

Lost Spaces, Lost Technologies, and Lost People: Online History Projects Seek to Recover LGBTQ+ Spatial Histories

Alex D. Ketchum <alexandraketchum_at_gmail_dot_com>, McGill University

Abstract

This article looks at online history projects focused on “lost” spaces, with an emphasis on lost LGBTQ+ spaces. In documenting lost spaces, these projects also highlight lost or marginalized historical actors. I position these projects at the center of debates surrounding how to recover “lost” peoples who have been left out or erased from mainstream histories. This article will discuss the various techniques used by digital humanities projects, focusing particularly on Jan Kurth’s “Lost Womyn’s Space”, Greggor Mattson’s “Mapping Lost Lesbian Bars”, and my own project, “The Feminist Restaurant Project”. This article discusses the various techniques used and the value these open access history websites serve for scholars and non-scholars alike. The article finishes by exploring how lost space projects preserve what was not previously preserved, while these websites are simultaneously vulnerable to similar preservation issues that plague digital humanities projects and community archives more broadly, especially those separate from large institutions. These challenges raise the questions: is lost space doomed to be lost? Can the history of LGBTQ+ space be recuperated? What role do digital humanities have in this work? And what does it mean to be found?

What does it mean to be lost?

In 1983, A Woman’s Coffeeshouse of Minneapolis, Minnesota taped an open community meeting during which members of the predominately white, working class, lesbian coffeeshouse could reflect on their experiences. One middle-aged participant remarked that by not speaking with younger generations of lesbians about differences between their coming-out experiences, she felt that “she [had] lost her history,” [WCC 1983]. This woman’s concern about not having forums in which to share and document her own history and that of her community was not unique. Archivists and historians have discussed how to preserve and to recover LGBTQ+ histories; less attention has been given to the ways that digital humanities projects have tried to preserve and recover “lost” LGBTQ+ spatial histories. This article seeks to fill this gap in the literature by analyzing online projects focused on the history “lost” LGBTQ+ spaces, particularly women’s spaces. 1

In documenting “lost” LGBTQ+ spaces, these projects highlight previously overlooked marginalized historical actors and geographies. Although the scale of projects varies from local studies to national or even international, these projects seek to empower marginalized communities by acting as testimony to their existence, to provide resources for others to build upon the research, and to document particular historical phenomena. This paper will discuss the various techniques used by the creators of these projects, particularly Jan Kurth’s “Lost Womyn’s Space” [Kurth 2011], Greggor Mattson’s “Mapping Lost Lesbian Bars”, [Mattson 2016], and my own project “The Feminist Restaurant Project” [Ketchum 2015]. It is outside of the scope of this article to look at every history website devoted to documenting or finding “lost” LGBTQ+ histories. Instead by narrowing it down to the scope of projects devoted to documenting “lost” spaces, primarily lost lesbian and queer women’s and feminist spaces on the national and international scale, this paper still provides fruitful comparison. Despite the projects’ emphasis on lesbian spatial culture, I use the LGBTQ+ umbrella. The three projects documented spaces that served a wider range of people than just lesbians. Furthermore, the problematics raised by this article relate to other “lost” LGBTQ+ projects, even if they are not wholly the same. 2

For this article, I analyzed the projects themselves, as well as interviewed their makers and included my own reflections 3

as a project creator. In doing so, I explore the contribution that these websites make to the general public and scholars alike, paying particular attention to why documenting lost spaces is so necessary to understanding a community's history. The article concludes by exploring how although lost space projects preserve narratives that have all but been erased or forgotten, these websites are vulnerable to similar preservation issues that plague both digital humanities projects and community archives, particularly those built separate from large institutions. These problems raise a number of questions, including: is lost space doomed to be lost? Can the history of LGBTQ+ space be recuperated? Is it possible to develop sustainable digital preservation initiatives that attempt to document the experiences of LGBTQ+ spaces? I argue that digital spatial history projects do not replace community archives, yet fulfill a different, complementary need. As such, the solution to the preservation of these materials rests with institutionalization within an archive large enough to provide the necessary financial and technological resources to sustain the project beyond the scope of the original, individual creator.

Who and What is “Lost?” And Why Should We Care?

Historians and archivists argue over how to recover missing or marginalized communities. Archivists Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook posit that conventional record creation and archival practices mean that “some can afford to create and maintain records and some cannot; that certain voices thus will be heard loudly and some not at all; that certain views and ideas about society will in turn be privileged and others marginalized” [Schwartz and Cook 2002]. Historians, such as Judith Bennet and Steven Maynard, and archivists, such as Randall Jimerson, have shown that socially and culturally marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ communities, have also been marginalized in archives and the discipline of history [Bennett 2000] [Jimerson 2003] [Maynard 1991]. Resulting from the acknowledgement of this deficit and beginning in the 1960s, social history sought to reclaim histories of marginalized peoples. Archives, a vital aspect of this shift, transformed collection and preservation practices in order to reflect these new historiographical interests. Archivists Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, and Noah Geraci have argued that this phenomenon was especially apparent in the development of community archives. When community archive movements developed as a response to the social and political movements that came to the fore in 1960s and 1970s, “within each of these movements activists and community groups recognized the significance of writing persons and communities whose histories and lives had long been marginalized, erased, or misrepresented into the historical record” [Cifor et al. 2018]. They show that the process of community archiving was a form of “self-representation, identity construction, and empowerment,” affecting both past and present [Cifor et al. 2018]. Melinda Marie Jetté (2019), James Brooks (2019), Jodie Boyd (2019), and others have written about how necessary it is to document LGBTQ+ histories in a way that is accessible to the public in *The Public Historian's* Special Issue on commemorating queer history. Despite efforts to recover the “lost” or marginalized histories, traditional historical and archival practices, however, do not capture all of them.

As a result, LGBTQ+ community archives began to rectify this gap. These community archives, such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, often function outside of institutional support, which enables the community to preserve its own histories, but can also make the collections vulnerable to issues of funding and sustainability [Nestle 2015]. Community archives also do not preserve the histories of the entire LGBTQ+ community; in the North American context, when these communities are documented, it is often members of that community that live in large urban or coastal areas [Lee et al. 2015].

While not fully compensating for this deficit, LGBTQ+ archival projects also exist online. Archivist Erin O'Meara argues that collecting activists' papers and documenting related social movements has always had inherent problems, but digital techniques complicate matters as they raise new questions around preservation [O'Meara 2012]. Elise Chenier, founder of the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony, has several articles on the challenges of preserving lesbian digital history projects including issues of collection and retention, related to her work with oral histories [Chenier 2010] [Chenier 2015]. Similarly, archivist Anthony Cocciolo discusses the challenges of establishing a digital community archive, finding that establishing and maintaining a community digital archive necessitates navigating a complex set of technological and social issues, including methods for capturing records, ownership and copyright, digitization and born-digital record keeping, social media and web archiving, and digital preservation [Cocciolo 2017]. However, art historian, Roxanne Samer continues to believe in the potential of feminist and queer digital archives despite these issues,

acknowledging that intergenerational sharing of knowledge through digital archives may be the key to this information surviving [Samer 2014]. While archivists have innovated new techniques to include more perspectives, online history projects provide complementary and alternative materials yet face similar problems. The unique nature of digital humanities projects necessitates different solutions than are required for community archives, which have historically been wary of institutionalization.

Access to narratives of marginalized people is impacted by accessibility of information and access to technologies. Online public history projects provide new opportunities to share materials and create new or different avenues of access apart from physical and digital archives [Jacobs and Murgu 2017]. Jan Kurth's "Lost Womyn's Space", Greggor Mattson's "Mapping Lost Lesbian Bars", and my own project "The Feminist Restaurant Project", are not digital archives but rather digital humanities history projects that seek to collect, remember, and retain information about LGBTQ+ spaces. These digital history projects build upon a tradition of LGBTQ+ individuals creating and utilizing new technological forms to advocate about their communities. Their narrowed focus, particularly on the difficulty of creating and retaining lesbian and queer women's spaces, is paralleled by the challenge of retaining records about these spaces in digital form.

What Does Being "Found" Look Like? What Makes Digital History Projects Different than Community Archives?

If to be "lost" is to be marginalized or erased, to be "found" or "to find" means centering LGBTQ+ histories; some history websites do exactly that. One technique for recovering marginalized histories has been to document where marginalized groups spent time. As the editors of *Queers in Space*, Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter note, both permanent and temporary spaces were important to queer activist organizing and community building [Ingram et al. 1997]. Geographer Julie Podmore likewise argues the importance of studying space to understand lesbian histories [Podmore 2001]. It is not that community archives do not provide evidence of community spaces, but rather the emphasis of these websites is on documenting specifically community spaces and providing visitors with information with which to explore these spaces further. As Kurth notes, "Certainly I have seen a lot of projects since I started Lost Womyn's Space that focus just on lesbian bars. I find that work of value, but I think we miss something when we don't look for parallels and connections with other forms of women's space over time and geography" [Kurth 2018]. Since this research started, other projects seeking to document lesbian and queer spaces have begun. In 2017, designer Lucas LaRoche began the community generated mapping project, *Queering the Map*, that geo-locates queer moments, memories and histories in relation to a world map. Unlike the three projects this article focuses on, *Queering the Map* seeks to represent queer memories outside of fixed queer spaces, such as gay bars or lesbian bookstores, and rather on ephemeral moments, published without dates, which happen anywhere in the world to mark experiences of queerness wherever they occur [LaRoche 2017]. While there is strong value in recording individual memory, documenting the location of more formalized geographies with fixed dates does something different; it provides a sense of space, situated in specific historical moments, to which future generations can situate themselves in relation to and build upon.

The three projects this article focuses on, take space seriously on a national or international scale by attending to an exploration of historical sites of LGBTQ+ socializing and political organizing. While they differ in their format and exact focus, they look at similar communities: lesbians, women with a focus on lesbians, and feminists with an emphasis on lesbian feminists. Mattson's work specifies bars, I target restaurants, cafes, and coffeehouses, and Kurth has the widest scope, encompassing all kinds of women's spaces and businesses. Likewise Mattson has the most specific geographic focus by looking solely at the United States, the Feminist Restaurant Project is U.S. and Canada centered, and Kurth's work is global [Kurth 2018]. The projects have some overlap and directly attribute the work of the other creators in their own work [Mattson 2016].

This article recognizes the different motivations of the sites' creators and the problematic nature of the individual creator being centered. On the one hand, these projects work to represent large swaths of lesbian and queer women communities, yet on the other hand, the individuals doing the work shape them. The identities of the creators impact their ability to do this labor and may influence the willingness of others' view of the authority of the content. That the

creators of this work are predominately white, and a self identified gay man academic (Mattson), queer woman academic (Ketchum), and a lesbian non-academic (Kurth), affects which LGBTQ+ spaces are “found” — through who is willing to share resources with us, through our editorial choices, and through how our work is understood as authoritative or non-authoritative. Furthermore, a creator’s biases shape the form of the project and risk marginalizing or erasing histories of other marginalized groups while doing the work of recovering or showcasing “lost” LGBTQ+ histories. This phenomenon became particularly apparent when in 2019, Kurth made trans-exclusionary comments while discussing the lack of women’s and lesbian venues in a post. In doing so, her project that in fact includes community spaces in which transgender people worked, gathered, and socialized, now minimizes or erases these histories. Responding to the marginalization, neglect, and deletion of trans geographies and trans geographic histories, geographer Kath Browne challenges how “gender geographies have focused on normatively gendered men and women, neglecting the ways in which gender binaries can be contested and troubled” [Browne et al. 2010]. Browne builds on the work of Viviane Namaste and Susanne Stryker and argues that “trans voices need to be heard and new knowledges created from the specific understandings gained through lived experiences” [Stryker 2008]. This is not to say that cisgendered creators are unable to include trans voices or representations of LGBTQ+ communities of color, but rather that the predominant whiteness and cisgendered identities of the creators of these projects affects the representation of these historical geographies. This issue is especially pertinent if the only, or majority, of projects documenting these spaces come from a white, cis perspective. While this article focuses on what it means to do the labor of recovering lost or missing histories, all to potentially lose these histories again, the individual creators’ identities impact the ability to do this work; the willingness to include or acknowledge certain people and spaces; and the form that work takes.

Yielding to the call to think seriously about space, digital representations such as online mapping projects, scrapbook databases, and user forums focused on space, highlight an aspect of historical preservation not fulfilled in the same manner by an archive. The projects surveyed in this article are part of a phenomenon of spatial documentation. However, typically spatial projects have focused on local regions. Creators benefit from access to insider community knowledge and histories, primarily due to the intensity of labor of gathering this information. Projects such as Found San Francisco are advantaged by focusing on a targeted local region, which allow the creators to delve in detail [Robb 2012]. As Jan Kurth reflected,

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I also enjoy the various projects that put together and catalog “lost places,” as that combines my interest in “space” and history. Typically, these efforts tend to be localized, as hunting down all these places can be pretty labor intensive. So generally, most of these projects will be devoted to particular cities, and sometimes, even more specifically, to particular bars or LGBT bars in a particular city. I had noticed that lesbian bars tend to get “lost” in the city lists and even the LGBT lists, so I wanted to highlight lost lesbian bars as those are rapidly disappearing. But as I played around in Google archives (later newspaper.com), and on the Internet in general, I came across all kinds of interesting lost, disappearing, or endangered women's spaces. So I thought it would be fun to have a kind of rangy blog for collecting all these places in one location. [Kurth 2018]

Although projects focused on a smaller region can be more manageable, as individuals in that community can share their stories and collective memory, national and international public history projects build awareness of the larger phenomenon of the desire for community run spaces that are occurring beyond the local level. Both types of projects are useful. Greggor Mattson agrees, remarking, “I like all the sites that are trying to map gay bars and LGBT spaces. The New York site is the gold standard, in my view, but it’s one that exceeds my abilities both technically and in terms of time to devote to it” [Mattson 2018]. He is referring to the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project website, which consists of an interactive map that links to histories of each location [NYC LGBTQ Sites 2017]. Mattson’s site, rather, tries “to be nationally comprehensive,” yet he explains that “it’s tough to just make sure that all the regions are being represented.” Mattson focused only on the United States due to language barriers and his own scholarly background. In my own experience, I focused on the United States and Canada because as a historian my training has focused on Canadian and American historiographies. Furthermore, my digital project was tied to my dissertation work in which I wanted to contextualize the development of these spaces within the legal and economic context of their times. Researching

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feminist restaurant histories for two countries was complicated to historically contextualize as I wanted to be specific about municipal, state/provincial, and federal laws. While my lens allowed me to speak to trends and historical phenomena regarding feminist and lesbian feminist restaurant creation, I had to sacrifice some precision; however, trying to integrate more countries would have required more generalizations than I was comfortable making. This article is concerned most specifically with the barriers of preserving LGBTQ+ spatial national and international projects, as unlike local projects, which are typically supported by regional organizations, the larger scale projects are created, updated, and preserved by individuals. For smaller scale regional projects without institutional or organizational backing, the suggestions at the end of this article will be relevant.

Compiling data on national and international scales can be more difficult as source materials are scattered. If this information is available on the Internet, as Kurth denoted about some of her source materials, is it really lost? As the Indiana University Lilly Library argued, when materials are in libraries, archives, or even on the Internet, they are actually the opposite of “lost” [Bahr 2019]. However, information, particularly about marginalized communities, can be so scattered and inaccessible to locate that while it may not be formally lost, it can be “lost.” To be “lost” is to be unable or difficult to find. The sites surveyed in this article collate this information, bringing it together for users and often creating duplicate files of these records, which can disappear at a moment’s notice, as had been the case with Google archives. This creation of records is not the only way that these digital history projects differ from digital archives. Usually, larger projects require input from users as the creators may not be familiar with the areas discussed.

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Crowdsourcing information is a key component for revealing histories of lost spaces, especially for projects on the national and international scale. LGBTQ+ history projects particularly benefit from crowdsourcing as the former users of these spaces are less likely to have had their recollections previously recorded, as marginalized communities’ experiences are not only marginalized in historical and archival contexts, but also in the popular media [LPP 2018].^[1] Greggor Mattson’s “Mapping Lost Lesbian Bars” utilizes crowdsourcing. He admits on his site that “it is inevitable that there are errors in this kind of enterprise – please send me corrections and queries to” his email and Twitter account. He likewise explains, “Eventually I will merge this with a map of currently-open lesbian bars, which I’ll launch as a crowdsourcing effort” [Mattson 2016]. This kind of community driven research on lost spaces benefits from a wide variety of perspectives and experiences. Crowdsourcing also generates publicity through the initial launch of the call for submissions and thus also draws more attention to these sites. On the Feminist Restaurant Project website, there are multiple calls asking visitors to contribute to the project. Although the initial directory and map were based on my amalgamation of old travel guides, periodicals, advertisements, and interviews, I created the website in part for the purpose of crowdsourcing new information. The website has a page called “Submissions” in which I ask users, “Know of a feminist restaurant, cafe, or coffeehouse that existed/exists in the United States and Canada? Please check if it is listed on the database — if not, email The Feminist Restaurant Project to let us know”. Likewise above the directory I have a note asking for feedback [Ketchum 2015]. Since I first launched the site in April 2015, I have only received about a dozen emails from people who found me through the site, but they were thorough, full of information, and quite helpful. The directory and its associated maps thus become living documents that grow as readership grows. As Jan Kurth has stayed anonymous on her site, her information is not crowdsourced in the same way.^[2] Users can post comments but cannot email her through the site. While the Lost Womyn’s Spaces site shows that crowdsourcing is not the only technique creators can use to collect information, the method is still valuable. The creation of websites with maps and directories, like those of Mattson and my own, allow for users to get directly involved, turning the site into a kind of community project/ archive.

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Social media works as an invaluable tool for crowdsourcing information for these digital history projects. Mattson finds information through social media and spreads awareness about his research on Twitter. He found that “most gay bars communicate better on Facebook than by phone or e-mail” [Mattson 2018]. Facebook enabled him to contact bar owners for interviews. He then used his social media presence and his website as a way to add credibility to his requests, explaining, “I thought it would be useful for them to see that they were part of something bigger to induce them to accept my request for an interview. I wanted them to see that this was something I’d been thinking about for a while and that I was serious” [Mattson 2018]. I, likewise, have found social media sites, particularly Facebook and Twitter to be invaluable resources [Ketchum 2019]. Facebook group administrators allowed me to join their online communities

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and pose questions to the members, asking if people had resources about other feminist restaurants or if they wanted to be interviewed. Like Mattson, I used my website, The Feminist Restaurant Project, to demonstrate the work I had already done on the topic and had a publicly available source that could be shared within these communities. I used Twitter to connect with people whose email addresses I did not have or could not find, as well as to publicize the project. As my research progressed, I was able to use these social media channels as a way to keep the community informed about the state of the project and publications. It has been a relationship of reciprocity.

Community archives do rely on donations from community members, but the kind of exchange on these websites is different. Digital LGBTQ+ spatial history projects collect scattered information from around the Internet, from physical archives, guide and travel books, and the oral histories and shared memories of community members. These digital projects thus, do not only gather information that could not be found in a single community archive, but the process of creating these sites produces knowledge. Users are motivated to share stories that would otherwise perish along with them. While similar to community archives, these digital projects do something different. This difference is made clear in how their information is displayed.

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Visuals: Spatial Histories and What Digital History Projects Offer that Community Archives Do Not

To be lost is to be hidden or unseen. To be found is to be revealed. Even our language around being lost and found speaks to visual culture. All three sites use visuals in different ways to draw in readers and contribute to underlying arguments. In Kurth's scrapbook format, where she pastes any relevant information within the blog post, she includes photographs of the businesses when available, Google Streetview images of the buildings when an address was known, and other photos and illustrations. Mattson, likewise "found it touching to use Google street view and have a look at the outside of the buildings when it was still a lesbian bar: the rainbows or triangles or posters for women's bands" [Mattson 2018]. He had a research assistant take the screenshots and post them so that as Google Streetview updates with the new exteriors, at least one image of the bar would remain. He remarks "I have no pictures of the gay bars that I've liked to visit, in part because I'm old fashioned about not taking pictures in or around gay bars in case someone is closeted," [Mattson 2018] yet he knows how valuable these visuals can also be. While the display of this visual information differs between the three sites, none follow the format of digital archives' formatting of folders filled with jpegs of images from the physical archives or reproduced text, as is the case with projects like the Queer Zine Archives and the Lesbian Herstory Archives.

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Apart from physical pictures, these websites provide other visual cues that speak to the existence of "lost" communities. Kurth's website's side bar, that shows the number of blog post entries written per month, is another powerful visual that conveys how many spaces existed that are now "lost." The 652 posts make clear that these spaces were not a rare or isolated phenomenon. I was, likewise, motivated by the visual power of numbers when I decided to make my directory and maps publicly available. An immediate benefit of quantitative mapping techniques is that they show the preponderance of these spaces. Based on my initial estimates before beginning my research, I guessed that there were, at most, 40 feminist restaurants, cafés, and coffeehouses in America and Canada. In fact, the number of verified feminist restaurants, cafés, and coffeehouses from the 1972-1989 is over 250 and, further, there are over 430 unverified spaces, and it is likely, feminist spaces are included in this set. The verified and unverified spaces are color coded with pink and blue markings on the site. These visual cues help quantify the space.

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One approach to understanding lesbian feminist history is to mark where women gathered. Maps can change conceptualizations of the past in ways that narratives cannot alone.

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Both Mattson and I use maps to serve multiple purposes. Some of my maps simply show where places actually existed, some show the variety of feminist businesses in a single area during a single year, based only on one guidebook, and some are part of a larger history project, which takes information from interviewees and provides a space for continual community building, through memory sharing. The initial goal was to map out the locations of feminist restaurants and cafés, the types of women's spaces that I have chosen to focus on, within the United States and Canada from 1972 to 1989, a process never before completed. From this map it is possible construct a sense of what the feminist and lesbian

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community in a particular space and time looked like. A large, public map served the goal of drawing attention to the legacy of the women founders of feminist restaurants, cafés, and coffeehouses who made this project feasible by making this information as publicly accessible as possible and also by developing new forums in which former participants could expand their community, during a time when many women's spaces are closing or have closed. Greggor Mattson shared a similar motivation. He explains "I like making Google maps because they help me visualize things alongside other sets of data... for example, I can use Social Explorer to eyeball whether it resembles population density, or I can use Google's Street View to have a look at the building and neighborhood that the bar is/was located in" [Mattson 2018]. The map was both beneficial for visualizing results and analysis. He realized that these images could be useful for his readers, noting that, "I guess I felt like I'd gone to this trouble of helping map where these lesbian bars had been, that I might as well share it with others" [Mattson 2018]. Maps allow users to interact with information and provide powerful visuals. The time has come to take space seriously, not just intellectually but methodologically, in researching the past; creating publicly available maps enables this pursuit.

Format and the Individual

Choices regarding format also shapes the way that users interact with the site and understand the motivations and intentions of the creators. Mattson's and my site explicitly mention our larger academic projects with which the public sites are correlated. The matter is more complicated with Lost Womyn's Spaces. Kurth notes,

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I chose the format I have so that I would be highlighting individual places, and highlighting the details of that particular place's existence. I like specificity. I think that theoretical generalizations are often in danger of wandering too far afield if care is not taken. The trade off is that some readers may get caught up in the details, and not be able to see the patterns I think are pretty clear that run across the histories of many former women's places. Clearly some readers are only interested in a particular bar they used to go to back in the 80s, and that's fine. I have sometimes thought I should write some sort of essay highlighting the patterns with all the documentation I have collected, but honestly, I don't know how many would be interested and I really don't have the time. [Kurth 2018]

She does actually include some editorializing information within her posts, supplying commentary in the margins. While Kurth states that the scrapbook style can be utilized as users wish, she also somewhat directs readers toward her argument, noting "I think my motivation has been pretty much the same, which is to create an outlet for a very wide range of lost women's spaces. But the more places I collected, the more I saw certain patterns that most don't know, so I like to highlight those and bring them to the attention of readers" [Kurth 2018]. Between March 2011 and June 2019, she wrote over 652 posts. Most posts focus on the history of a single space and are typically a collection of newspaper articles, advertisements, entries on review sites such as Yelp, and whatever photos and other information she can find pasted in what she calls her "blog scrapbook" formatting. However more significantly, Lost Womyn's Space's format reflected Kurth's desire to provide records of a smattering of spaces that users can engage with as desired, rather than be directed. Kurth believes that "it's fun to have a blog to throw things on that are interesting. There is so much available on the Internet right now that really needs to be curated in some way to make it more accessible in a single location" [Kurth 2018]. Having read all 652 posts, these arguments begin to come through clearly, yet if a user just reads one or two posts, the details of the scrapbook format tend to dominate reader experience.

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What is clear is that each website's specifics relate to the individuality of their creators. As each of these three projects are created primarily by one person, our individual experiences, motivations, educational backgrounds, and biases shape the projects. Our geographic focuses are influenced by language and cultural knowledge. Even when Kurth has tried to include information from countries around the world, she "realized pretty early that Google search engines keep corralling me back to English language sites, which means the focus is on English speaking countries. Occasionally I'd figure out a strategy to break free, but I haven't found as much as I would like outside the US, Canada, UK, etc." [Kurth 2018]. Apart from geographic positioning, our training has shaped our methodologies in creating these websites. I had previously worked as a research assistant which tracked changes in every edition of the Canadian Medical Directory and that influenced my methodology to track edition changes in directories and guidebooks. While we all worked on

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related topics, our specific training and skills impacted our methodological choices and thus the end product. And so, while these projects are for the greater public and larger community, each site carries its author's fingerprints. Having an individual's viewpoint does not negate the usefulness of these sites, as individuals also shape documentation in community archives. However, it is this tie to the individual that puts these projects in danger.

Failures and Finishing

None of these projects were built in a single attempt, but rather were evolving undertakings where the creators have adapted, changed, and experimented. Jan Kurth has worked on her site since 2011, my site went live in 2015, and Mattson's page with maps launched on September 17, 2016. Each creator dealt with failures that required innovation. Mattson had difficulties with his social media accounts. His Twitter project (@WhoNeedsGayBars) never really took off like he thought it would. He originally believed that users would communicate with him and follow the project through Twitter, but most of his followers were bots. Rather than functioning as a news stream about gay bars, as it was originally intended, Mattson uses his site as a way to be able to scroll through a timeline of articles [Mattson 2018]. I had a similar experience of making assumptions about what users would want and initially completely missed the mark. I spent months researching different map-making applications that would allow users to upload information to the site. I experimented with Nunaliit, Postscrap, Google Social Maps Experience, and Esri's Story Map Crowdsourcing (beta), and eventually chose Story Map.^[3] I later learned that users preferred to communicate with me via email and have me make the changes on the map, rather than each person altering the map herself. These stories of failure also point to the fact that these projects can continuously be improved, begging the question: can a "lost" project ever truly be complete?

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Unlike a published book, public history websites can be updated ad infinitum, forcing creators to decide when to end the project. Placing parameters on a project allows for a sense of completion. Mattson chose to restrict his project to the 10-year timeframe of 2006-2016. However, he explains that "I've got a larger project that is using LGBT guidebooks to track the closures of bars for lesbians, and this mapping project turned out to be just an early version of the larger one. In those early stages I thought I was going to find that gay bars were just closing, but it turns out it's a much more complicated picture. Even for lesbian bars, at least three have opened this year. No one has created a 'Found Womyn's Spaces Blog,' so tracking only the closures of what are, in the end, small businesses, doesn't capture the new ones that arise" [Mattson 2018]. While the Mapping Lost Bars project is complete, it is part of a larger, ongoing endeavor. For my project, the completion of my dissertation produced one kind of ending. However, as I turn my dissertation into a book manuscript, I continue to update the site. Also, as I publish more information about the topic of feminist restaurants, including academic articles and non-academic books, I include that information on the website. The maps I built originally in 2015 based off of the women's/lesbian guidebooks, a kind of methodology that Mattson has begun to likewise use to track bar closures, have only been updated a few times since the website originally launched. I have considered working with a research assistant or information studies scholar to digitize and make word searchable every copy of Gaia's Guides and map every single kind of business mentioned with color codes. I have also considered making the map specific down to addresses, rather than just city centers and include photos, histories, and personal stories, similar to the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project website. However, I currently do not have the resources to enact these changes. After years of keeping The Feminist Restaurant Project updated, my work on the site has slowed. Jan Kurth shares a similar sentiment stating,

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I suppose I could quit at any time and it would be more or less complete. I still see mention of lost lesbian bars now and then, so I'll add those as time permits. Or maybe search for an old ad for a ladies cafe from 1900. But because of a lot more demands on my time these days, I just don't have the same hours to devote to this as I used to. I don't really see an "end goal" as the thing doesn't really have a beginning. It is what it is, I suppose. [Kurth 2018]

Mattson did most of his work over eighteen months. I spent four years actively updating the site. Jan Kurth has spent seven years on her site but has decreased her rate of posting over the past three years. Between June 2019 and June 2020, she did not write a single post. These projects point to the difficulties of sustaining these kinds of ventures. "Lost" spaces keep being lost. History keeps expanding. An individual's resources, however, have limitations. The topic of endings speaks to larger questions regarding maintenance and preservation.

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Preservation: is lost space doomed to be lost?

The process of finding lost spaces is about creating a record. The projects discussed in this article host their records online. Rapidly changing file formats, domain name ownerships lapsing, and new technologies threaten preservation. The struggle to keep resources up-to-date and accessible has led historians and archivists to fear that the current era will be the digital Dark Ages for future generations. Websites disappear. Head of the British Library's web archiving program, Stephen Bury, explained how the program preserved important records that only existed online, noting that "if we hadn't done that nobody would have access to the information, the photographs, the interviews on that site" [Fowler and Abramsohn 2009] [Milligan 2013] [Milligan 2018].^[4] Keeping websites functioning and up-to-date is a specific struggle that requires constant maintenance, necessitating labor and financial resources. While the British Library has financial resources for this kind of work, all three of the projects surveyed in this article are maintained by individuals without any dedicated institutional funding.

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Maintaining digital resources, especially projects independent of large institutional resources, is difficult. Greggor Mattson explains that his site "will live on my Google page forever, I guess, but until you asked it never occurred to me that it might be something that would interest an archive. But it's true: who archives the exteriors of the lesbian bars of Salt Lake City or Tulsa?" [Mattson 2018]. Kurth said she has not given thought of how to preserve the work but is interested in ideas. I, too, am unsure of how to proceed. I built the site on Google's Blogger platform so that I would not have to pay hosting fees and just pay a modest fee of around fifteen dollars yearly to maintain my domain name. However, the site is vulnerable to the whims of Google, which could decide to end Blogger and Google Maps. The site also requires frequent maintenance and updates. All of this work depends on my donated labor and is vulnerable to my own mortality [Ketchum 2018]. Outside of saving the posts as Word file documents and saving them on external hard drives and digital storage, personal attempts at preservation flounder. When I posed this question to readers of my site, the only solution offered was the Internet Archive [Anon 2017]. The Internet Archive, a 501(c)(3) non-profit, is building a digital library of Internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form; for example, it saved copies of The Feminist Restaurant Project 27 times between May 9, 2015 and August 24, 2018. Despite the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine preserving 341 billion web pages over the past twenty years, it is only useful if users know what they are searching for. Also, it seems precarious to depend exclusively on this single site. While the Internet has been touted as a democratization of knowledges and a tool for making knowledge more accessible, the ephemeral quality of digital resources challenges this narrative of accessibility. How do we as public historians and archivists preserve digital projects? Is our work fated to disappear?

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As scholars Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood demonstrate, archives and public history projects centered on marginalized, particularly LGBTQ+ communities have often decided to remain independent and not join with an institution. Elise Chenier likewise explains that "one of the major concerns expressed about the current shift of LGBTQ materials from community-based archives to institutional libraries, archives, and special collections is that collections will no longer be shaped by LGBTQ praxis" [Chenier 2016]. They report that organizations such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) are "decidedly suspect of the long-term investment in and commitment to these initiatives [and as a result] many organizations chose to keep collecting efforts autonomous and community driven, ensuring that collections, policies, and materials were not subject to changing priorities within universities" [Cooper 2013] [Corban n.d.] [McKinney 2015]. However, as evidenced above, by the example of the British Library's Web Archiving project, institutions provide more funding stability and are not predicated on one individual's circumstances in the same way.

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Perhaps some compromise can be made. Ann Cvetkovich has proposed "Queer Archive Activism" that calls for something beyond the financial and infrastructural support of the institution, but also requires space for active engagement with materials and a space for housing materials that push against traditional archival notions of evidentiary value [Cvetkovich 2011]. This debate between institution and community driven projects continues [Eichhorn 2014] [Juhasz 2006]. Online history projects serve a kind of counter narrative to the erasure or marginalization of LGBTQ+ histories; however, with their creation comes new challenges. Since these digital history projects are different than community archives and rather than dependent on a small group are so tied to one individual, institutionalization within an archive that has the financial and technological resources to sustain or retain the project is necessary. To be

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incorporated within that institution would help maintain these projects, which serve as valuable resources to understanding LGBTQ+ spatial histories. Moving away from a burden on the individual and towards institutionalization will give these projects a greater chance of survival. Ideally, community members will be included and the kind of engagement that Cvetkovich proposes can exist. As Kurth states, “If somebody else wants to take one or more of these places and do more research that’s great! Or even come up with their own observations and generalizations based on the data. I have no problem with that at all. I welcome it” [Kurth 2018]. Mattson and I share a similar sentiment, hoping that our work of collecting and retaining will be built upon. In order for the future work to be done, these sites must be preserved and institutionalization will enable this work.

Conclusion

The stakes of preserving the history of lost LGBTQ+ spaces are high. Directors of the Lesbian and Gay Liberation in Canada, Michelle Schwartz and Constance Crompton discuss how history-making practices of lesbian feminists offer a model of cultural history preservation and transmission for those who create digital resources. They write that “while this history-making situates researchers and their sisters in relation to lost history, there is something in the perpetual reinvigoration and revisiting of these lists and projects, often started anew every decade, which leads us to ask about the lack of cultural transmission between lesbian generations” [Schwartz and Crompton n.d]. In particular, they argue that even though individuals should maintain a right to privacy and a right to be forgotten, “we must also weigh the danger to both feminism and queer politics of hiding our history, forcing each new generation to start anew, with only the haziest stereotypes about previous generations to draw on for strength, or worse, to look on with derision, against the threat of confrontation, doxing, or violence to named activists” [Schwartz and Crompton n.d]. Without proper preservation “lost” history projects risk being “lost” or re-forgotten, forcing future generations to repeat the work of recovery.

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This article has focused on online history projects that center women’s, lesbian, and queer women’s spaces within a greater narrative of reclaiming LGBTQ+ spaces as a way to study histories of marginalized peoples. Jan Kurth’s “Lost Womyn’s Space”, Greggor Mattson’s “Mapping Lost Lesbian Bars”, and my own project “The Feminist Restaurant Project” use crowdsourcing, social media, visuals, and mapping in order to inspire other researchers, contribute to the collective memory of LGBTQ+ communities, and further the creators’ other work. Lost space projects are important. These digital projects highlight lost or marginalized historical actors. In the case of the endeavors studied in this article, women’s, lesbian, feminist, and queer spaces bring attention to histories that have been lost or forgotten and speak to larger conversations within history, archival research, and digital humanities about the need to document and preserve materials and stories of marginalized communities. However, as these projects rely on the efforts of individuals, and are divorced from institutional support and self-funded, they are vulnerable to being re-lost or re-forgotten. Institutionalization is necessary for their survival and can free future generations from needing to repeat this labor. To institutionalize or archive an individual project merely ends a single iteration of the work. By preserving these sites, my hope is that future generations will build upon and adapt these projects to new futures and circumstances.

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Notes

[1] This technique is not exclusive to LGBTQ+ focused history projects. The non-LGBTQ+ project, the “Lost Pub Project” which documents the decline of the English pub, has compiled over 35,000 entries. On the website, which functions as a kind of directory, the makers write, “Help our community project to archive these lost pubs before they are forgotten forever. If you know of a pub which has closed at any time in the past, please submit it, together with any anecdotes, historical information or photographs that you might have.” They further ask users to check for inconsistencies, writing that “pubs do re-open from time to time, so if you see one on the site that is open please let us know.” The creators share information on their website, Facebook, and twitter channels and users can check the database by clicking on city/town names and seeing listings. While the Lost Pub Project shows that lost LGBTQ+ pages are not unique in their use crowdsourcing, the technique is still valuable. As of October 31, 2018, the site features 35, 323 lost pubs, together with 20,509 photos.

[2] She has given me permission to use her name for this article.

[3] Picking the right kind of software to create a public map that invited user feedback was particularly difficult in 2013. At first, there was no application that directly suited my needs. Initially I considered Nunaliit and Postscrap, both developed by University of Carleton geographers. Neither fit the exact needs of the project because of the frameworks they necessitated. Further, the Google Social Maps Experience did not give the researcher oversight and editing capabilities over the content, leaving the opportunity for the map to be trolled. On that application, if a map was publicly available, anyone could add or delete data and, because of this, users might be less likely to feel safe uploading their content knowing that it could be changed or deleted by anyone. In 2016, Esri launched Story Map, a map builder that allowed anyone to create an account or use one's Google profile or Facebook account to post onto the map. Story Map Crowdsourced (beta) is an ArcGIS web application designed to collect photos and captions from anyone and display them on a map that Esri kept in beta until 2018. The application was easy to use and configure, and could be used in a web browser on laptop and desktop computers, mobile phones, and tablets. Contributors can sign in with their Facebook, Google, ArcGIS account, or participate as an anonymous guest. Further, creators of the map have oversight over the content. The program thus allows for a good balance of permitting users to not have to commit too much personal information in order to participate, but still know that their contribution is relatively safe. There are some drawbacks however, besides the \$2,500 annual subscription fee, which was thankfully covered by McGill University. It was not possible to upload or create a non-editable basemap without it being at risk of deletion, due to the Beta status of the program. Ideally it would have been possible to just export my master Google Map as a kml file, convert it to an ArcGIS readable file, which is readable by ArcGIS, the software Esri relies upon, and then use those points as a background layer over which users would be able to only edit a top layer. Also, currently, users are supposed to upload a photo and do not have the option to solely upload text. As a workaround, I suggested that users just upload a photo of a square and then write their text, but this situation is less than ideal. A positive aspect of this system is that the Esri program is quite user friendly and requires very little web literacy, relative to other mapping software. However, despite the friendly interface, some of these issues dissuaded some potential users. Another issue is that, unlike QGIS, which uses Python, the Esri site does not allow for the development of plugins in the Beta version. Nonetheless, in September 2016, the Feminist Restaurant Crowdsourced StoryMap launched and was embedded in "The Feminist Restaurant Project" website. And after all of that- no one used it. Users preferred emailing me about their own narratives or communicating with me in other ways. The site's users were not interested in actually making the map themselves, despite saying that they were. People liked the idea of it existing and talked about that being an exciting option but ultimately were not interested in map making. It turns out that my simpler Google maps were preferable for the communities I was engaging with.

[4] Ian Milligan's WARC project offers another approach to web archiving in a way that allows historians to more easily access data. This project also connects to his work on WALK (Web Archives for Longitudinal Knowledge).

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