives of trans people as they intersect with other minoritized and repressed modalities of being: queerness, left political radicalism, blackness, poverty, and countless others.

As one of the most significant and easily accessible archives of transgender history, the Digital Transgender Archive provides our first example. Though I have already discussed elements of this archive's work and the work of K.J. Rawson at length, I now look to unpack its relationship to practices of privacy more specifically. In comparing the operations of the Digital Transgender Archive to the Black Trans Archive, Rawson describes the openness of information provided by the DTA as a one-size-fits-all presentation of trans records. They include little in the way of framing, prefatory texts are absent, and there are no restrictions on access from those outside the broader trans community. Rawson also details how the DTA's materials are simultaneously integrated into cis-centric spaces beyond their own website as both the Digital Commonwealth (a Massachusetts-based digital archive) and the Digital Public Library of America are allowed to harvest and display their data. While this effectively broadens the reach of

records of the DTA into areas that exceed more siloed trans histories, the result is complicated. Rawson writes:

In some ways, this is a loss of the control of trans history, a dispersal and dissipation of trans-related resources without any ability to dictate how they are encountered and used. Yet, it can also be understood as a different form of intervention that seizes traces of trans lives from cisnormative archival spaces that render our lives invisible or invaluable, repackages our stories within a trans-affirming framework, and widely recirculates those stories in order to disrupt cisnormative archival spaces. The DTA takes risks in making trans histories more readily available for pernicious uses, but those risks allow materials to be serendipitously encountered by researchers who were not looking for trans history and who may be positively influenced by those materials. Even more importantly, wider dissemination of our collections means that more of our materials will successfully reach trans people who are seeking support and affirmation through archival research.⁴⁴

Rawson is optimistic about the value of proliferating trans records despite the risks posed by providing easy access to records of trans lives. There are good reasons to be. As I have noted, these records that the DTA has made available played an invaluable role in many people's transitions, including my own. In so many cases, these records provide "support and affirmation." If they were cloistered and buried beneath layers of security that removed them from easy public viewing, it's likely that they would not have

⁴⁴ KJ Rawson, "The Trans Rhetorical Practice of Archive Building," in *The Routledge Handbook of Queer Rhetoric*, 1st ed., by Jacqueline Rhodes and Jonathan Alexander. (Routledge, 2022), 82.

had the same impact. However, this is a difficult thing to quantify. It requires asking too many unanswerable “what-ifs.” I had access. It changed me.

By prioritizing access to trans materials while acknowledging the secondary risks this broad access poses, the DTA offers a limited but good-faith privacy standard developed to safeguard against the public dissemination of particularly sensitive data about trans people represented in the archive. Regarding “Privacy and Redactions,” their policies include the following statement:

While the purpose of the DTA is to make trans history widely accessible, we are careful to avoid violating the privacy of individuals represented in the collection. Toward that end, we redact personally identifying information such as social security numbers and home addresses. We also redact last names on sensitive materials that were not designed or intended for public circulation. If any materials on this site violate personal privacy, please contact us and we will address the situation immediately.⁴⁵

The risks of reproducing one’s home address and social security number are quite obvious. That is best practice in a variety of archival settings, not just trans ones. But the mention of “sensitive materials” and the selective redaction of last names is a bit more interesting. The statement elaborates slightly that they do not censor “sensitive materials” in general, but those “not designed or intended for public circulation.” But this still leaves questions. It’s unclear from the statement what exactly might comprise these sensitive materials beyond your standard fare life-administration records: taxes, insurance details, medical history, and the like.

⁴⁵ “Policies - Digital Transgender Archive.” Digital Transgender Archive. Accessed March 17, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/about/policies>.

When I began my research for this thesis, I was most concerned with forms of anonymity as they manifested in records of trans life generally, and the life of trans leftists more specifically, present in the Digital Transgender Archive. The thing about anonymity is that, when functioning correctly, others shouldn't be aware of it. In order to respond to this central paradox in the attempt to observe anonymity, I find it most helpful to consider anonymity as one of many modalities of privacy. This conceptual broadening achieves heightened perceptibility of a practice that should be imperceptible. I'll put this in more practical terms in the context of the Digital Transgender Archive. As the DTA acknowledges that it redacts names from documents they host that contain the aforementioned sensitive information, they claim a form of active anonymization as an integral part of their small but capacious privacy policies. But how can I, as a user of the archive and as a researcher concerned with its operations, understand the true scope and extent of this practice?

When entering the DTA homepage, the first major item presented is a search bar under the heading "Trans History, Linked." The scope of the materials in the archive is much broader, varied, and researcher-oriented than the other online trans archival repositories I have addressed, like the NYC Trans Oral History Project, so it is fitting that the first archival tool that the DTA provides is a self-directed search. Beneath the search bar and various site section headings are, in descending order, a slideshow of highlighted collections, various introductory user guides tailored to specific audiences, a map-based location discovery tool, and a sample of topics that a user might utilize to narrow their browsing. This multiplicity of entry points recognizes the diversity of the

DTA's audience and provides countless pathways for entry into their collections that may best serve its users in the United States and beyond.

When filtering the archive's content by topic tags, one is able to select the topic "privacy" after a considerable effort. The topic-sorting function is one element of the site's multimodal navigation strategies that proves a bit stickier than necessary. Users can sort the topics by alphabetical order or quantity present in the archive, but this only allows one to see twenty topics at a time. There is no option to see all topics simultaneously, nor is there any function that allows one to browse the topics in any manner other than one page after the next. The total number of topic pages isn't indicated either. This is a major design flaw. A user is not able to functionally navigate the DTA's digital records using only the topic function first and on its own. Consequently, the topic function is only useful for grouping the records that a user encounters using other search methods where topics appear when linked to individual records. These record-level topic tags can be clicked to show what other records share the same topic tag. Still, there is no intuitive way for a user to see a complete list of all topic tags used by the DTA. Unfortunately, this effectively limits the search pathways that one can pursue using topic tags in a more open-ended way and disallows users from gaining a broader sense of all of the subject headings that may be attached to the DTA's records.

However, once a user is able to locate the "privacy" topic tag, this yields a single page with fifteen distinct results. The third result is a photograph titled "Christine Jorgensen in Car with Others." It depicts Jorgensen, one of the first widely known transgender women in the United States, in black and white, huddled between three unidentified people in the back of an automobile. A speckled gauze covers the image. It

is raining. The photographer clearly took the image from outside of the car, peering through the rain covered window to get a salacious glimpse of Jorgensen, who doesn't appear to want to be photographed. As the car's other passengers protectively flank her, she can be seen slouching down and pulling up her leopard print fur coat with a gloved hand to partially obscure her face from view. Consequently, the image documents both a violation of trans privacy and an attempt to retain it. It is a striking example to keep in mind in the broader discussion of trans archival privacy that I will continue to address, but here privacy appears more as a thematic or a piece of content, removed from the DTA's own approach to privacy. It does, however, document Jorgensen's attempt to wrest some form of privacy back in her incredibly publicized life following her surgeries. In that way, it is methodologically instructive in the context of excessive or malignant types of trans visibility that I am particularly interested in. This image of Jorgensen prompts me to ask, How might some semblance of privacy be won back when one has already passed into public visibility? How might practices of trans privacy preempt the scenario where one needs to claw back the pieces of their personal life that have escaped containment and have become a risk or, at the very least, a burden?

In grappling with the "traps" of trans visibility in archives, Michelle Caswell notes, "As many trans activists have noted, the heightened visibility brought about by increased representation can further expose vulnerable communities to violence and other forms of oppression."⁴⁶ This is the "trap" of visibility discussed by Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton in their aptly titled anthology, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (2017). In their introduction, they write, "When

⁴⁶ Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (Routledge, 2021), 84.

produced within the cosmology of racial capitalism, the promise of ‘positive representation’ ultimately gives little support or protection to many, if not most, trans and gender non-conforming people, particularly those who are low-income and/or of color—the very people whose lives and labor constitute the ground for figuration of this moment of visibility.”⁴⁷ The authors suggest that the merits of “positive representation” are unevenly distributed and almost always minorly effective for those who enabled many of the celebrated moments of trans visibility in the past fifteen years: poor trans people of color. Visibility and positive representation as ends in themselves rarely provide any significant material support or concrete protections for the trans people that these processes purport to serve. That is still largely the task of the trans community. But forms of visibility and representation can also bolster efforts to grow and strengthen these community bonds in a manner similar to the community-emboldening impact of widely disseminating trans archival records that K.J. Rawson advocates for through the operations of the DTA.

In her reading of this introductory text from *Trap Door*, Caswell also notes that the authors reserve hope for the possibilities for transformation and liberatory change when individuals have greater agency and are involved in the production of their representation.⁴⁸ She then writes that “this paradox, simultaneously holding in tension representation and endangerment, visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, speaks directly to cyclical temporalities, as minoritized communities respond to repeating cycles of oppression and flashes of liberation. The desire or need to be seen

⁴⁷ Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton, “Known Unknowns: An Introduction to *Trap Door*,” In *Trap Door: Tran Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), xv.

⁴⁸ Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (Routledge, 2021), 84.

and heard changes over time in response to the larger political climate.”⁴⁹ Despite the hope for liberatory transformation embedded in much of the popular trans visibility discourse, visibility almost always means more clearly exposing oneself to those who might do you harm. “Visibility” can make trans people a clearer target. In an effort to further speak to this dynamic’s particular temporality, Caswell quotes from trans historian Morgan Page’s contribution to *Trap Door*, “One from the Vaults: Gossip, Access, and Trans History-Telling.” Page writes, “Rather than a linear narrative of progress, what we really seem to be dealing with are cycles of visibility over the past one and a half centuries that have had and continue to have direct, often negative, impacts upon the lived realities of trans peoples. Visibility, this supposed cure-all, might actually be poison.”⁵⁰ Like many changes for the better in the lives of queer and trans people in the recent past, certain types of trans visibility (especially mass media visibility in films, television, and advertising) have helped prompt and deepen anti-trans reactionary politics across almost all social arenas, from the intimately interpersonal to the governmental. This should provoke real concern over the ways that trans people become or are made visible, especially by institutions whose mission and policies are not equipped to account for the real personal risks posed by the wrong kinds of representation. Archives are one of these institutions.

Caswell extends Page’s criticism of unfettered visibility to the context of archives when she notes, “While such observations about the paradox of representation are made in the context of mass media representation, they hold true for archives as well.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 84.

⁵⁰ Morgan M. Page, “One from the Vaults,” In *Trap Door: Tran Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 143.

Visibility, one might ask, for whom?”⁵¹ As much as archives, and community archives in particular, might attempt to enact a politics of representation beyond the pitfalls of popular visibility treated as an end in itself—and beyond failures to account for the uneven distribution of power and oppressions meted out on trans people in particular—they might still pose similar risks for trans people. Who benefits from visibility? The answer is never really straightforward. The right types of visibility might grow our ranks, deepen our self-knowledge, and bolster our political resolve, as evidenced in the passages I have cited from Juliana Gleeson, from Janet Mock, and K.J. Rawson. But again, visibility is no panacea. Not only can it inadvertently expose trans people to increased state and extralegal violence; it can also be deployed cynically to improve the social cachet of an institution deemed too white, too straight, or too cisgender (in short, too aligned with power and the domination of the marginalized) without requiring of that institution a commitment to a more substantive politics that might actually improve the lot of those they fail to represent. These cynical representational gap-filling projects are often those least invested in addressing the reality of visibility’s janus-faced nature as both cure and poison.

Trans visibility in popular media often strikes me as a highly cynical enterprise illustrative of a completely hollow politics of representation for the sake of representation. However, visibility at the level of mass media (e.g., Christine Jorgensen’s celebrity or the Netflix documentary on Marsha Johnson) and visibility in the archives are two different things. But the paradoxical intertwining of visibility and threat—cure and poison—proliferates in both forms. Christine Jorgensen’s image on the

⁵¹ Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (Routledge, 2021), 84.

DTA appears as an archival trace of mass media trans visibility turned threatening. But the presence of the image in the archive, a form of visibility for someone long-gone and already hypervisible in the popular trans historical record, does not constitute a real threat or evidence of the poisonous second face of archival visibility. To understand this distinction, I continue to describe the manner in which we might glean traces of archival records structured by the recognition of threat in the wrong kinds of trans visibility.

Alongside the image of Jorgensen attempting to obscure herself within the car, fourteen other entries appear under the topic “privacy” on the Digital Transgender Archive. This is a rather limited selection considering the near omnipresence of concerns about privacy within the lives of trans people who are forced to survive under the shadow of concerns for their safety created by a surrounding world largely hostile to transness. The other digital objects grouped by “privacy” comprise a collection of newsletters, conference documents, newspaper clippings, and another oral history pulled from the NYC Trans Oral History Project. The types of privacy demonstrated by these objects include the private bathrooms a hotel forced trans visitors to use to protect the “privacy” of the venue’s other cisgender clientele using the standard gender segregated bathrooms;⁵² the privacy of one’s work email or internet searches that can be negated by one’s employer and the consequent risk of communicating digitally about one’s trans identity while at work if not out;⁵³ the privacy desired by members of various

⁵² “Special Notices from an IFGE Convention - Digital Transgender Archive.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/w37636878>.

⁵³ “Renaissance News & Views Vol. 10, No. 7 (July, 1996) - Digital Transgender Archive.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/c534fp017>.

crossdressing societies;⁵⁴ and the privacy of transgender women whose personal details were brought to public attention by unscrupulous newsletters trying to draw in readers with salacious stories of gender deviance.⁵⁵ Another document attests to the desire of trans women in particular for codified laws around trans privacy akin to those used to protect cisgender women in legal cases involving abortion and sex work. Phyllis Randolph Frye, the Executive Director of the International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy (ICTLEP), writes in the conference's published proceedings from 1995:

we the transgendered do not really have a legal right to privacy.
we don't have many legal rights at all, especially in the employment area.
Yet "regular and normal" people flaunt gender all the time with impunity.
An entire culture of people who do not own cows or horses, ranches or
farms, crossdress in country and western attire, in country and western
bars and use such apparel to enhance their self-esteem of to get off
sexually. These trans-WEST-ites do not fear because of their crossdressing,
but we do. something is wrong with this picture!⁵⁶

As she humorously advocates for trans protections within the framework of rights as a kind of guarantee by the state, Frye highlights something integral: the legal armature of

⁵⁴ "Chi Chapter Tribune Vol. 39 Iss. 02 (February, 1999) - Digital Transgender Archive." Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/4q77fr56x>; "Our Special Joy (Vol. 4 No. 3 March, 1984) - Digital Transgender Archive." Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/j96020799>.

⁵⁵ "'News of the World' Censured - Digital Transgender Archive." Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/qz20ss57q>.

⁵⁶ "Proceedings from the Fourth International Conference on Transgender Law and Employment Policy - Digital Transgender Archive." Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/hm50tr815>.

the state, both historically and at present, is woefully inadequate for providing real protections or privacy for trans people. In fact, the government of the United States and countless other nations are actively hostile to the very idea of trans people, let alone their protection and their privacy. As demonstrated by my prior discussion of the role of intra-community trans social reproduction, the protection and proliferation of trans life, especially as it intersects with radical left politics, is sustained largely from within trans communities by other trans people.

To return to how this all manifests concretely on the Digital Transgender Archive, I find it compelling that so few entries of all the digital objects maintained by the DTA are categorically sorted by their mention or demonstration of trans privacy. Though my initial research question was more concerned with the concept and practice of trans anonymity, I now find it more helpful in this context to consider trans anonymity in archival records as only one of many modalities of trans privacy. There is no topic or subject tag present on the Digital Transgender Archive for “anonymity” or “anonymous.” However, if one simply searches the term “anonymous” in the DTA’s search toolbar, far more results appear than in a search for records that have received a “privacy” subject tag—in fact, about thirty times more. There are 458 results yielded by a search for “anonymous.”⁵⁷ This is still dwarfed by the amount of results users will find if searching for “privacy” in this manner rather than sorting by the “privacy” subject tag. That search yields 706 results.⁵⁸ These are the more generalized results the users are likely to first encounter if they attempt to find records related to privacy and anonymity on the DTA.

⁵⁷ “Anonymous - Digital Transgender Archive Search Results.” Accessed June 28, 2026. https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/catalog?utf8=%E2%9C%93&search_field=all_fields&q=anonymous.

⁵⁸ “Privacy - Digital Transgender Archive Search Results.” Accessed June 28, 2026. https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/catalog?utf8=%E2%9C%93&search_field=all_fields&q=privacy.

Users are more inclined to turn to the search bar as their first and last method for finding the contents they desire instead of using more specialized search functions or topic sorting.⁵⁹ In the case of the DTA, it is only really viable to use the topic tag function if you have already located a record with a particular topic tag—say, the Christine Jorgensen image with the topic tag “privacy”—and want to view other records linked by the same topic tag. With the near total failure of functionality in topic-first searches that I have already discussed and the discrepancy between tagged topics and results yielded by the site’s broader search function, questions arise about the efficacy, completeness, and consistency of subject tags compiled in the topic section of the Digital Transgender Archive. However, the amount of records that both kinds of searches turn up does attest to the prevalence of trans records concerning both privacy and anonymity on the Digital Transgender Archive.

To return to what we can actually observe on the DTA about privacy as a type of searchable content or topic, when searching the term “privacy” rather than navigating to related materials through the much narrower topic tag, the results appear to privilege the digital objects hosted by the DTA that feature a “privacy” tag. Other results that first appear have the word “privacy” included in the metadata created by the Digital Transgender Archive for the objects that they host external to their institutions of origin. Following these secondary results, the majority of records that the “privacy” search yields are less clearly linked to metadata that describes “privacy” as a topic or content. Instead, when one navigates to the PDFs that most of these search results link to, the word “privacy” typically appears somewhere buried in each document. It is likely that the

⁵⁹ CITE

DTA employs some sort of AI text search feature that allows the search function to present users with any documents that contain their search terms even if they are not explicitly included in the object metadata.

From the way that the first page of results switches between these three types of “privacy” as metadata or content, the logic of this ordering and the sequence of results is somewhat mystifying. The Jorgensen image makes a striking appearance once again. It appears first among the listed results. Other results include a 1994 issue of *TransSisters: The Journal of Transsexual Feminism*, which features an article on pseudonyms and privacy titled “Noms de Plume, Noms de Guerre: Pride and Privacy” yet does not have a privacy topic tag;⁶⁰ a 1974 newsletter from a Connecticut trans organization called Hartford TVIC that mentions the privacy needs of members looking to “develop some of their feminine potentials” away from prying eyes;⁶¹ a 1997 document titled *Insurance Coverage for Transsexual Employees of the City and County of San Francisco* that enumerates policies aimed at fostering respect, dignity, and privacy for trans people employed by local government in the Bay Area while acknowledging the practical absence of such protections in American law more broadly;⁶² and countless others of a similar variety. Searches for both “anonymous” and “anonymity” return a similarly broad spectrum of digital objects with varying levels of description. In searching for “anonymity,” most results deploy this term in a

⁶⁰ “TransSisters: The Journal of Transsexual Feminism No. 4 (Spring 1994) - Digital Transgender Archive.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/79407x266>.

⁶¹ “Hartford T.V.I.C. (May, 1974) - Digital Transgender Archive.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/f4752g91t>.

⁶² “Insurance Coverage for Transsexual Employees of the City and County of San Francisco - Digital Transgender Archive.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/n009w277d>.

manner that bears little difference from the usages of “privacy” in the records I encountered when searching for that term. Such records include an undated pamphlet from *Labyrinth Foundation Counseling/Gender Services* that promises anonymity for its clients by corresponding with external organizations on their behalf;⁶³ a 1997 advertisement in the Ingersoll Gender Center’s newsletter for an “AA group for transsexual, transgender, and transvestite people” describing how they maintain their principles of anonymity through closed group meetings;⁶⁴ the 1992 “Office Guide and Operating Procedures” for the Massachusetts-based International Foundation for Gender Education, which includes a directory of trans-related services sorted by state where “anonymity” is frequently invoked as a standard privacy practice to protect trans members;⁶⁵ and many others.

Within the International Foundation for Gender Education’s “Office Guide and Operating Procedures,” one particular phrase strikes me. It is included in a description for the Transgender Network in upstate New York and emphasizes some of the slipperiness in the terminology of privacy and anonymity used specifically in the context of trans organizations and records that my description of my search process on the Digital Transgender Archive should demonstrate: “Anonymity and discretion are required to ensure privacy to all.”⁶⁶ Once again, “anonymity” and “privacy” are promised

⁶³ “Labyrinth Foundation Counseling/Gender Service Pamphlet - Digital Transgender Archive.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/7d278t12c>

⁶⁴ “The Ingersoll Message, Vol. 3 No. 5 (August, 1997) - Digital Transgender Archive.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/v118rd81m>.

⁶⁵ “International Foundation for Gender Education: Office Guide and Operating Procedures - Digital Transgender Archive.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/8p58pd227>

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

but an explicit description of how they might be practiced concretely is conspicuously absent. This is similar to the privacy policies listed by the Digital Transgender Archives itself, although those do place some emphasis on their actual practice of anonymizing records. What this absence of explicit instruction or methodology indicates is the role of community knowledge and practice that can be difficult to articulate as a set of universal principles or rules. Anonymity, discretion, and privacy may be emphasized by an organization in their rules or governing principles to assure potential members that they will remain safe and secure if they choose to participate, but these things are only made real through the communal adoption of tactics and strategies honed with other trans people to protect each other. These are acts of trans social reproduction, or as my friend Donna Allen puts it in a song titled “Nothing Can Stop Us Now,” *transsexual solidarity*:

Transsexual solidarity,
In practice and in faith.
So to save our sister’s breath
When she is in fear of death.⁶⁷

Trans social reproduction comprise acts of mutual care, protection, and love that help to “save our sister’s breath.” This is accomplished by the practice of “flocking” that Treva Ellison describes as a Black trans femme praxis. It is also what the writings of Leslie Feinberg, Juliana Gleeson, Nat Raha, and Noah Zazanis all elaborate in some form or another. Trans social reproduction is the kind of communal adaptation together with one’s trans kin and comrades in the interest of mutual preservation: transsexual

⁶⁷ Donna Allen and Ever/Never Records, “Melon Kolly / Parker’s First Song Diary, by Parker Allen.” Accessed June 28, 2026. <https://evernever-records.bandcamp.com/album/melon-kolly-parkers-first-song-diary>.

solidarity. One way this might be accomplished is through practices of privacy that include anonymization, secrecy, and other kinds of solidarity born out of mutual experiences of threat to preserve some form of trans safety.

In *Trans Femme Futures: Abolitionist Ethics for Transfeminist Worlds*, authors Nat Raha and Mijke van der Drift describe how trans safety has been and should be a structuring concern for any transformative work seeking the liberation of trans people and their protection from anti-trans violence. They write:

Concretely, one of the ways to orient our collective endeavours around anti-violence is centring community safety. In recent years (especially since 2017), anti-transphobic and anti-fascist feminist organising has coalesced around challenging TERF platforms and spaces. While these interventions are important, practices change when prioritising the safety needs of marginalised trans people, including trans sex workers, migrants, Black and Brown folks, trans femmes and women, gender non-conforming people, and queers and women more broadly. Prioritising safety needs is a direct and action-oriented challenge to our dehumanisation and counters the dismissal of our exclusion from social life and its attendant affective economies. It challenges climates that enable transfemicide and the conditions in which direct and indirect transmisogynist and transphobic harm manifest. . . . It is work that builds and maintains a qualitative and direct understanding of issues, problems or situations that may arise in the particularities of the work we do and the lives we lead, or may wish to lead.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Raha, Nat, and Mijke van der Drift. *Trans Femme Futures: Abolitionist Ethics for Transfeminist Worlds*. Pluto Press, 2024. P. 176.

Raha and van der Drift's description of practices of mutually built trans safety gets at precisely how privacy as but one modality of trans safety is maintained in the absence of fully developed policies to ensure its protection. It is work spearheaded by organizers and community members in collectivity rather than a process of siloed institutional reform. The reliance on trans community members to build real safety through privacy is evident throughout the search results for "privacy" and "anonymity" on the Digital Transgender Archive. In those cases, privacy was only gestured toward officially while the labor of actually maintaining the privacy and safety of vulnerable trans people clearly fell to the broader community of other trans people faced with the same reality. At the end of the day, it is trans people that are the most responsible for the safety of each other in a society structured by transphobia and increasingly motivated by reaction against the perceived specter of a perverse and shape-shifting trans threat propagated by "Marxist gender ideology."⁶⁹ Or more briefly and familiarly: We keep ourselves safe.

The world does not want us to be trans. But trans people continue to reinforce and protect each other as our communities swell despite pluriform threats to our existence and well-being. In her 2017 essay "Transition and Abolition: Notes on Marxism and Trans Politics," Juliana Gleeson writes:

Despite the violence, more and more trans women are finding acceptance and recognition by those around them. How has this happened, in the face of widespread disparagement and oppression? While apparently spontaneous to those outside trans communities, a proliferation of dedicated organization and labor has gone into trans women's sporadic success in living and surviving

⁶⁹ Butcher, Jonathan. "'gender,' Marxism, and the Search for Power." The Heritage Foundation. Accessed March 21, 2026. <https://www.heritage.org/progressivism/commentary/gender-marxism-and-the-search-power>.

openly. Beneath the “moment” there is a churn of activity, largely invisible to those it does not serve, but actively contributing to and progressively nurturing trans consciousness. Trans women have been encouraged to live their womanhood openly through networks of mutual support and solidarity, which have expanded and strengthened significantly in recent years. Such networks have been constituted both online and IRL. These developments form the basis for the current surge of “visibility,” but reach their limit in that they serve only to supplant the work usually done by the heterosexual family, and not to replace it. The successful operation of these largely unacknowledged networks is the basis for an untold number of trans women reaching the necessary state of education, confidence and consciousness to live openly. This increasingly commonplace development (a trajectory of confusion leading through to clarity, and then action) has as its secondary consequence the startling levels of violence in backlash against it.⁷⁰

Gleeson’s writing beautifully elucidates the way that trans women protect and reproduce each other simultaneously. But, as Gleeson notes, this process is janus-faced. Increasingly robust networks that enable trans life in community with other trans people beget increasing visibility. In turn, this yields increased repression and threats to trans people as they have become more visible as targets for scrutiny, repression, and violence at all levels, from interpersonal transphobia to national legislation targeting gender marker changes or trans medical care. These are manifestations of trans

⁷⁰Jules Joanne Gleeson, “Transition and Abolition: Notes on Marxism and Trans Politics,” Viewpoint Magazine, July 19, 2017. <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/07/19/transition-and-abolition-notes-on-marxism-and-trans-politics/>.

visibility turned poisonous or, at the very least, trans visibility instrumentalized for socially poisonous ends.

I have addressed the ways that different archival records maintained by the Digital Transgender Archive express attitudes towards privacy, anonymization, and safety shaped by the threats to trans life that the wrong kinds of visibility can generate. However, I'd like to return to the ways that archival policy might mirror the historical and ongoing strategies for trans self-preservation through privacy and anonymity. From here, I will continue to describe the manner in which we might glean traces of archival policy structured by the recognition of threat in the wrong kinds of trans visibility. Gender and women's studies scholar Toby Beauchamp provides a compelling account of how trans identities are both threatened and constituted by practices of surveillance in a manner that parallels earlier discussions of the double-edged sword of trans visibility. In the book *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices*, Beauchamp writes:

One broad task of this book has been to reframe a common approach to transgender studies and transgender people: it moves away from a search for truth and legibility to consider instead how surveillance practices make gender nonconformity visible, constructing it as inherently deceptive in ways that justify continued surveillance to locate its truth. Sometimes this scrutiny operates without formally naming the category of transgender, yet still ensnares many different bodies and identities that transgress normative gender; in other cases, surveillance measures overtly cite the transgender-identified while manipulating that focus to also strengthen scrutiny of other population categories. [...] state

agencies constantly recalibrate surveillance technologies, and informal surveillance practices continually adjust to more effectively track those bodies and identities that evade their grasp.⁷¹

Beauchamp's analysis helps to describe how even nuanced forms of trans visibility might increase threats to trans people and people of other marginalized identities as the national security apparatus and surveillance technologies attempt to scrutinize the categorical illegibilities of gender deviance. The majority of his writing for this book preceded the more brazen attacks on trans identity originating from the federal government in the post-transgender tipping point era, but his observations still hold. Beauchamp then elaborates, "Greater recognition has not staunched continuing surveillance practices that take new shapes under the war on terror and the rapidly ascending authoritarian movements in the United States and elsewhere. New surveillance technologies and data-sharing networks—like the linked databases required by the Real ID Act—feed on visibility, which can also refine conceptions of what transgender means and to whom it properly applies, so that the expansion of transgender visibility paradoxically narrows the purview of transgender politics."⁷² According to Beauchamp, the formalized trans recognition that popular visibility may yield increasingly occurs only in narrowed parameters meant to serve the categorization efforts of the state's surveillance apparatus. In his account, this limits who or what gets to count as "transgender" and effectively limits the purview of transgender politics and the multiform identities that it might serve and encompass solidaristically.

⁷¹ Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. p. 132.

⁷² Ibid. p. 132-133

But the “politics” in question here is different from and broader than the sort of radical trans community politics that I have invoked numerous times throughout this thesis. I have continually described a more specific constellation of far left trans politics in an effort to describe the ways that both trans life and political identity precede and exceed the boundaries of “transgender politics” as a question of rights and recognitions granted by government officials and the pluriform legal apparatus of the United States. While I do not mean to discount how much formal rights and legal protections can mean for transgender people, I would like to note once more that it is ultimately we who keep ourselves safe when the government fails us as it almost always does. Legal protections or shallow gains in formal rights only mean so much when the ground on which these protections stand seems to erode further and further with every election cycle. And who will enforce legal protections? The police? The courts? Police and the carceral state propped up by the US judicial system pose one the most significant risks to the wellbeing of trans people historically and at present. The examples I have presented throughout this thesis have repeatedly shown this to be the case. Agitating for modest reforms within a system that is foundationally transphobic, anti-Black, governed by the logic of capital, and bound to the perpetuation of reactionary social forms can only yield so much good. The problems that proliferate in the current organization of our world run too deep to be fixed by functionally cosmetic modifications. Trans people invested in liberatory politics largely recognize that another world is necessary.⁷³

⁷³ Jules Joanne Gleeson, “Transition and Abolition: Notes on Marxism and Trans Politic,” Viewpoint Magazine, July 19, 2017. <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/07/19/transition-and-abolition-notes-on-marxism-and-trans-politics/>.

Again, I return to the writing of Juliana Gleeson, who compellingly describes this relationship between trans liberation and the shortcomings of a liberal politics centered on institutional reform and the desire for an expansion of trans rights. She writes:

“Trans liberalism” is an inevitable feature of the objective shifts underway within society: undoubtedly the stigmatization, unfamiliarity and ignorance trans women face in much of the world has begun to diminish. Many will still hope to style themselves as respectable subjects, with all the tacitly reactionary commitments this entails. But the very paucity of what the conventional political establishment has to offer to most trans women is striking. It seems likely a relatively high proportion of trans women will be involved in emancipatory political activism of one kind or another. Many trans women have found our way to revolutionary politics not because we are virtuous, but because we are regularly exposed to the worst in the world. The conditions of trans women should be addressed as a concrete lived predicament, which will ultimately find political redress through revolutionary action.⁷⁴

As Gleeson notes, the political conventions of the present have so little to offer us as trans women. That is, unless one is willing to abandon true solidarity with their trans kin and comrades and wholeheartedly embrace the most superficial reforms to the current state of things. That dynamic plays out in “reactionary commitments” to a respectable trans subjecthood that does not rock the boat too much, that is not really radical, that is not sexually deviant, and that generally does not upset good, normal people. In other words, this would require one to forget or misrecognize why “we are regularly exposed

⁷⁴ Ibid.

to the worst in the world.” It’s not just because trans people are wronged but because the world itself is wrong. That is, at least, the world as it is currently organized around the deprivation and immiseration of many. This “many” includes trans people whose unique form of immiseration should allow us to see the ways that the political order of the present immiserates us all, albeit unevenly.

Gleeson’s analysis poses interesting questions about the efficacy of privacy standards as an institutional practice, even in the case of standards developed by community archives such as the Digital Transgender Archive. If the condition of trans women necessitates more radical political solutions than modest institutional reforms, then the role in the process of real change that institutional privacy policies can play should be interrogated. Rather than considering these policies and the existence of their institutions as a sufficient political practice in themselves, it is more beneficial for our purposes to consider them as but one tool among a broader set of tools used to protect and enact trans safety in the manner described by Nat Raha. At the same time as trans community archives like the Digital Transgender Archive and the NYC Trans Oral History Project enable and bolster the labor of trans social reproduction, they must also attempt to protect those they document and serve from the traps of visibility.

Explicit policy on the maintenance and protection of trans privacy has been limited in the examples I’ve described. But should it be otherwise? Such directness might better enable surveillance or the legal targeting of trans identities, as Toby Beauchamp suggests in other contexts regarding the legibility of transgender identity to the state. Perhaps the necessity of trans social networks substantiating much of the work of trans privacy and safety beyond any concrete policies enacted by institutions

like universities, archives, places of employment, and the government is preferable to the alternative. Still, as Gleeson writes, “Much of the worst violence trans people live with is done during childhood, by parents and other legally mandated guardians. Much more is done by prison systems, police and other arms of the state which reformists and liberals have no answer to, and tacitly wish to leave in place.”⁷⁵ These types of violence that trans people face are too real and becoming too visible in the wrong ways or at the wrong time can make it easier for a world that is foundationally hostile to being trans to swallow us up.

This puts the role of trans archival privacy policies into perspective. While privacy policies might not be able to guarantee safety and can only do so much to further the work of trans social reproduction at an institutional level, it is still worth considering how such policies might be developed and effectively deployed as a kind of harm mitigation or reduction. One of the ways that trans archival repositories can deepen their commitment to harm reduction through their privacy policies is a more explicit discussion of the ways that records may be instrumentalized by the institutions of the carceral state, like surveillance, police, and prisons, to undermine the safety of the subjects of archival records. In their introductory *Oral History Handbook*, the NYC Trans Oral History Project writes:

Aside from the narrator’s own privacy, the main things to be aware of usually pertain to revealing information about other people (keep their privacy in mind too), discussion of illegal activities (especially if the statute of limitations has not passed), and in some cases, discussion of immigration status. Because trans

⁷⁵ Ibid.

people are often in tight-knit communities—we know a lot about each others’ business!—and because trans people are more likely to participate in criminalized economies, it’s important to point out these considerations before getting started.⁷⁶

The criminalization of the work done by trans people, as well as the historical criminalization of trans people in general, is recognized explicitly in the guidance the NYCTOHP provides for those conducting oral histories in order to flag the effect of this reality on the privacy and safety of the subject of a trans oral history and those that they mention in their narration.⁷⁷ This passage also suggests that the policing of trans criminality frequently dovetails with the policing of the border and the targeting of immigrants. This should be a surprise to no one attuned to the ways that the worst of the world is wrought upon minoritized populations of all kinds. This acknowledgement by the NYCTOHP is a step in the right direction as it recognizes the stakes of trans privacy beyond a generalized and abstract invocation of the need for personal privacy most broadly. It is a solidaristic recognition of the real trans struggle against the world as it exists. The world is and has been organized against us. This is what trans Marxists and radicals have repeatedly demonstrated, from Marsha P. Johnson to Juliana Gleeson, Leslie Feinberg to Nat Raha. Concerns for privacy and trans safety should overtake any depoliticized commitment to trans visibility in archival records that does not account for what we face upon becoming *too visible*. But archives should also

⁷⁶ NYC Trans Oral History Project, “NYC Trans Oral History Project Oral History Handbook,” NYC Trans Oral History Project. Accessed June 9, 2026. https://nyctransoralhistory.org/content/uploads/2021/09/NYCTOH_Handbook.pdf.

⁷⁷ While not all of the identities that were criminalized historically for gender transgression and deviance would have understood or used the terms “trans” or “transgender,” I believe that contemporary usages of the term “trans” in particular are capacious enough to account for this spectrum of experience.

recognize their limited capacity to provide real safety for trans people. So much of the limited safety that exists for trans people is the result of the labor of trans social reproduction that can be sustained in part by the work of trans archives but not carried by archives alone. They are only a small part of the broader work of trans liberation.

CONCLUSION

Trans archives are critical to the labor of trans social reproduction and trans liberation at the same time as they create unique risks for the privacy and safety of trans people generally and those committed to the radical political project of that liberation in particular. This tension does and must guide how trans archives approach questions of privacy while preserving accessibility. Throughout this thesis, I have described trans archives that have been critical to the social reproduction of my own trans life as well as others who, when taken together, may collectively constitute a trans community. The Digital Transgender Archive has been my primary focus, but I have also considered the work of the NYC Trans Oral History Project and less institutional endeavors like Tormaline's archival collation of Marsha P. Johnson's legacy. In describing the particularly trans social reproductive labor of these archives, I sought to establish a palpable linkage between the critical work of trans archives and the development, sustainability, and flourishing of trans life more broadly. To this end, I incorporated analyses of the relationship between archives and a number of trans people of note in popular media, in the field of archival studies, and among scholars promulgating new trans-inflected Marxist and Marxist-feminist political theories. These include the writer and historian Juliana Gleeson, poet and scholar Nat Raha, scholar Treva Ellison, writer

and trans rights advocate Janet Mock, artist and activist Tourmaline, scholar and archivist K.J. Rawson, and numerous others. I referenced the work of these members of the trans community in the context of trans archives, privacy, and trans social reproduction and identity-constitution to establish concretely how trans archives help to socially reproduce many different kinds of trans life.

Through a survey of literature concerning social reproduction, trans identities, and community-driven and trans archival practices, I have demonstrated how trans social reproduction through archives helps to fortify and grow trans communities despite widespread transphobic threats to our lives and wellbeing at all levels of the social and political. Like all sorts of other trans organizations, trans archives recognize the types of threat that manifest both ambiently and acutely in the lives of trans people of the past, present, and future. This is readily observable in the cases of the NYC Trans Oral History Project and the Digital Transgender Archive. At the same time, trans archives produce a heightened state of visibility for the trans people they document, especially if those records are made freely accessible online. Running counter to more optimistic popular celebrations of trans visibility—from archives to mass media—as a political victory and a desirable end in itself, we must recognize the paradoxical intertwining of visibility and threat—cure and poison—that proliferates in all kinds of trans visibility. These threats proliferate because trans people continue to be convenient political targets for the powerful forces of reaction that link transness with social and political degeneracy. Consequently, the privacy and safety of trans people is a primary concern within and beyond archives that maintain an active stake in the trans community as it exists in archive-ready historical traces and in the amorphous, messy, and beautiful

trans sociality that creates these traces. The way that these concerns contour the practices of trans archive and the trans community vary significantly.

Privacy and safety for trans people is never a guarantee. Not when threats to our lives, our ways of being, our *everything* proliferate largely undaunted at the highest levels of government and in the most intimate of spaces, like the families that raised many of us. These threats fundamentally shape the ways that we as trans people approach and relate to the world. It is also why so many of us carry a desire for a different, better world. The image of Christine Jorgensen obscuring herself as photographers leered through the window of her car prompted me to ask: How might some semblance of privacy be won back when one has already passed into public visibility? How might practices of trans privacy preempt the scenario where one needs to claw back the pieces of their personal life that have escaped containment and have become a risk or, at the very least, a burden? Here, I am less interested in the context of trans celebrity that might help to better make sense of Jorgensen's unique predicament. Instead, this thesis situates my questions about privacy and safety in the context of the trans social reproduction enabled by archival access as it dovetails with the reproduction of radical political solidarities. At the same time as I build a case for the socially reproductive function of trans archives, I acknowledge the necessity of limited or modified visibility in trans archives to preserve trans privacy and safety. Archives help preserve trans history and provide those who need it most with access to their collective trans pasts. Open digital archives contribute so much to the accessibility of these pasts. But freely accessible digital archives also produce a heightened state of visibility, and thus of risk, for the trans people that they document. Transphobic threats continue to

haunt us and show no signs of yielding, so concerns for the privacy and safety of transgender people that these trans archives serve and document must structure more institutional approaches to archival access. Digital archives like the DTA and the NYCTOHP provide helpful examples of how trans community archives are grappling with these issues here and now through their privacy policies, missions, and collecting methodologies. In a particularly effective example, the NYCTOHP explicitly addresses the oppressions faced by most trans people and calls trans people into its project by recognizing their struggle in the records that it aims to produce of their lives. This sets realistic stakes for the privacy and safety of trans people with whom they are in community. While institutional attempts at relative neutrality are standard practice, the adoption of the NYCTOHP's solidaristic commitment to highly political trans struggles in other trans archival contexts may help to more effectively hone practices of privacy and harm reduction for trans people. We should let examples like this carry us forward even as we consider the lessons about trans social reproduction that our radical trans forebears have left us. Trans archives sustain us, grow our ranks, and deepen our self-understanding, but beyond the walls and institutional limits of archives, the work of trans liberation—the real guarantor of our privacy and safety—continues to forge a new world inside of this decaying one.

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