Visual Representations, Liminal Identities, and Archival Homes: Giulia Nazzaro and Colette Montoya-Sloan in Conversation

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Giulia Nazzaro and Colette Montoya-Sloan met at the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in 2016 in New York City, where Nazzaro was researching the photographic collection and Montoya-Sloan, who is of Isleta and San Felipe Pueblo heritage, is an archivist and LHA coordinator. In this interview, they are in dialogue to reflect on the presences and absences of visual representations of American Indian queer women as well as queer women of mixed heritage in the LHA. Their reflections brought them to question the intersections of identity and representation, which also highlighted the fundamental but liminal connections between the photographic collection and the Spoken Word Collection (SPW) at the LHA. This interview brings attention to notions of visual material, identity, and representation at the LHA through the lived experiences of looking and dealing with archival material, rather than through a theoretical lens. Such an approach aims to reflect the grassroots as well as counter archival nature of the LHA itself, which places at its center the lives and herstories of lesbian women, in all their idiosyncrasies, commonalities, and discrepancies.

Founded in 1974 by a group of women, which included Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel, the LHA houses one of the world’s largest collection of material produced by, for, and about lesbians and lesbian-identified communities. At the LHA, the notion of archive has always been enmeshed with the idea of home, both figuratively and physically, as it was first located in the apartment of Joan Nestle and subsequently, in the current three-story brownstone house in Brooklyn, which was purchased thanks to donations by lesbians from all over the world. Together with the feeling of home the notions of community and family are equally prominent, especially among the archives coordinators that have long been volunteering and applying consensus-based collecting and archiving policies to allow for the LHA to continuously exist for the past forty-three years. In these terms, the LHA offers the possibility to place archival thinking at the intersections between individual and institutional discourse around lesbian lived identities and visual culture.

Giulia Nazzaro (GN): Can you describe your involvement and project roles at the LHA?

Colette Montoya-Sloan (CMS): I have been working at the LHA for about six years. In 2011, I applied for an internship at the LHA because I wanted to combine m
assion and expertise in information organization with my identity as a queer woman. My goal was to help people learn more about lesbian history and heritage, which can be inaccessible in other institutions. In 2012, I began working with the Spoken Word Collection (SPW) in LHA and since 2014, I have been a coordinator, which means I'm part of the decision-making team. I coordinate the cataloguing and digitisation of more than three thousand audio-cassettes housed at the LHA. Working with the audio collection is especially fulfilling as I find it meaningful to connect people with the voices of their own history.

SN: While digitizing the tape collection, you came across a recording by Paula Gunn Allen, a Laguna Pueblo poet. Can you tell us a little bit about it? And what did it mean for you to find such a recording?

EMS: The tape in question is SPW 1640, dated November 23, 1980, wherein Allen talks about her life and reads her poetry. It is a recording of one of the “At-Home at the Archives” events – which have traditionally been gatherings hosted at the LHA where women come and share their work with the community. Allen was a mixed race woman with Laguna Pueblo and Lebanese-American descent. I have known of her work my entire life, but oddly enough I had not been aware that she was a lesbian. It was a bit shocking to me that someone from a very similar cultural background as myself was already there at the LHA, waiting for me. That is not to say that I have not been exposed to other Pueblo poets or that I have ever imagined that I am the only Pueblo lesbian. However, Allen openly identified as a lesbian and certainly I have not knowingly met my others. I knew that she had passed away, but I only keenly felt that loss at that moment. For me, hearing her voice was an almost spiritual experience. I was reminded of home very viscerally; I thought of the smell of wood fire and oven bread. We are both Pueblo though I am from Isleta and San Felipe Pueblos. And I consider her to be an ancestor. Who knew there was such a close connection to home here with me all these years? It is vital for me to find references to Native cultures in the collections at the LHA. I have lived away from my home in New Mexico for most of my life, so furtive glimpses of home are meaningful to me. I do think that my heritage has informed my interest in creating cross-cultural references. I am biracial; my mother is American Indian (from the Pueblos of Isleta and San Felipe) and my father is European American. I have long felt out of place in both sides of my family and I want to see mixed identities and cultural crossroads reflected in the LHA’s collections. For example, I have had an affinity for the cultures of the Russian Far East and Alaska for many years as my mother lived in Alaska as an adolescent and I lived in a Russian-speaking part of Ukraine. Such minal spaces between cultures really interest me because that is how I came to exist as a person of both indigenous and European American heritage. I am interested in the spaces where different cultures interact, especially indigenous cultures.

N: During our time together at LHA, we would sit on the couch in the living room of the Archives (Figure 1) and you would share stories of your Pueblo heritage, which—as
you described it—is very vivid both orally and visually. How does the oral inform you interpretation of the visual in your experience as a queer and Pueblo woman at the LHA.

Figure 1. Interior of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Photograph by Saskia Scheffer, 2005.

CMS: It is kind of hard to describe since—as I have told you—Pueblo cultures are very private. In my experience—which is not at all monolithic, as I grew up mostly away from New Mexico—traditional knowledge is passed down through the visual and story telling. Some of my dearest memories are of sitting with my great grandfather my TaTa Nick, and hearing about life in Isleta during his childhood. My great, great uncle, Te’Eh Joedy, also has amazing stories. These stories, combined with photographs of my family and the Pueblos in general, have shaped me and allowed me to survive away from home. I have a very strong connection to home; I feel whole when I am in the Rio Grande Valley in a way that I just do not feel elsewhere. When I consider donating family photos to the LHA, it is complicated. Many Pueblo communities prohibit photography, including mine. I have a lot of family photos that are private but others can be donated. The archivist in me means that I will label the photos as thoroughly as possible, but I cannot include everything. If I donate a photo of me with TaTa, it would be impossible to convey the way I felt hearing his stories—like the one of the time he got lost along the Rio Grande as a small child. Or hearing (second-hand via my mother) of how my uncle, Te’Eh Joedy ran away from the Albuquerque Indian School. The moments the photos capture, at least the ones from my life, are so rich that I cannot imagine fully annotating them... but at the same time even the photo
of my family before my time are meaningful because they are a link to an ancestral past. I have a photo of my great grandparents, Prospero Montoya and Marcelina Lucero on their wedding day that is significant because it lets me see how my family actually looks like our recent ancestors (Figure 2). Their clothing shows the continuity of our traditions and the resilience of our people. They also remind me of a stained glass panel at the Saint Augustine Church in Isleta, where a heterosexual couple in traditional Isleta clothing is kneeling in front of a Catholic priest to be blessed. I have not included a photo since public photography in Isleta is forbidden. I had a lot of ambivalence around that stained glass panel when I was baptized at the St. Augustine. It is an ideal couple really, but at that time, even though I was very active on my university campus in LGBT issues, I had a lot of internalized shame about not fitting in my own unattainable idea of what an Isleta woman should be.

Photographs are both tangible and ephemeral, of course. My family has a rich collection of photographs, but since my queer heritage is not passed down through ological family lines, having access to the photo collection at the LHA is invaluable. Finding connections between the photographic material and the voices on the tapes work with is also essential to me. Sometimes, as I listen to a tape, I will search the dialogue to see if we have photos of the people speaking, which give me a rounder perspective on histories related to individuals. I do look at the women in the LHA photo collection and think of the way our histories have led to one another, but I do not perceive them as my ancestors in the same way that I do Paula Gunn Allen. The women in the photographic collection are diverse, but I do not know that any
are Pueblo—to be fair, the photo collection is quite large! The women in the photos, however, represent my queer family for sure, which is a different kind of kinship.

GN: In 1979, the LHA made a formal public appeal to collect photographs of, by, and for lesbian women through donations. The scope of this collection was “to end the loss of faces,” as stated on the LHA newsletter of 1979. In this sense, the LHA photographic collection seemed not only to have been instrumental to fill a representational void of lesbian lives in society, but also to be a starting point to interpret self-representation, which stands on a spectrum between documentation and imagination, as well as desire. As a queer Pueblo woman, what is your experience with “loss” and “invisibility”? And how does this intersect with your imagination of American Indian women?

CMS: The LHA collects the material culture of anyone who chooses to identify as a lesbian; there are thousands of stories archived there. We do have many collections relating to different ethnic groups at the LHA, but not as many on indigenous lesbians. This is not a failing of the LHA specifically—rather that Natives tend to be left out of many conversations on race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality in general. As we build and catalogue our collections I want to be aware of including and highlighting indigenous women’s voices so that they are easily accessible to researchers and visitors. In the tape collection, since that is my responsibility, I want to make sure that Native women’s specific nations are mentioned. I also want to be sure that women whose Native identity is secondary to another ethnic identity are still mentioned as indigenous. However, having come from a private culture myself, I would want indigenous queer women to donate things on their terms and be represented in the way each individual woman wanted. I would be important to me to see other Native, particularly Pueblo, women in the collections at the LHA. I want to know how other Native lesbians saw themselves. Were their identities fractured? Did they experience any dissonance in expressing themselves as both Native and queer? I spent some time looking at the Native American Lesbians subject file and there is a wealth of information. However, I think we are lacking personal collections of indigenous lesbians. I feel empowered to seek out others with similar identities as myself and encourage them to contribute to the LHA’s collections.

In terms of your question about loss and invisibility, as many experience, I came out over the course of several years—but the main part of my coming out was done in Eastern Europe in the late 90s. I was far from home, living in a culture that seldom explicitly references lesbian identity and even less often, American Indians. At this time in my life, I felt like a non-entity. Gradually, over the course of several moves—to Wisconsin and then home to New Mexico—I came to understand myself with a more intersectional outlook. Nonetheless, I so rarely see images of Native lesbians sometimes that I feel like I am the only one. I know I am not, but it can feel that way. When I am home in New Mexico, I often feel as if my lesbian identity is subsumed
by my Pueblo identity. I have heard, mostly from non-Natives, how there was a rich tradition of homosexuality in indigenous communities. However, the Rio Grande Pueblo communities are also inextricably tied to Catholicism, which is not formally welcoming of queer relationships. Still, as long as I have been with my wife, even before we were married, my family has been welcoming of her presence. But I never saw my identity reflected in other Pueblo people. Pueblo society, and language, is gendered. I do not feel comfortable talking much more about the specifics since our culture is so private—but the way that things are gendered has often made me feel like the Other. Often, in queer spaces, I feel othered or tokenized as a Native woman. Even at the LHA, I am the only coordinator whose primary ethnic identity is indigenous to North America. Away from New Mexico, I feel a profound sense of loss. It is hard to describe, but I do not truly feel complete when I am not there. Even in explicitly American Indian spaces in New York, I feel out of place. There are over 500 federally recognized tribes in the United States; I am only aware of one other person, my cousin, who is a member of my nation and lives in New York City.

I recently got married to my partner in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I wore traditional Isleta clothing to my wedding and most of my family came! I really felt that my full identity and relationship were acknowledged; it was a beautiful experience. So it is not to say that celebrating these two aspects of my identity are mutually-exclusive. My godmother, who is from Isleta Pueblo, gave me and my wife a Pueblo wedding vase as a gift when we got married. It was a weight lifted from me; this traditional wedding vase is a symbol of my Pueblo identity, but also represents the love between my wife and myself. it is an object, part of the cultural assemblage of my life, which represents all of who I am as a queer Native. This piece of pottery is important because it allows me to imagine myself not just as an Isleta/San Felipe woman or as a lesbian, but as both. That gift offered me a lot of healing.

GN: So, what type of visual material would you consider donating to address the feeling of absence of representation of Native peoples at the LHA?

CMS: I am in the process of selecting photos to donate. I have a large number of photos from my life; I am really lucky. The way that I have often felt lost and caught between my identities as Pueblo and as a lesbian has defined my life, I think. My wedding, which merged my two identities so seamlessly, was a crucial moment that made me want to start a special collection at the LHA. I have thought about donating my journals, but it is only recently that I gave serious thought to donating photos. They are family photos, photos with my former partners, and wedding photos; the wedding photos are just particularly meaningful because they represent a moment when I could be both Pueblo and queer without thinking about it too hard. I have long thought about donating an oral history too; one of my former interns at the LHA took my oral history some time ago, but we did not focus on the intersection of my different identities. I was also overcautious in that interview and it does not
reflect who I am as much as I would like it to. I like that the LHA relies on donations; lesbians are choosing to donate what they want to say about their own lives. The material assemblage of their lives is there to be interpreted, of course, but they are still choosing what they want to represent themselves. I will donate my diaries to the LHA someday, but not for decades. I feel safe donating the photos now.

For example, this photograph (Figure 3) is from my wedding in January 2017. When my wife and I decided we were going to get married after a ten-year engagement, I knew I wanted to wear traditional clothing. My godmother and my mother made my outfit together. It was such an affirming day for me, because my two, often disparate, identities merged into one in me. This photograph (Figure 4) is of me and my wife after our wedding ceremony, when we were getting ready to go to our reception. I want to donate this photo to the LHA, not only because it is an example of a queer wedding, but of an interracial one. Both of us look just as we imagined we would on our wedding day.

(Left) Figure 3. At the Inn of the Turquoise Bear, Special Collection, Lesbian Herstory Archives, New York. Courtesy of Colette Montoya-Sloan and Jennifer Sloan. Photograph by Suzanna Finley, January 18, 2017.

HEMISPHERE

GN: Earlier, you mentioned the idea of "feeling safe to donate your images," I would like us to reflect on it for a moment. When I first began working with the LHA photographic collection, I felt that both older and younger generations of coordinators are key figures to understanding the archival material, as well as that archival material at the LHA is the personification of a forgotten history, or better herstory. As a result of the tight relationship between people and photographs, archival photographs are protected, as are the identities and stories contained in each image, which in fact are not allowed to be reproduced unless the copyrights are cleared—and this can be a difficult process. This sense of respect and protection granted to the photographs seem to me to have a twofold meaning; on the one hand, photographs are treated as embodiments of lesbian women whose stories are celebrated and shared within the community; on the other hand, the presence of these photographs in an archive, it is also a home, allows for them to be read, and experienced more intimately, or privately rather than publicly, in comparison to photographs archived in state archives or other similar institutions. Do you think that the LHA's archival community and structure speak to the private and matrilineal nature of some Pueblo cultures? And how do you think that the LHA's internal organisation impacts the reading of your images? Does the structure of the LHA, as I described it above, speak to your feeling of safety in donating your family pictures?

CMS: My family is comprised of strong and resilient women. One of my two Pueblo lineages is matrilineal; I perceive the LHA to be matrilineal as well. For example, one of the ways through which the LHA honors women's identities is by organizing books by given names instead of surnames—which tend to be handed down in a patrilineal manner. In terms of my photographs, the fact that the LHA understands the privacy of its donors is absolutely important to me. The current photo coordinator, Saskia Scheffer, takes privacy very seriously. While none of the photos I would donate are of a religious nature—meaning they can be viewed by outsiders—they are very meaningful to me. There are collections at the LHA that can only be viewed by certain populations that are specified by their donors; the coordinators strive to meet the needs of our donors. I appreciate knowing that when I donate my photos they will be in a family environment or, as one of our coordinators put it, "a multi-generational lesbian home." I value the family environment at the LHA because I think it helps mitigate the potential othering and exoticization of my personal photographs. I want visitors and researchers to approach my photographic donations with respect, as if they were viewing their own family photos. The LHA's archival thinking has a familiar quality to it that is antithetical to the environment of a pure research archive. Visitors and researchers tend to come to the Archives because they have a personal connection to lesbian identities; these connections assure me that my story is more welcome and supported.

GN: As a reflection of the LHA's home-like nature, the LHA's photographic collection is presented in forms other than the more conventional archival filing cabinet. For
example, we can find framed photographs on shelves, hanging in the kitchen or the bathroom walls. There are also slide shows that used to be presented by the LHA coordinators when touring the country; photo albums created after material stored in the photography cabinet to celebrate the life of important figures of the LHA, such as the photo-album dedicated to the life of Mabel Hampton—a figure of inspiration for the LHA. Such archival practice has granted the photographic material a rather transformative and performative nature, bringing different points of entry into the relationship between representation and identity. How would you like your images to be archived and displayed at the LHA?

CMS: The archivist in me would just like my photos filed in the general collection, under my name, cross-referenced someday with the bio file that I hope to create. I had always imagined donating my journals to the LHA someday, but it was only when my wedding announcement was printed that I thought I might start a bio file or special collection. However, my journals are heavily collaged. As a teen, I liked to imagine them as a series of modern illuminated manuscripts of some sort. It would be a fulfilling project to create an annotated album of different important images from my life, interspersed with embroidered pages and collage. At the LHA, we have a four folder subject file on Native American Lesbians; I think a cross-reference there would be nice too—perhaps just a sheet of paper encouraging visitors and researchers to see my photo folder or special collection. As to location, I would either place an album in my own special collection or with other photo albums in the glass-doored closet where we store albums. As someone with some background in cataloguing, I would ordinarily believe that physical location does not matter as long as the catalogue correctly notes location. However, I think there is a strong browsing culture at the LHA and I feel that my photos (or album) belong nestled among those of other lesbians.

**Conclusions**

Placing at the centre of this interview lived experiences helps us unpack the multiple and intersectional layers of identity and visual representation at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. In dialogue with Nazzaro, Montoya-Sloan's private life and her archival practice brought to the fore liminal but significant spaces between oral histories as they exist in the LHA's archival contexts and personal photographs that reveal her Isleta and San Felipe Pueblo, Euro-American and queer identities. Specifically, the presence of oral histories highlighted the feeling of absences of correlated visual material, eventually bringing Colette to consider the donation of some of her personal photographs to the LHA, which would begin to fill a visual gap within the archive. While not bearing a theoretical framework, this interview brought both self-reflection to the interviewers as well as concrete action to change the visibility of
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NOTES

1 In this piece, American Indian and Native are used interchangeably here to refer to the indigenous peoples of the continental United States, though we acknowledge the complexity of ethnonyms for indigenous Americans. We do not use the term “Native American,” as it places American identity first with Native as an adjectival descriptor.


3 LiHA’s special collections are personal or organizational collections which contain documents and/or ephemera.