

making invisible histories visible

Mysteries of the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives: Martha Foster Collection

One of the joys of working in an archive, for archivists and researchers, is coming upon a tantalizing mystery.

MANY, MANY WOMEN have donated to materials to the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, ranging from public figures like Margarethe Cammermeyer to lesser-known, but no less historically important, women. Occasionally, a very intriguing collection will come with a minimum of identifying information about the woman to whom it belonged. I recently interviewed Stacy E. Wood, a graduate student researcher working on processing the Mazer collections for the “Making Invisible Histories Visible” project. about one such collection: the Martha Foster Collection.

While looking through the Mazer holdings, Wood came across Foster’s papers, which include a small amount of poetry and many striking photographs, which seem to be taken in her backyard in Echo Park in the early 1930s. “They’re really gorgeous,” says Wood. “They almost look like test costume shots. There are hundreds of them. And I couldn’t find any information about her. Even Angela Brinskele, photographer and board member of the Mazer, couldn’t find a





death certificate or a birth date.”

Wood became fascinated with Foster and went above and beyond the call of duty to try and find out more about her. She and Brinskele emailed friends and colleagues to try and unravel the mystery. Wood even went to Foster’s house to inquire about her.

“There was one letter with her old address on it,” says Wood. “So I went to her house and asked [about her], in case maybe her grandkids lived there. I felt really strange about the pilgrimage, but I did it anyway! I went and knocked on their door and asked if they knew the previous owner and said her name. They said no, and I took it at face value.”

Wood had given up trying to solve the mysteries of Martha Foster when six months later, a new clue emerged: “There is an accordion room divider at the Mazer’s headquarters in West Hollywood, and it’s from the Esther Bentley collection. On it is a collage called ‘The Women in My Life,’ and it’s rumored to be all of her ex-girlfriends. Peeking out, I saw Martha Foster’s face, and I freaked out, because this meant that Foster had real connections, and maybe I could find something about her.”

To her surprise, as Wood continued processing various Mazer collections, more fragments of information and memorabilia about Foster began to emerge. “Looking through Esther Bentley’s collection, I found Martha’s ID card and some tax information about the house they shared in Echo Park,” says Wood. “And then these other bits of her life were in another person’s collection. Nobody at the Mazer knew that [any

of these people] were connected.”

So far as Wood can tell, the Mazer contains the only evidence of Foster’s life: “Angela has been tracking down everything for the collection’s deeds, for legal purposes, and she even asked me to dig out Foster’s tax document because it indicates that she died, and we can’t find out through the city or online that she even existed. The only traces of her are in these collections, and some of them are in the collection of an ex-girlfriend. But we don’t know when they dated, or when they knew each other. There are just these sort of weird suggestions.”

Foster’s relationship with Esther Bentley makes the lack of information available about her even more confounding, since Bentley was a very well-known and well-connected member of the Los Angeles LGBTQ community. “That’s the weird thing,” says Wood. “We know almost everything about her. Her collection is huge, everyone knew her. She was super active in L.A. Everyone at the Mazer knew her. There are all sorts of stories about her. What’s strange is that the picture of Martha in the ex-girlfriend collage was taken when Martha was older, so, I assume people would have known her or had some contact with her, but nobody knew her. She was with somebody who was very known in the community, but she herself doesn’t have any ties. The pictures are so beautiful. It’s like a silent film star posing in her backyard, in these beautiful prints. You imagine who was taking those pictures, and you’ll never know. It drove me crazy for so long, for so many months.”

Before she began processing the Mazer materials, Wood anticipated

that they'd contain more mysteries than they actually do. Her assumption seemed to be confirmed when the first collection she processed belonged to another enigmatic subject, named Tiger Woman: "Her poetry and some of her art work were in the collection, and again she dated someone who ended up being a famous and recognized artist," says Wood. "I tried to contact the artist, and she would never respond to me. It was really frustrating, because I had all of these photos, and she felt more accessible because they were from the early 1990s. I couldn't believe that someone would just drop off the planet, and that there was no trace."

In spite of these archival mysteries, Wood has been surprised at how comprehensive the Mazer is in its historicizing of lesbian identities. She believes that the Mazer can be so comprehensive because of its deep, strong roots in the community that it documents.

"Since Tiger Woman was the first collection I worked on, I expected it to be the norm: some of it due to mystery, and some of it due to a choice made by the subject of the collection," says Wood. "A lot of people have collections that they gave at times in their life, and now they have different identities and politics. So I just expected it to be a little harder to pin things down in a traditional archival way. But [such challenges] haven't happened as much as I would've thought, and I think that's because of the organizational structure of the Mazer and its grassroots nature. If you can't find something out, you activate the network, and it will come back to you.

It might not come back soon, but in nine months somebody will send a Facebook message to somebody else, and eventually it will come back to you: Here is what she is doing now."

Wood admits that her own personal tendency to become passionately fascinated with the subjects of the collections she processes can sometimes drive her crazy. At the same time, it likely makes her perfect for the job. "I get very attached to the collections and like to communicate some sort of story [from them]. There are often false hopes attached to that desire. I think that especially with a project like this, when the idea is to share these lost, hidden, or less-public histories, it seems even more important to represent people in whatever way you can. It's more frustrating when you can't put a complete picture together."

Wood emphasizes that the more identifying information she can find about a collection, the more potentially useful it will be to a researcher. "Ultimately, it's about people using this collection," says Wood. "If you think about it that way, it's important to have as much information as you can, so that people can know it's there and how they can use it. It's hard to fit that sort of affective sense [that surrounds mysterious collections] into a finding aid. It's hard to say: Oh, there are these beautiful pictures, and they'd be great for artists, designers, and period study, and there's this poetry that's not really great, but... It's hard to say why a collection is important without giving it shape or context. It's hard to piece it together."

While there are abundant professional reasons for solving the mysteries of the archive, Wood has become an excellent detective because she loves the work. "I think I have some narrative greed, but that's my own sort of personal problem," says Wood. "I think it is in a lot of ways a hindrance to my actual job sometimes, because within the context of what we're doing it's actually not always practically important to know all of the information that I seek out. But it's hard to work with these materials and not want to know."

-Ben Raphael Sher

Ben Sher is a doctoral student in the Department of Cinema and Media Studies at UCLA and a graduate student researcher at CSW. If you know anything about Martha Foster or Tiger Woman, email Ben at ben.sher.csw@gmail.com!

The finding aid for this collection will soon be available for viewing at the Online Archive of California (<http://www.oac.cdlib.org>). Digitized materials from the collection and the finding aid will be available for viewing on the UCLA Library's Digital Collections website. This research is part of an ongoing CSW research project, "Making Invisible Histories Visible: Preserving the Legacy of Lesbian Feminist Activism and Writing in Los Angeles." 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>