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AN INTERVIEW WITH ANN GIAGNI

President of the Board recalls how her history and the Mazer's intertwined



Celebration of the launch of the partnership between UCLA Center for the Study of Women, UCLA Library, and the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, November, 2009: left to right, Kathleen McHugh; Ann Giagni; Sheila J. Kuehl; Abbe Land; Gary E. Strong; and April De Stefano.

ANN GIAGNI demonstrated many talents and had various careers before becoming president of the board of the June Mazer Lesbian Archives in 1996: she trained as a ballerina throughout high school, studied math and English at New York University, and directed a production of “Berlin to Broadway with Kurt Weill” that was nominated for a Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award in 1986. However, Giagni traces her interest in archival work to her love of libraries as a child, which eventually led to a 10-year stint as a children’s librarian, including three years at the Alma Reaves Woods–Watts Branch of the Los Angeles Public Library.

“I loved that . . . that was a fabulous job,” says Giagni during an interview over coffee at Literati Café in Santa Monica. “And that’s sort of where my interest in joining the Archives board came from: my experience being a librarian.

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And I just had an affinity for libraries, even as a kid. I used to spend a lot of time in them. I just liked the environment.”

Although Giagni, an avid reader, was drawn to the quiet spaces and free books offered by libraries, her work in Watts helped her discover the library as a place of social engagement and a way to interact with new communities. “[We started] doing activities for the kids because we had a lot of kids that were latchkey kids, so they would hang out. . . . There was a housing project across the street, so a lot of the kids from the housing project would just hang out with us because it was safe and something to do. We would keep them occupied. It was a very, very enriching experience for me, and I think it was good for the kids, too.”

Giagni became even more intertwined with the communities of South Central and East Los Angeles when she operated a book mobile in those areas, which she describes as “one of the most fun jobs I’ve ever had.”

“When you go to the community sites, you’re only there for an hour or two,” says Giagni. “For that little piece of time you become one thread in the fabric of that community,



and I still remember that. There would be a crowd of people waiting for us when we pulled up. They were regulars, and we got to know them and we knew what they liked. So we were always looking for books: oh, this book for so-and-so at this stop, and this book for so-and-so at that stop. It was a very personalized service, but I got to know L.A. really, really well.”

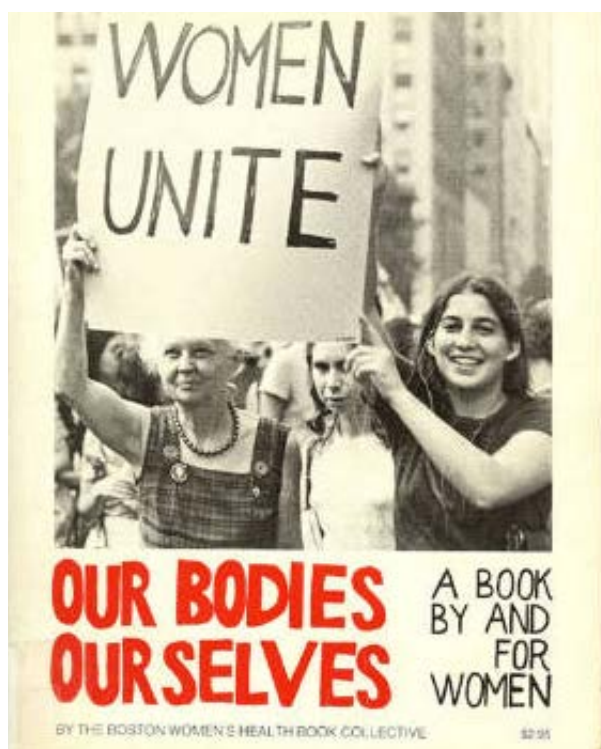
These combined interests in working with communities and archiving and disseminating meaningful stories



Giagni’s love of books and libraries led her to work for the Los Angeles Public Library, including three years at the Alma Reaves Woods–Watts Branch (above right) and to operate a bookmobile in South Central and East Los Angeles.

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made the Archives an ideal venue for Giagni to find meaningful work and community. Giagni, who was born in 1948, also found herself invested in the Mazer Archives because she remembered a time when lesbians and lesbian history seemed to be invisible.

"I grew up in a theater family; my dad is a choreogra-

pher. I knew about gay guys because my parents would have gay male couples over for dinner. I was aware of that as a little kid. I just never knew that two women could love each other," says Giagni. "It was not anywhere, it was not visible at all. They were not apparent in the general culture. The invisibility was stunning. I was vaguely aware

Giagni came into her own as a lesbian and an activist during the boom of feminism and LGBT activism that took place in the 1970s.

that Tim and Hugh were together. They lived together, they came to dinner together, they did things together, I was aware of that, but I never saw two women in the same union."

Giagni was at NYU when Stonewall, one of the major events to raise cultural consciousness about gay men, lesbians, and the Gay Liberation Movement, took place. However, she wasn't "out or aware of [her]self" at the time. Giagni came into her own as a lesbian and an activist during the boom of feminism and LGBT activism that took place in the 1970s.

"There was just an explosion. There's no other way to describe it," says Giagni. "It was kind of like the Big Bang starting the universe. There was nothing, and then there was everything. It was just like that. One of the catalysts was *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, out of the Boston [Women's Health Book] Collective, and there was a lot of interest in women's health and the way the medical community was mistreating us. So there was women's health, and then there was women's publishing, and then there was

women's music, and then there were women's bookstores, and then there were collectives everywhere. There was a lot of what was called "consciousness raising." It went from nothing to everything so fast. It was breathtaking, it was very, very exhilarating to live through that."

Giagni points out that this boom also led to the birth of the June L. Mazer Archives, originally called the West Coast Lesbian Collections, which were founded in 1981 in Oakland, CA. Lillian Faderman describes its origin on www.mazerlesbianarchives.org: "In the 1970s, the lesbian world began to change. We realized, as we dreamt of the Lesbian Nation, that we could and must make our lesbian communities strong. Part of our struggle was to fight the erasure that had always been used to keep us weak. We had to proclaim not only our immediate presence but the fact that many went before us, that we did indeed have a history. It was in this climate that the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives was created."

In the 1980s, many of the lesbian and feminist organizations that flourished in the 1970s began to wane.

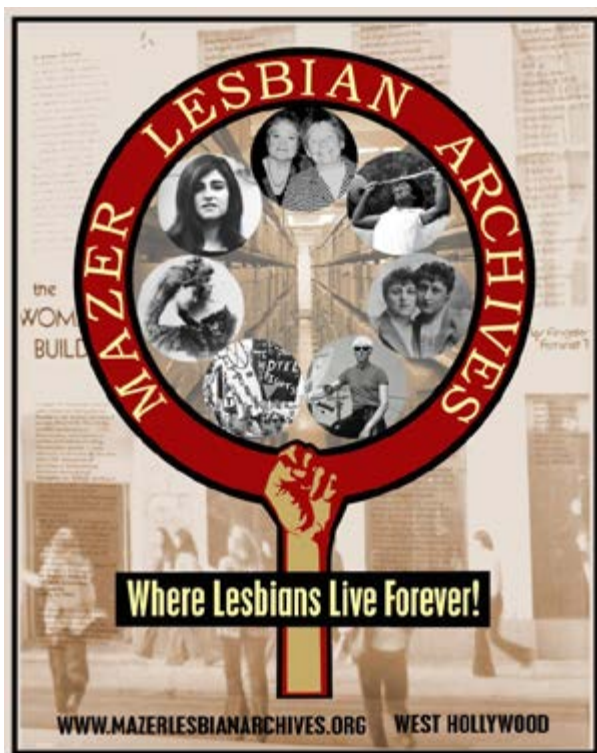
Giagni attributes this waning to several factors. Perhaps primarily, lesbians began to pool their resources to help, fight for, and fight with gay men who were dying of AIDS while the government and population at large stigmatized and neglected them. "It was the lesbian community at the very beginning that stepped in to help," says Giagni. "And that, I think, really diverted a lot of our money and our energy into saying, 'Wake up world. You can't let these people die.' And that was a long effort."

Groups and organizations also began to fade simply because it is difficult to maintain grassroots organizations over a long period of time: financial resources run out, staff members come and go, and group's goals lose and gain momentum as culture changes. "Creation and maintenance have two different skill sets," says Giagni. "One is very exhilarating, and the other is a lot of hard work."

Giagni also stopped her work as an activist when she fell ill in 1984. After recovering from an illness in the mid 1990s, she sought to rejoin the activist community. She was shocked to find how much it had diminished.

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June L. Mazer Archives, originally called the West Coast Lesbian Collections, was founded in 1981 in Oakland, CA. Six years later it moved to Los Angeles. The Archives acquired its present name after the death of June Mazer, to honor her work as a community activist and invaluable supporter of the Archives.

"When I got well enough and I was ready to re-enter being active . . . it was like everything had disappeared!" says Giagni. "It was like, 'Well, where is everything?'...I was just stunned that so much that had been there when I had to drop out just wasn't there anymore. So I talked to some friends of mine and asked 'What's around? I'd like to reconnect. I'd like to get involved again.'"

Through her contacts, Giagni discovered the Celebration Theatre in West Hollywood, which allowed her to draw on her experiences in the theater, and the Mazer Archives, which fulfilled the passion that was born in libraries. Both organizations satisfied Giagni's desire to be an active part of Los Angeles's LGBTQ community. She joined the board in 1996.

"I had a friend of mine call somebody on the board of the archives. She said, 'Well, I know this person, and she's interested in joining the board.' Because I had decided that I wanted to be involved at the board level, not as a volunteer," says Giagni. "They didn't call for a

really, really long time . . . So, finally, they called me, and I came in, they interviewed me, and I was accepted onto the board."

Giagni's interview, also her first board meeting, brought with it a big surprise. "At the same meeting they said, 'Now, who will be our president?' Because the gal who was going to be the president was going off the board, and they all looked at me," says Giagni. "I said, 'I can't be your president, you don't even know me!' And I became president at that meeting. I was the only one, nobody else would do it, and I was just the new kid in town, and I said, 'Well, this is ridiculous.' So I was copresident for three months, to sort of get me acquainted. And there I was, and here I am." Giagni has remained president of the board for 17 years.

Given her lengthy tenure with the Mazer Archives, Giagni seems uniquely equipped to assess why the Archives have managed to stay open and succeed in the decades during which other lesbian institutions and organizations founded during the same period shut

their doors. Giagni highlights several potential reasons for the organization's longevity, the first being its long-term, timeless mission.

"I was in a collective and our goal was to provide an alternative to the bars on Friday night. We ultimately stopped doing what we were doing. . . because there was so much going on that that need was being met and the attendance at our activities was declining. So we thought, 'Well, they don't need us anymore. Mission accomplished!' Who would have thought its mission would still be valid decades later? One [reason for the archive's longevity] is that the purpose of the Archives, just by its nature, is long term. It's to collect and preserve lesbian history and feminist history. It's a mission that goes on forever."

The support of the City of West Hollywood has been fundamental to the success of the Archives. "We have a space [from the city of West Hollywood], and we don't pay for it; it's rent-free. That, has allowed us to stay afloat. We went through a very difficult time; at one point, there were only three people left on the board,

and we had to rebuild ourselves from that."

Giagni points out that, while the Archives always tries to attract young people to its board and as volunteers, the organization has thrived because of the dedication of a group of women who are established in their careers, who have made Los Angeles their permanent home, and who have a deep personal investment in the maintenance of lesbian history (partly because they remember when it was impossible to find).

"[Younger women often] come in, they're very enthusiastic, they finish school, and they move out of town. So our board is made up of older women. . . who have a career now or are retired. And we're on the board because we have a commitment to the mission. We've been very clear that we are a working board.. We've developed a process where we invite on to the board people that we've gotten to know, people who have exhibited, independent of us, an interest in and a caring for the Archives and for the whole concept of

preserving history. I think we've been very fortunate that, as a board, we have been able to conduct activities and grow the Archives in a way that has attracted other responsible lesbians."

In 2007, the Mazer Archives formed a relationship with the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, a union that has also contributed to the Archives' longevity and supported its growth. Board member Ann Powell, affiliated with UCLA's Department of Education at the time, set up meetings with various campus organizations. CSW learned of the interest and contacted them.

"Originally we were going to catalogue about five collections," says Giagni. "We knew that Outfest had a relationship with UCLA, where they deposited their moving images in the UCLA Film & Television Archive. So I said to [CSW Director] Kathleen [McHugh], 'Could we have something like that, where we put our materials on file?' Because I knew that our space was limited. We had stuff in garages, we had [boxes] and

MAKING INVISIBLE HISTORIES VISIBLE

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we didn't even know what was in them, and we didn't have any of the proper conditions for maintaining material over time."

McHugh arranged a meeting with UCLA's University Librarian, Gary Strong, and several other library administrators, to discuss a possible collaboration between CSW, UCLA Library, and the Mazer Archives.

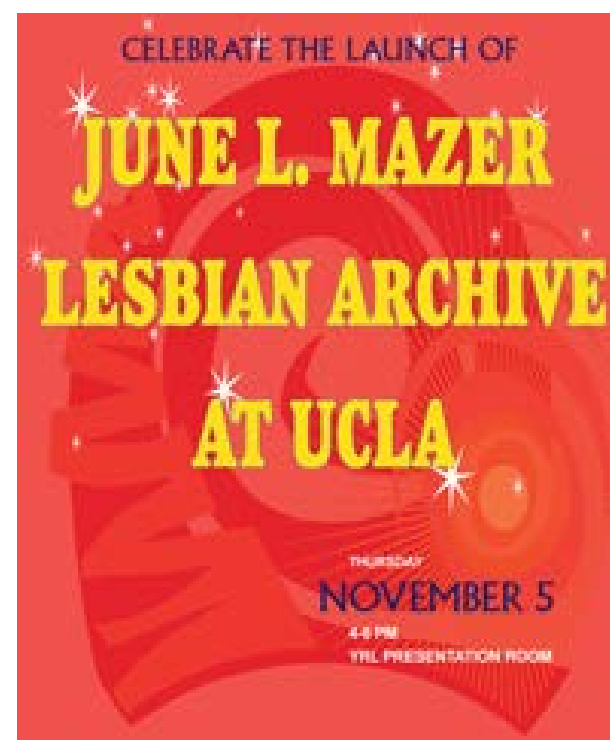
"We had a conversation in which they asked us what we were interested in, and I laid out what I knew about the Outfest relationship, and he told us why he couldn't do that and gave all the reasons. At the end of the meeting he said, 'Well, what you should do is go back and think about what you really want, and we can meet one more time and see if anything comes of it.' Later, after things were going well, we each acknowledged to each other that when I left and when he left we both thought to ourselves, 'This is never going to work.'"

However, Giagni and the members of the board met and came up with a list of goals that they hoped to achieve through a potential relationship with UCLA.

"We wanted our materials preserved properly, and we wanted the expanded space," says Giagni. "What was most critical to us was that the material not disappear, that it stay in L.A., and that it get processed. If it stayed unprocessed, that would be a form of disappearing it."

Giagni and her colleagues had another meeting with Strong, Sharon Farb, Associate University Librarian for Collection Management and Scholarly Communication, and McHugh. The group began a discussion that led to the agreement that the three units have today.

In 2007, the UCLA Center for Community Partnerships awarded a two-year Competitive Support for Campus Partners grant to McHugh and CSW—"The 'Access Mazer' Project: Organizing and Digitizing the Lesbian-Feminist Archive in Los Angeles—to inventory, organize, preserve, and digitize several key Los Angeles-themed collections. During the first year of the project, CSW collaborated with the UCLA University Archives and the University Librarian's office on the processing of the five collections; the CSW project staff worked with the Mazer to assess,



organize, and create extensive finding aids for the Connexus/Centro de Mujeres Collection, Margaret Cruikshank Papers, the Lillian Faderman Papers, the Southern California Women for Understanding Collection, and the Women Against Violence Against Women Collection.

"[CSW and the board] agreed that we want to keep the relationship going," says Giagni. "We think that it's

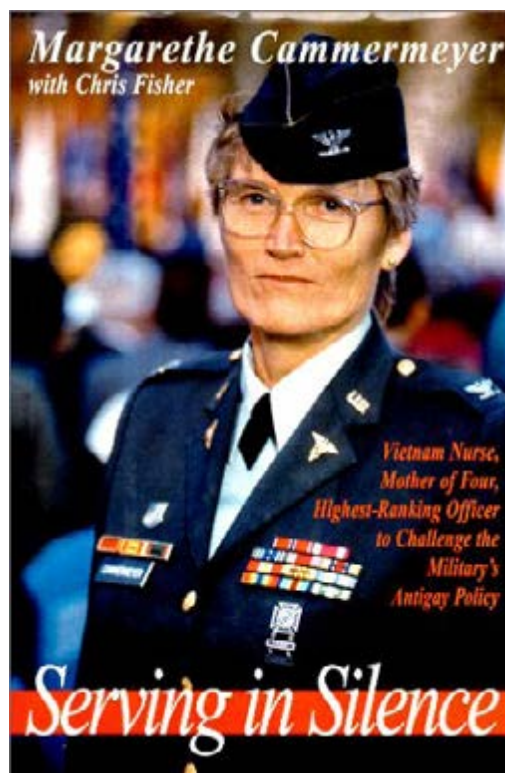
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been very beneficial to us. Giagni has particularly valued board members' one-to-one relationships with CSW's administrators and staff. "Sharon [Farb] and Kathleen [McHugh] have been our liaisons with UCLA, and myself and Angela [Brinskele] have been the Mazer's liaisons, so that foursome is where most of the communications and decisions get made. At worst, it's been merely cordial, but most of the time it's fun and we have a great time and it works really well."

In 2011, CSW applied for and received a National Endowment for the Humanities grant for another Mazer project, titled "Making Invisible Histories Visible: Preserving the Legacy of Lesbian Feminist Activism and Writing in Los Angeles." Over three years, CSW archivists will arrange, describe, digitize, and make physically and electronically accessible two major clusters of Mazer Archives collections related to West Coast lesbian/feminist activism and writing since the 1930s.

In addition to helping the Mazer Archives board members achieve the goals they set out in their early



meetings, their partnership with UCLA has also led to the expansion of their collections. "We've gotten gifts because of the UCLA connection," says Giagni. "We got a gift from a woman, Beverly Hickok, up in the San Francisco area. Margarethe Cammermeyer, the lesbian officer [featured in the movie *Serving in Silence*, starring Glenn Close] gave

us her collection, including a uniform. We've gotten some other important collections because of the UCLA relationship, and we can go out and really urge people to give to us because we don't have the space limitations. That has been a real gift out of this relationship."

The relationship with UCLA has been mutually beneficial. Giagni emphasizes that the Mazer Archives board's role in curating and maintaining the Archives and encouraging acquisitions is as strong as ever. The partnership has also allowed the Mazer Archives to grow in productive new directions, increasing projects geared toward community outreach and education. Recent events have included a reading of *Aleta's Stories* by Angela Bowen—a dancer, teacher, mother, activist, professor, and author—accompanied by a documentary in progress about Bowen by Jennifer Abod; a celebration of the life and work of activist and Lesbian News founder Jinx Beers in celebration of her 80th year; and an open house to introduce the public to the Mazer Archives board, inform them of current and future

MAKING INVISIBLE HISTORIES VISIBLE

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Please join us in Celebrating the life and times of
Angela Bowen; Dancer, Teacher, Mother, Activist, Professor, Author

Mazer Lesbian Archives
Autographed books will be sold and Angela Bowen will be available for photographs.

Readings from *Alela's Stories* and Screening of *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen* a film in progress by award winning documentarian, Jennifer Abod




WHEN
Sunday, April 14, 2013
3pm-5pm

WHERE
Mazer Lesbian Archives
626 N. Robertson Blvd.
West Hollywood, CA 90069
TEL: 310 659-2478
www.mazerlesbianarchives.org
Requested donation \$10.00

For more information about the book or film please contact Jennifer at jabod@jenniferabod.com

A Great Example of 'Living A Life' in All its Complexities!
Marie Cantier Professor Film Media Women's Studies
Cal State Northridge

I Was Captivated. The Film is Rich Visually and in Content
Dan Castanon Verizon Service Rep

An Extraordinary Collection of Short Fiction
Beverly Guy-Shetall Professor Spelman College

Alela's Stories are Vividly Drawn and Intensely Cinematic
Vivian Price Professor CSU Dominguez Hills

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activities, and encourage community building.

Giagni and the board have also worked on building relationships internationally. In May of 2011, the Mazer Archives hosted "ALMS 2011: Highlighting Archives, Libraries, Museums and Special Collections: An International LGBT Conference," which was organized by

survives unchanged. Last year, Giagni arranged to send two board members to "LGBTI ALMS 2012: The Future of LGBTI Histories," which took place in Amsterdam.

Giagni and the Mazer Archives continue working to contribute to the future of LGBTI histories. Board member Angela Brinskele and CSW's student archivists currently work on digitizing the collection in order to expand its reach. The Mazer Archives board continues to do a great deal of productive fundraising. Giagni points out that they had a higher income last year than the year before, an impressive feat for a not-for-profit organization in the current challenging economy.

"I think I would say primarily that our goals these days are to survive and to expand, both in terms of the materials coming in and the education programs that we can do," says Giagni. "Just survival is success. So we're focused on that. We try to put a lot of time, attention, and self-training into learning how to be more sophisticated in fundraising, and to really nurture the giving of materials to us."

the Mazer Archives in association with the City of West Hollywood, the UCLA Center for the Study of Women, and the UCLA Library. This conference was the third international conference focused on public, private, academic, and grassroots archives collecting and preserving materials of all types from LGBT communities to ensure the history

Giagni is perhaps most passionate about her role, through the Mazer Archives, in interacting with the community and encouraging archival donations by insisting on the vital importance of the lives of “ordinary” lesbians. “We don’t know elite lesbians,” says Giagni. “We don’t know stars, we don’t know mega-scientists. We don’t know those folks. We know the teachers, and the nurses, and the electrical workers. That’s who we know as a board. Our responsibility is that if there isn’t somebody out there talking to ordinary, ‘unexciting’ lesbians, telling them that their lives are important, and that the material from their lives, their letters, their photos, their diaries, their personally-created memorabilia, are important, if there isn’t somebody out there telling these women, ‘Actually, your life is really important, and someday 10 years from now a researcher is going to be thrilled to look at your photos,’ they’ll throw them away. So that’s our role, and we’re trying to expand how we reach out to women to let them know. . . We really feel that to have an accurate understanding of what the lesbian life was, you



need to hear from people who had to work for a living, and who struggled with family, and were or were not involved with other activities. So we think that our role is really to be that link between people who don’t necessarily see themselves as important, as historically significant, and the concept that they are. The more we can collect from people, grassroots people, for future generations,

Many of the materials in the Mazer Archives reflect a collection policy that seeks to document the lives of “ordinary” lesbians

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particularly for younger lesbians who are trying to understand “What’s our history?” the more complete and accurate the history will be.”

– Ben Sher

Ben Sher is doctoral student in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies and a writer for CSW Update.

Principal Investigators for the ongoing CSW research project, “Making Invisible Histories Visible: Preserving the Legacy of Lesbian Feminist Activism and Writing in Los Angeles,” are Kathleen McHugh, CSW Director and Professor in the Departments of English and Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA (on sabbatical until July, 2013) and Gary Strong, University Librarian at UCLA. Funded in part by an NEH grant, the project is a three-year project to arrange, describe, digitize, and make physically and electronically accessible two major clusters of June Mazer Lesbian Archive collections related to West Coast lesbian/feminist activism and writing since the 1930s.

*For more information on this project, visit <http://www.csw.ucla.edu/research/projects/making-invisible-histories-visible>
For more information on the activities of the Mazer, visit <http://www.mazerlesbianarchives.org> or <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-June-Mazer-Lesbian-Archives/51347743934?ref=ts>*