

Embracing the Ephemeral

Navigating Archives and Queerness in a Digital Age

ABSTRACT

In 2009, I immersed myself in a workshop led by Jack Halberstam, which focused on the realm of queer archives. Together, we delved into the complexities of queer subcultures, contemplating the balance between personal and official archives. As time passed, the landscape of knowledge underwent a fundamental transformation. In this essay, I explore the archive, the ephemeral nature of memory, and the profound impact of our 2009 seminar. Amidst the digital revolution, archives have embraced new dimensions: the digital sphere, inclusivity, ethical dilemmas, and their influence on historical narratives. Queer scholarship, with its focus on inclusivity and community engagement, navigates these complexities, turning challenges into opportunities. Queerness and the archive are not merely destinations; they serve as beacons illuminating our scholarly pursuits, compelling us to venture into the limitless horizons of knowledge with hope and determination.

Keywords: Ephemerality, digital transformation, ethics, memory, queer archives and scholarship

Memory, a swinging door.

– David Bowie in *Shining Star*

I WISH TO recount a cherished memory from one of my many captivating interactions with Jack Halberstam. In 2009, while I was a gender studies professor at Lund University, Halberstam conducted a workshop centered around the concept of the archive. During this session,

we explored not only the archives of queer subcultures, but also the contrast between personal and official archives. I distinctly remember our adopting the phrase “I do not have this in my archive” to recognize and embrace new insights – or, in many cases, the absence of knowledge. Time has since passed, and much has evolved. At that time, the absence of evidence overshadowed our scholarly work. Today, the situation is quite the opposite: there is an overwhelming abundance of information available on the internet and social media.

In this essay, I reflect on insights that have emerged through revisiting the 2009 seminar and our discussions at the time. These contemplations encompass the significance of the ephemeral, the inherent unreliability of memory, and the artistic possibilities embedded within the realm of archiving. The focus of this essay is specifically on Halberstam’s “What’s That Smell? Queer Temporalities and Subcultural Lives,” originally published in 2003 and later republished in *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), a work referenced in this essay. During this period, significant progress had been made in the field of archives and archiving, evident in the contributions of queer theorists such as Ann Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant, and José Esteban Muñoz. Halberstam advocated for a reevaluation of our perception of queer subcultural archives, proposing a new queer subcultural theory that encompasses non-heterosexual, non-exclusively male, non-white, and non-adolescent subcultural production. Furthermore, Halberstam urged the need to conceptualize an archive capable of capturing and tracing ephemeral scenes in queer memory and history. Finally, Halberstam (2005, 161) suggested that queer subcultures offer an opportunity to challenge the binary of adolescence and adulthood prevalent in subcultural inquiries, as many queers reject conventional notions of home and family, thereby extending their subcultural participation.

The resurgence of the archive

The concept of the archive, once considered dusty and obscure, has experienced an unexpected resurgence within the realm of the humanities. This renewed interest can be partially attributed to significant

theoretical contemplations that emerged in France during the 1960s. A notable illustration of the reevaluation of archives can be found in Michel Foucault's 1969 work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, in which he explores the connections between the Greek term *arkhe* (origin), archeology, and the archive through the lens of discourse analysis. Similarly, in 1995, Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* further emphasized the significance and metaphorical depth of the term "archive."

Foucault (2002, 34–44) describes the archive as the general system for the formation and transformations of discourses. In this context, the archive encompasses all systems that structure and create regularity within discursive statements, determining how they are separated, grouped, and specified. Michel Foucault highlights that the archive primarily governs what can be said, acting as the system that regulates the emergence of statements as specific events (2002, 142–150). Therefore, the archive appears to include all systems that enable certain statements, ensuring persistence, change, and disappearance according to specific patterns. Both Derrida's and Foucault's work illustrate that the archive functions not only by shaping the form or arrangement of its content (or statements) but also by determining what qualifies as an event or statement in the first place. Basically, it pertains to the power of the system itself – the practice of systematization, or archiving – to define, generate, and set limits on its content, thus defining what exists beyond those limits.

Derrida's *mal d'archive* is intertwined with Freud's death drive (*Todestrieb*), rooted in humanity's inclination toward death-affirming and destructive tendencies, in contrast to the life drive. Since the archive's ontology is founded on repetition – rooted in destruction and death – experiencing the archive in its "pure" form is considered unattainable. The archive contains a dynamic duality: a desire to preserve coexisting with a longing to destroy (Derrida 1995, 14). Derrida views all living exchanges as reflections of the archive, spanning both the past and the future. The archive is constructed upon a drive to endure into the future, offering a glimpse of what is to come.

The material circumstances surrounding archives have undergone significant changes since our gathering in a seminar room in Lund. Through the digitization of texts, images, sounds, and films, archival materials have shifted from urgently sought traces of human lives to coded entities that regenerate information each time they are accessed. Media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst argues that we now live in an era in which the conventional concept of the archive has diminished, either replaced or complemented by a techno-mathematical regime (Ernst 2015, 2018; see also Olsson 2009). Contemporary online archives and libraries are open-ended and limitless, unlike the closed and comprehensible offline archives and libraries of the past.

The archive and the repertoire

However, the significance of the archive extends beyond its theoretical implications, given the contemporary shifts in information and storage paradigms. While Halberstam's work has largely revolved around variations of cultural, gender, and queer studies, my own research domain lies within theatre and performance studies, with a particular focus on gender and queer studies. Within performance studies, scholars attempt to theorize and write about liveness – the live moments – and I think that it resonates nicely to combine it with queer narratives. Our internal archives contain experiences of specific moments when “time stood still.” Such moments may take the form of ecstatic elevation: an enchanted meeting, an extraordinary experience, or a physical flow in which existence is perceived as a single, expanding now. They may also emerge in the opposite register: an unexpected catastrophe, an assault, death, or rape, which may produce trauma in which the perception of time becomes trapped in a nightmarish loop.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's 2003 book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* distinguishes between *the archive* and the repertoire of embodied memory, encompassing gestures, spoken word, movement, dance, song, and other live performances. Taylor's framework provides alternative perspectives on transnational flows and historical processes. Taylor asks: “Whose

memories, traditions and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?” (2003, 5). As part of her effort to counter the conventional focus on the written word as the primary carrier of knowledge, she divides memory practices into an archive of ostensibly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice and knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, and ritual (Taylor 2003, 19).

According to Taylor, the archive is thus memory that is preserved separately from the body, while the repertoire consists of bodily and oral practices for preservation, knowledge dissemination, and the transmission of memory. Taylor’s division shares similarities with Derrida’s theory, and she suggests that the archive is extended (*prosthetic*) material, or mediated memory. Taylor highlights that there is a power dimension involved in the archive, since it implies a certain stability across time and space. However, even though the repertoire (and thus performance) tends to disappear to a greater extent than archived materials, Taylor argues that the repertoire should rather be understood as something that remains, albeit more or less altered over time, through repetition and ongoing transmission.

An archive of the ephemeral

The archive is a Western, Eurocentric tradition with roots in colonialism and patriarchal systems, influencing what has been considered valuable and relevant. When the ephemeral character of the performing arts is understood as fundamentally unarchivable, and language – particularly writing – is privileged as the dominant vehicle of memory, the epistemic and archival value of embodied forms of remembering is inevitably marginalized, both historically and in the present. The conclusion, then, becomes that ephemerality in performance, but also in queer culture, is challenging to include in the archive. As Halberstam (2005, 161) aptly phrases it, “we need to alter our understanding of subcultures in several important ways in order to address the specificities of queer subcultures and queer subcultural sites.” Halberstam’s assertion that we should con-

conceptualize the archive and explore “new models of queer memory and queer history capable of recording and tracing subterranean scenes, fly-by-night clubs, and fleeting trends” (ibid.) still resonates deeply.

Queer studies, therefore, faces challenges in accessing queer lives and sites. To write about people’s lives is always complicated, and many of the meeting places where queers have gathered may no longer exist or no longer hold the same significance as before. This aligns with performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz’s call for “an archive of the ephemeral.” Yet, as Muñoz highlights in his 1996 essay “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” queer lives often remain absent from archives, as they have historically resided in the shadows to escape violence and harm. This marginalized status in archiving has led to fragmentation across different archives, if any evidence exists at all. Muñoz identifies the ephemeral as “traces, glimpses, and grains” of events that find their way into everything that an event has left behind (1996, 5–6). Muñoz’s argument is based on the idea that ephemera is a mode of proving and producing arguments often utilized by minoritarian cultures. He claims that queer traces and remnants can be found everywhere.

Halberstam’s vision of an archive that merges ethnographic interviews with online and unofficial sites is consistent with performance studies (2005, 169). Performance is fundamentally an ephemeral art form that cannot be touched, precisely defined, or fully captured in its potential. The only definition one can truly provide for performance is that it involves live art performed by artists (Goldberg 2011, 9). Performance can thus also be defined by its intention to question social norms and power relations in contemporary society by placing artists themselves, their bodies (often multiple bodies), on stage, since performance is so closely tied to the moment in which it is performed and the bodies, along with the histories they carry, that appear on stage.

Taylor’s approach seamlessly aligns with a fabric of memory, reminiscent of Orhan Pamuk’s perspective, and it closely corresponds with her conceptualization of repertoire, which is intimately linked to sensory experience and situated knowledge, constituting a form of sensory

archive (Pamuk 2022). In queer studies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduced the notion of touch in her work, particularly in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003). Sedgwick's examination of touch transcends its literal and physical dimensions; she broadens its scope to include a spectrum of meanings and implications across the domains of emotion, connection, and comprehension. Arguing that touch serves as a multifaceted metaphor, Sedgwick contends that it can symbolize diverse forms of contact, intimacy, and affective connections between individuals. It extends beyond the tactile sense, encompassing emotional and psychological dimensions. Within the broader context of her work, Sedgwick emphasizes the significance of unraveling and deconstructing binary oppositions, such as love/hate, inside/outside, or self/other. The notion of touching, for Sedgwick, emerges as a way to blur and challenge these binaries, fostering a more nuanced understanding of human experiences and relationships.

Turning Pamuk's fabric of memory into a queer fabric of memory also resonates with a fundamental methodological inquiry in theatre and performance studies. The challenge of preserving the moment is rooted in memory's unreliability, rarely yielding something tangible to grasp. The queer fabric of memory, whether preserved in objects believed to be eternal, meticulously accumulated paper, or the boundless potential of digital storage, underscores the intricate task of historical narration. Yet it is Walter Benjamin's concept of *aura*, emanating from preserved memories, that captivates me, rather than the minutiae of documented recollections. Even if we were to save everything, it would be impossible to preserve the past.

Investigating the intricate layers of memory through varied scholarly methods, including its transformations, distortions, and lapses, presents a considerable challenge. Despite its complexity, this endeavor proves captivating from an artistic perspective (Benjamin 1936/2023; Pamuk 2022).

What, then, am I truly preserving when I contemplate the intricate tapestry of queer memory? Is it the aging artifacts we protect, assuming their eternal significance and almost superhuman power? Or is it the

fervent collection of every scrap of paper touched by us or by the subjects of our study (Pamuk 2022)? Could it even be the naïve faith we place in the limitless capacities of digital repositories, guiding our archival journeys? The task of writing history presents itself as a monumental undertaking, one that mirrors its own transience, for it chronicles entities no longer in existence.

That is, I think, the Kantian idea of the lost object. What persists is the individual, and in some cases the collective, human archive and the sensory impressions that we call memory.

Yet my intrigue perhaps does not solely reside in the meticulously documented facets of these memories. Instead, it may lie in the effable aura born from preserving them in tangible artifacts, diligently sought out and curated. There is a poetic and allegorical quality to this aura as it radiates from objects, at times inevitably arousing a sense of melancholy within us, as Pamuk observes. It is much like the contemplation of ancient Greek and Roman ruins, or rather other monuments long relegated to oblivion (Pamuk 2022).

Construction of collective memory

As Halberstam eloquently conveys, the archive serves not only as a storage place, but also as a conceptual framework for cultural significance, the formation of shared memory, and the intricate documentation of queer endeavors. To operate effectively, the archive depends on users, interpreters, and cultural historians who must navigate through the content, assembling the complex mosaic of evolving queer history (2005, 169–170). The concept of cultural significance that Halberstam highlights is a vital aspect of archives. Archiving finds its roots in the late nineteenth-century “control revolution,” encompassing a trio of elements: the office, the registry, and the archive itself (Olsson 2009).

This world was characterized by typewriters, index cards, and meticulous filing systems, which have since been supplanted by contemporary technologies. The scope of the state’s influence extends beyond the realm of the army and the police; it also, significantly, resides within archival practices that have accumulated and persisted across centuries. More

specifically, the archiving model that emerged in Germany during the 1880s holds particular significance. This model can be succinctly encapsulated by the *Provenienzprinzip*, which dictates that archived documents should be organized *not* according to their content, but according to the manner in which they were collected and structured before their arrival at the archive (Olsson 2009).

These venerable archives encapsulate a nation's history and political dynamics, weaving the tapestry of its memories, often divergent from the experiences of queer lives. Nevertheless, in the current climate of nationalist-conservative and right-wing political surges, not everyone may be inclined to share their queer life stories and recollections with scholars such as ourselves. This becomes particularly pertinent when target groups such as queers, feminists, and migrants are subjected to political hostility. However, amidst these political ideas, and the evolution of social media storytelling and various approaches to new documentation practices, it is undeniable that we are currently observing a surge in explorations of queer lives and subcultures.

It is possible that the traditional method of conducting face-to-face interviews no longer holds the same significance it once did. Instead, the queer archive increasingly finds its place in today's social media landscape. At the same time, these advancements will inevitably compel us to reconsider the inherent political dynamics involved in archiving queer practices. Reflecting on the 2009 queer archives workshop, our challenge back then was primarily the lack of evidence and sources. Today, however, the situation is quite the opposite. In this era of social media, we have an abundance of sources, and it is not always easy to determine where to begin.

Performing the archive

In *Performing the Archive* (2009), art historian Simone Osthoff introduces the concept of the archive-as-artwork, exploring living archives and reenactments of art and performance history. Osthoff's approach involves not just writing about artists but writing alongside them, thereby blurring the lines between artist and art historian. Contemporary

(performance) art continues to challenge the traditional archive as a mere repository of documents. This transformation, influenced by the merging of artwork and highlights that history exists in a fluid state, intertwined with the art world yet distinct from it, creating an ongoing dialogue. Osthoff examines artistic practices that unsettle conventional understandings of the archive, foreground collaborative work in digital humanities, and probe the porous boundaries between subject and object of research, with particular attention to decolonial histories and methodologies. Building upon Osthoff's work, one approach to creating a collective memory – an ephemeral archive – is through performance. In the 2022 rendition of “A Gay Bar Called Everywhere” (with costumes and no practice), director Every Ocean Hughes embraced the queer memories embedded in its 2011 iteration.¹ Every Ocean Hughes, a multidisciplinary artist and professor at the University of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, utilized various art forms, including performance, photography, text, video, and collaboration.

Every Ocean Hughes transformed “A Gay Bar Called Everywhere” at Stockholm's Modern Dance Theatre (MDT) on April 3, 2022, reimagining its 2011 debut in New York's The Kitchen.² MDT, renowned for avant-garde dance and performance, provided a fresh space for contemplating the evolving landscape of queer lives. A decade after its presentation at The Kitchen, the gay bar found new life at MDT, enabling reflection on the changes shaping queer lives.³ Drawing inspiration from Susan Sontag's accounts of her creative process in a gay bar, the 2022 edition incorporated shifts in gender debates, the prevalence of intersectionality, Judith Butler's theories, and evolving feminist ideas, flourishing into a vibrant performance. Every Ocean Hughes expanded on this foundation, integrating insights from José Esteban Muñoz, emphasizing his scholarship and struggles in queer life. The low gay bar set the stage for profound ideas, mirroring historical experimentation in both the performing arts and public spaces.

Within this evolved context, Every Ocean Hughes questioned how to perform in a new era, considering the prominence of political debates across the arts and academia. The guidelines embraced both trauma and

laughter in the performance, fostering a sense of community among participants. Engaging with queer activism through texts, dance, song, costumes, and character embodiment, participants explored contemporary queer activism within today's societal landscape. Notably, figures like Cameron and Rawls, who have remained constants since the project's inception, contributed anew. This collaborative community memory and performance method resurrected and relocated artistic expressions from the past into the current milieu, nurturing a sense of community and camaraderie between spectators and performers.

Central to the performance was a channel of communication with the audience, weaving a discourse that integrated the audience with the artists and vice versa. At the MDT venue, the audience occupied the stage, blurring the line between performers and spectators. This intimate space highlighted not just the occurrences on stage but also the enduring relevance of the entire conceptual framework within today's society. A pressing question arose regarding potential adaptations in the approach to crafting the performance, considering the eleven years that had elapsed and the reality of its origins in another country. Performers, drawing from their unique societal experiences, artistic techniques, and cultural histories, breathed life into the performance.

This form of performative queer fabric of memory implies that performance art is a form of knowledge that, however, cannot entirely fulfill its mission on its own. There must be a shared venue, such as a theatre stage or another site, where queers can meet and perform together without having to overpower a straight audience. This participation in queer narratives from various art forms allows us, as readers, spectators, and listeners, to adopt the artistic way of examining the world from diverse perspectives and various historical eras. Historical and artistic events in the queer fabric of memory can point to something hidden, leave a trace, or clarify moments that would otherwise go unnoticed. What unites artists and performers with scholars is that it is our task to think, ponder, see, read, interpret, analyze and also perform (in all senses of the word). In this way, the metaphor of the queer fabric of memory can be stretched out indefinitely.

What characterized this performance was the intricate blend of historiography, biography, documentary theatre, and improvisation, each working in distinct ways within the tension between aesthetic expression and the depth of knowledge. Every Ocean Hughes had to establish a nuanced relationship with both the performative expression and the factual “evidence,” shaping a unique form of queer historical representation. This relationship is complex, yet not necessarily dichotomous. On an ontological level, performance as fiction implies in(ter)vention, contrasting with facts as verifiable reality. Simultaneously, on an epistemological level – in which fiction also embodies a performative construction or narrative – facts do not stand as the antithesis of this hybrid genre. Instead, they coalesce, contributing to the rich tapestry of this form of artistic expression.

The intersection of performance and queer studies clarifies the prerequisites for communication in performance art: it transcends the literal documentation of “archival evidence,” understanding how skillfully a performance reflects human life. “A Gay Bar Called Everywhere” had collective queer memory as its theme. Through the choice of venue – the symbolic gay bar – and the involvement of local artists, writers and performers, Every Ocean Hughes connected these elements with a tradition within queer lives that revolves around queer spaces – the places where queers have been able to find like-minded people (Atherton 2021). In this way, Every Ocean Hughes and their performers created a memory archive, even as times have changed, and the places and people along with them.

If today’s memory archive unfolds on the internet and social media, I would like to defend the importance of live encounters with living people, which constitute the core of performance studies, but also of the performative archives that Diana Taylor and Muñoz write about. As Johann von Goethe writes in *Faust*: “Augenblick, verweile doch, du bist so schön” (Moment, linger on, you are so beautiful). Personal archives consist precisely of these moments when time quite literally stands still, whether they are wonderful or dreadful memories.

Summing up: The archive as utopia

The archive, once daunting, has incorporated new dimensions: digital archiving, inclusivity and diversity, community engagement, ethical considerations, memory, and its influence on historical narratives. Queer scholarship emphasizes inclusivity and diversity, actively engaging with communities, navigating ethical complexities, and addressing a vast amount of information. Following Halberstam, today's archival practices should ensure that the voices and experiences of marginalized communities are preserved by collaborating with the people and communities from which materials originate. Community input helps to make archives more relevant and respectful of cultural contexts (2005, 152–186).

Ethical concerns, including issues related to privacy, consent, and the cultural sensitivity of certain materials, are integral to contemporary archival theory and practice. Archivists must navigate these complexities while ensuring access and preservation. Archives are also acknowledged as potent sites of memory and are studied for their role in shaping collective historical narratives. Understanding how archives influence our perception of the past thus becomes a significant aspect of contemporary archival theory. Today, archivists grapple with a vast amount of information. Sorting through and determining what to preserve, especially in the digital age, presents a major challenge. Therefore, appraisal strategies – the process of determining what records are worth keeping – are a critical focus (Ernst 2012, 2015, 2018).

The more I think about queer archives, the closer I get to Muñoz, who compellingly states in the introduction to *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009, 1), “Queerness is not yet here [...] Queerness is an ideality.” In these words, Muñoz captures the essence of a vision of a future that transcends our current understanding of queerness. Both queerness and the archive are not merely destinations but illuminations on the horizon, filled with potential. Muñoz envisions this future as a utopia, a performative space that challenges conventional forms of coexistence, fostering immersive collective curiosity. In this polyphonic realm, voices converge, weaving narratives that celebrate our shared capacity to imagine and prepare for encounters with worlds yet unknown.

Halberstam's insights have sparked enthusiasm among academics and performers alike. In moments like this, a deep gratitude fills my heart. Embracing an optimistic perspective facing on the various possibilities to access queer memories and personal archives, I find myself surrounded by people dedicated to queer scholarship and to sharing their imaginative visions. Undeniably, the potency of queer archives lies in their collective chronicle of transgressions spanning time and space. These archives serve as a gateway to an empowering realm, a step toward an envisioned, if not realized, queer utopia. Having a sense of responsibility toward others indicates a sense of belonging. Broadening one's responsibilities means expanding one's horizons, making the world more extensive and profound. Jack Halberstam's scholarly efforts have themselves constituted an archive and continue to serve as a cornerstone of this pursuit. For my part, I continue to say, as we learned at the seminar in 2009, that their work will always remain in my archive.

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NOTES

1. The original piece was created by Every Ocean Hughes (Emily Roysdon), together with Vanessa Anspaugh and Aretha Aoki, Jibz Cameron, Dean Daderko, Celeste Dupuy-Spencer, Nicole Eisenman, Barbara Hammer, K8 Hardy, Yve Laris Cohen, Thomas J. Lax, Elaine Carberry, Neal Medlyn, MPA, Jeanine Oleson, Becca Albee, Tami Hart, Will Rawls, Charles Ryan, JD Samson, A.L. Steiner, Sacha Yanow, Nao Bustamante, N-Pop Eisenman, and Tara Mateik.
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3. Participating artists in Stockholm included Jeremy Atherton Lin, Morgan Bassichis, Jibz Cameron/ Dynasty Handbag, Samuel Girma, Salad Hilowle, Every Ocean Hughes, Tony Karlsson Savci, Lawen Mohtadi, MPA, Will Rawls, Iris Smeds, Edwin Safari/Jafar the Superstar, Derrick Woods-Morrow, Evelyn T. Wang, Ming Wong, and Arnisa Zeqo.