The Practice of Simultaneously Curating Physical and Virtual Exhibits to Resist Against Institutional Memory Loss

Keeping LGBTQIA2S+ Campus Histories Alive

Alex Ketchum

ABSTRACT: Institutional memory, particularly on university campuses, is difficult to maintain. Preserving the institutional memory related to the activism, work, and community building done by marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ2S+ communities, is important to protect the communities' histories, maintain the strides these communities have made, and inspire ongoing activism. I argue that curating exhibitions simultaneously in physical and virtual spaces as a public history practice relieves some of this burden on individuals having to maintain institutional memory and works to overcome some of the root causes of institutional memory loss. In addition to discussing the specific case study of the LGBTQIA2S+ McGill Student, Faculty, and Staff Activism physical and virtual exhibitions, this article includes guidelines for other institutions.

KEY WORDS: queer, LGBTQIA2S+, exhibition, memory, preservation

Introduction

On the cover of the 1991 Gay and Lesbian Special Issue of the student paper *The McGill Daily*, author and McGill University alum Will Aitken shared that the campus bar, Gertrude Bar, more commonly known as Gert's, was founded by gay men. Aitken explained to a student journalist that Gert's, named after Gertrude Stein, the "20's biggest literary diva and stately dyke" was a popular hang-out spot for the members of the organization Gay McGill. According to the journalist, "McGill apocrypha claim[s] it was named after a member of the maintenance staff in the Union Building," to which Aitken replied, 'That's homophobic bullshit.'"[1] Seventeen years after the campus bar's 1974 founding, students at McGill no longer

---

[1] Carl Wilson, "Special Lesbian and Gay Cover Story," *McGill Daily* 80, no. 73 (1991): Cover, https://archive.org/details/McGillLibrary-mcgill-daily-v80-no73-february-28-1991-13638/mode/2up?q=Aitken+gay.

---

knew its queer and activist history. In the fall of 2022, when I curated physical and virtual exhibitions about LGBTQIA2S+ student, faculty, and staff activism at McGill, nearly fifty years after the bar's founding and continued operation, most McGill students, faculty, and staff had also never heard of this bar's queer history.[2] Institutional memory, particularly on university campuses teeming with turnover and change, is difficult to maintain. Preserving the institutional memory related to the activism, work, and community building done by marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ communities, is important to conserve the communities' histories, maintain the strides these communities have made, and inspire ongoing activism. In this article, I argue that curating exhibitions simultaneously in physical and virtual spaces as a public history practice relieves some of this burden on individuals having to maintain institutional memory after the initial investment of labor. By using digital humanities strategies such as distributed knowledge production, collaboration, multimodal creation and distribution, animating the archive, accessibility, and sustainability, curating of physical and virtual exhibitions at the same time works to overcome some of the root causes of institutional memory loss. In addition to discussing the specific case study of the LGBTQIA2S+ McGill Student, Faculty, and Staff Activism physical and virtual exhibitions, this article includes guidelines for curating related exhibitions at other institutions.

Literature Review

Maintaining institutional memory within university settings is difficult. Reflecting on these challenges, scholar of higher education Cameron Fincher writes, "The long-term memories of universities are indeed deplorable."[3] High rates of staff and student turnover, lack of documentation and preservation, and disruptions in knowledge sharing between incoming and outgoing community members contribute to this difficulty and are issues this project sought to address. As more university records, publications, and materials exist in born-digital format, maintaining records that could help preserve institutional memory is even more challenging.[4] For example, retaining student groups' materials became trickier when these groups began to rely on corporate controlled social media platforms to publicize campus events, demonstrations, and meetings rather than printed flyers; many social media platforms are not even archived by the Internet Archive's WayBack Machine.[5]

---

2 In the past, this history has not been explained on the Gert's bar website's "who we are" section: Gert's Bar & Café, "Who We Are," https://web.archive.org/web/20240118143133/https://www.gertscampusbar.ca/who-we-are.

3 Cameron Fincher, "AIR between Forums: Improving Institutional Memory," *Research in Higher Education* (1987): 431.

4 Timothy J. McGovern and Helen W. Samuels, "Our Institutional Memory at Risk: Collaborators to the Rescue," *Campus-Wide Information Systems* 15, no. 3 (1998): 103–7.

5 For example, the Wayback Machine cannot archive pages that are password protected, "pages that are only accessible when a person types into and sends a form," and some "pages may not be archived due to robots exclusions." Many social media sites are thus not archived. Internet Archive,

Universities tend to archive and preserve the more privileged voices on campus. Part of the work of maintaining institutional memory falls on university archives and records.[6] University archives and records management staff work to preserve the official records of the institution, but questions over how to manage these materials, how to implement appraisal processes, and how to determine the role of archives and records within an institution have long been the subject of debate.[7] Additionally, I agree with university archivist Eddie Woodward that university archives should be more than a "place where the retained remnants of the administrative units, and the academic departments, schools, and college's records retention schedules are stored."[8] I further agree with Woodward that "it is important to actively seek to document the student experience at the school. It is only in this way that one can breathe life into the history of the university. University records tell the institutional history. However, it is the student collections that make it live."[9] As Jacob Williams and I curated these physical and digital exhibitions at an institution whose university archives continue to not prioritize collecting materials on student activities, staff activism, and marginalized groups on campus, we had to be creative in our approach to sourcing materials.

It is important to be attentive to what Charlotte Linde calls "the noisy silences" within institutional memory of universities. Linde explains that noisy silences are "stories that are not told freely, both those that are never told and those that can be told only under very particular circumstances."[10] Furthermore, this work is part of a larger project of public history interpretation of the LGBTQ+ past.[11] Curating exhibitions simultaneously in physical and virtual form can work to address the noisy silences, pertaining especially to the work of marginalized communities, such as LGBTQ+ groups, on university campuses.

"Wayback Machine General Information," accessed May 9, 2025, https://help.archive.org/help/wayback-machine-general-information/.

6 It is outside of the scope of this article to differentiate between the different lines of archival thought such as the Hilary Jenkinson, TR Schellenberg, and Total Archives models. In this article, I am focused on McGill University, which as a Canadian institution uses the Total Archives model. Therefore, when I am speaking about archives and records, I am primarily referring to the Total Archives model, although I do refer to work from archivists in the United States context. As defined by archivist Kent Haworth, the concept of Total Archives is "an attempt to document all aspects of historical development, seeking the records not just of officialdom or of a governing elite but of all segments of a community" and "combining official administrative records and related private files, architectural drawings, maps, microfilm, and other documentary forms all touching on the development of the organization or region." Kent M. Haworth, "The voyage of RAD: from the Old World to the New," *Archivaria* 35 (February 1993): 55–63.

7 William J. Maher, *The Management of College and University Archives* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield), 1992.

8 Eddie Woodward, "The Case for a University Archivist: Preserving Institutional Memory," *College & Research Libraries News* 72, no. 4 (2011): 226.

9 Woodward, "The Case for a University Archivist," 226.

10 Charlotte Linde, *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 196.

11 Susan Ferentinos, "Ways of Interpreting Queer Pasts," *The Public Historian* 41, no. 2 (May 2019): 19–43.

Oftentimes the materials surrounding the work of campus activists, clubs representing minority groups on campus, and groups that oppose a university's administrative decisions become noisy silences within university records and archives. The stories of marginalized groups, particularly the histories and records of LGBTQ+ people, have not always been a collecting priority for many institutions, including university archives, due to homophobic and transphobic attitudes, and there are risks to institutionalization.[12] Linde reminds us that "any institution exists within a larger ecology of institutions and persons. This means that stories about an institution may also exist outside the institution. Such stories may be oppositional, neutral, or favorable."[13] While university archives and records are one important part of maintaining a university's institutional legacy and expanding collecting policies in order to document the activities of students, student groups, student publications, faculty and staff clubs, events on campus, and other ephemera is an important step, doing so will not wholly solve the issue of university institutional memory loss. This article discusses how it is possible to work within and outside the structure of university archives and records to recoup and maintain aspects of institutional memory. This process, however, comes with its own set of challenges.

Maintaining a university's institutional memory requires more than archives; ongoing collecting, outreach, and education are necessary. Many university archives have not collected materials on student, faculty, and staff activism and on marginalized communities on campus, but even if records and materials are collected and maintained in university archives, current students, faculty, and staff might not ever access them and gaps in institutional memory can persist. This lack of access and education about institutional records is a problem of outreach and communication, a persistent issue discussed by archivist Timothy Ericson.[14] With high student, faculty, and staff turnover, outreach must be ongoing and utilize a variety of communications platforms. If the material has not been collected, it is important to update university collecting policies if that institution can be trusted to not maintain homophobic and transphobic legacies. In the meantime, it is necessary to look beyond university archives to supplement current collections.

To attend to the noisy silences in university records and archives, new projects have begun to try to capture the voices of campus activists and marginalized groups on university campuses. In "The Feminist Protocols of Building an Archive of Student Activism," communications scholar Carrier Rentschler and her team

12 Judith M. Bennett, "Lesbian-like' and the Social History of Lesbianisms," *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 9 no. 1–2 (January/April 2000): 1–24; Randall C. Jimerson, "Archives and Memory," *International Digital Library Perspectives* 19, no. 3 (2003): 89–95; Steven Maynard, "The Burning, Wilful Evidence': Lesbian/Gay History and Archival Research," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92): 195–201; Jeanine Austin, "Affective Absence: Risks in the Institutionalization of the FemTechNet Archive," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (2019).

13 Linde, "Working the Past," 196.

14 Timothy L. Ericson, "Preoccupied with our Own Gardens': Outreach and Archivists," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990–91).

describe the protocols they developed to collect, design, and create a digital archive on the Omeka platform.[15] The Feminist Student News and Protest Archive (the Feminist SNAP Archive) consists of materials from thirty years of student activism against sexual violence on McGill University's campus, collected primarily from student groups' records and archives rather than the university's own official archives. The sustainability of the project, however, like many digital humanities projects, is a concern.[16] Relatedly, in 2020, I published a piece in *Digital Humanities Quarterly* about the ways individuals were creating digital public history projects to document the histories of physical queer spaces. These projects were all vulnerable as they relied on one individual for their continuation and by existing outside of formalized archival and institutional settings, long-term maintenance and preservation posed a challenge.[17] Documenting and maintaining the institutional history

This glass case in the physical exhibit contained the copy of the 1991 Gay and Lesbian Special Issue of the student paper *The McGill Daily* with Gertrude Stein on the cover. This case focused on Queer Joy and Campus Events. (Photo by author)

15 Carrie Rentschler et al., "The Feminist Protocols of Building an Archive of Student Activism," in *iMPACTS: Reclaiming the Role of Universities to Address Sexual Violence through Multi-sector Oartnerships in Law, Arts and Social Media,* ed. Chris Dietzel and Shaheen Shariff (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), 2023.

16 It was in part due to the Feminist SNAP Archive that I was inspired to curate the Physical and Digital Exhibitions of Student, Faculty, and Staff LGBTQ+ Activism at McGill University. I am also grateful for my conversations with research assistant Catherine Plawutsky of the SNAP project.

17 Alex Ketchum, "Lost Spaces, Lost Technologies, and Lost People: Online History Projects Seek to Recover LGBTQ+ Spatial Histories," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 14, no. 3 (2020).

of marginalized groups on campus and of student, faculty, and staff activism benefits from working within and outside institutional structures simultaneously, paired with an outreach and educational program.

About the Exhibition: Multi-Modal Creation and Distributed Knowledge Production

From February to October 2022, I worked with my undergraduate student research assistant Jacob Williams to simultaneously curate a physical and virtual exhibition about LGBTQIA2S+ student, faculty, and staff activism at McGill University.[18] This exhibition showcases the work of students, faculty, and staff who advocated for increased rights, safety, and places to thrive for LGBTQIA2S+ communities at McGill. The materials particularly highlight activism from the mid-twentieth century until 2023. In the physical exhibition, which was located on the main floor of McGill's McLennan Library from October 4, 2022, to January 6, 2023, the materials were organized around five major themes: Queer Joy; Student, Faculty, and Staff LGBTQIA2S+ Organizations and Clubs; Discrimination and Backlash; Academic Programs; and HIV/AIDS and Health. During a period in which there has been increased political backlash against LGBTQ+ communities within Canada and the United States, it is important to better understand earlier generations' activism and community-building efforts to encourage our work. I hoped that visitors to this exhibition would leave feeling inspired to build a more equitable world. The section of the exhibition on LGBTQIA2S+ Student, Faculty, Staff Clubs, Groups, and Organizations sought to provide resources to help individuals connect with current organizing efforts.

The materials from this exhibition came from the Queer McGill Archives; McGill's Union for Gender Empowerment (UGE) Archives; McGill University Rare Books, Archives, and Special Collections (ROAAr); the Archives gaies du Québec (AGQ); the Archives lesbiennes du Québec (ALQ); Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ); the Internet Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive; the collections of the Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies (IGSF); the Black Students' Network (BSN) of McGill; the Quebec Public Interest Research Group at McGill (QPIRG McGill); and the personal collections of alumni including Will Aitkin, Deb VanSlet, and Laure Neuville. Graduate student research assistant Kari Kuo assisted in uploading materials into the virtual exhibition and undergraduate student research assistant Shannon Salick digitized the QPIRG-McGill poster collection. The virtual exhibition,
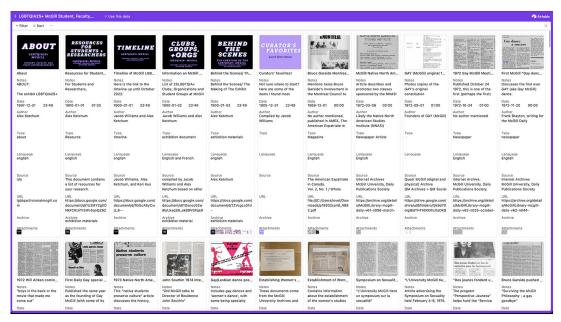
found at lgbtqactivismatmcgill.com, includes all of the materials from the physical exhibition as well as additional materials including resources for researchers and students, behind-the-scenes materials, links to the collections we digitized as part of this project, and regularly updated information on campus LGBTQ+ clubs and organizations.

Collecting and Collating: Collaboration

The history of LGBTQIA2S+ student, faculty, and staff activism at McGill is found in memories scattered across generations, archives, and private collections. To curate this exhibition, it was necessary to collect and bring together materials across institutions and individual collections. After corresponding with archivists and determining collections, fonds, and files that might be relevant to the project, during the summer of 2022 Jacob Williams and I visited McGill University Rare Books, Archives, and Special Collections (ROAAr); the Archives gaies du Québec (AGQ); the Archives lesbiennes du Québec; the Queer McGill Archives; McGill's Union for Gender Empowerment (UGE) Archives; the Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ); and the Black Students' Network (BSN) of McGill Archives. Williams took photos of materials and digitized all of the archives of Queer McGill and the UGE. We made these digitized files available to the organizations and also created links in the virtual exhibition to most of these digitized archival materials with the permission of the organizations. However, some of the digitized materials reflecting private and identifying information are not publicly available without researchers contacting the organization first. This compromise was made to maintain privacy while also contributing towards the sustainability of the work; having some redundancy in who had a copy of the files aims to preserve this institutional memory in case files are deleted. Williams and I also corresponded with numerous student, faculty, and staff clubs, groups, and organizations. I spent the summer curating these materials and also borrowing physical materials from the AGQ, ALQ, Will Aitkin, Laure Neuville, and Deb VanSlet. I also worked with the Margaret Gillet papers at the McGill Archives, internal institutional records, and designed exhibition materials.

Determinations for what would be included in the physical and virtual exhibitions were made based on the following goals: representing a range of campus groups; showcasing a diversity of topics related to LGBTQIA2S+ student, faculty, and staff activism; displaying a variety of the kinds of materials; and utilizing a diversity of sources from different archives and collections. Using the design software Canva, I created early mock-ups of the exhibition to visualize the layout of the materials. This process helped me determine where objects and materials should go on installation day and to see where there were gaps in the physical exhibition's materials and narrative. As there were more materials that we wanted to include than would have been physically possible in the exhibition space, Williams and I simultaneously curated the virtual exhibition on the web

platform Airtable. This platform enabled us to upload images and create individualized entries that included information such as the date, title, information about the document, photo, or object, author of the entry, type, language, source, URL, additional source information, and the archive and/or the physical location of the material. Although there was a distinction between the physical and virtual exhibitions, the two complemented one another.

Screenshot of the digital exhibit.

June through October 2022 was filled with uploading materials, writing citations and exhibition text, editing the digital exhibition, and more. During this period, I was able to strengthen relationships with institutions that I had worked with in the past including the McGill Archives, AGQ, and the ALQ, and forge new relationships with Queer McGill, the UGE, the BSN, the BAnQ, and QPIRG-McGill. Working with alumni also meant that there were interested parties across generations from the McGill community. We created a timeline of LGBTQ+ student, faculty, and staff activism on campus from 1914 to 2023 and benefited greatly from graduate student Kiersten Beszterda van Vliet who shared her timeline on the History of LGBTQ Dance Music in Montreal that contained some overlapping history, and the draft of history professor Brian Lewis's conference paper about some queer activist history on campus. The curation process resulted importantly in two main outcomes. The first outcome was that by bringing together materials from multiple different archives and collections across the city, we helped raise awareness of these resources between organizations and individuals who had similar interests. The second outcome was that this process guaranteed a group of stakeholders interested in the exhibitions and who were invested in the project's success.

Working with all of these organizations was useful for generating interest in the project, gaining publicity, and raising awareness of the exhibition and the information it was sharing. The involvement of these groups meant that information about the exhibition was shared on the social media accounts, newsletters, listservs, and websites of ROARr and AGQ and shared within ALQ networks. Also, the Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies shared information about the exhibition on its listserv because I am a faculty member there. The section about the exhibition on LGBTQIA2S+ clubs, groups, and organizations was also key to generating interest, creating stakeholders, and bringing the LGBTQ+ community together. Within the physical exhibition, there was a poster about the history of these clubs, and the exhibition showcased materials from these groups such as stickers, publications, event posters, buttons, and even a flogger made with bicycle tubes from a UGE event. Throughout the exhibition, there were QR codes that linked to the virtual component's updated club and group list with direct links to these organizations' websites and social media. These links served to help visitors readily connect with ongoing activism and community building on campus and led to clubs gaining new members. These links and materials were then also shared by groups such as Queer Engineers and McGill OutLaw (a law club) in their Instagram stories and on their other social media. These clubs, groups, and organizations were interested in sharing information about the exhibition because they saw their histories represented and wanted to showcase them. Furthermore, learning about the exhibition and seeing their groups' materials there led to new partnerships.

Publicity and subsequent events related to the exhibition meant that other LGBTQIA2S+ groups contacted me about having their materials included in the virtual component. Months after the physical exhibition ended, I was still adding new materials to the virtual exhibition because groups such as QPIRG-McGill, alumni, and McGill's faculty and staff continued to share materials with me. As a result, my undergraduate research assistant Shannon Salick digitized the meeting minutes of the JSBCE Equity Committee on Queer People and I added these documents to the virtual exhibition. QR codes and materials in the exhibition also encouraged visitors to visit the archives and learn more about their holdings and programming. The different LGBTQ+ organizations, archives, and the exhibition amplified and shone attention on each other, all mutually benefitting from this collaboration and reinforcing queer networks across the city of Montreal and beyond.

Timing was also an important factor in the exhibition's ability to strengthen these connections, as the physical and virtual exhibitions launched together in October for Queer History Month. When planning the physical exhibition, I specifically aimed for October so that it could be included on the McGill Queer History Month calendar and be publicized alongside those events. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were fewer queer history month events than in

previous years and since this exhibition was so McGill-centered, the university showcased it in its internal and external newsletters, daily emails to students, faculty, and alumni, and web pages (which I documented in the Behind the Scenes section of the virtual exhibition).[19] This publicity from the university also meant that student journalists covered the exhibition in student newspapers. As official McGill publications and student publications are some of the materials best preserved in the university archives, this publicity would increase the likelihood that both the materials within the exhibitions and the history of creating them both be retained. This publicity and media attention also discussed the queer archives and organizations highlighted in the exhibition and therefore amplified their reach and queer networks.

While I actively publicized the exhibitions within listservs and social media that I had access to, the exhibitions also benefitted from passive publicity. I insistently advocated that the physical exhibition should be on the main floor of the downtown campus's central library, visited by thousands of students, faculty, staff, and community members daily. According to the 2022 McGill Library Assessment, the library receives an average of eight thousand visits per weekday from the campus community and guests and the physical exhibition was there for ninety-five days and sixty-nine weekdays. Having the exhibition in this central space meant people did not have to go out of their way to see it. The location also enabled people to discover it by chance as anyone who entered through the main doors (the only entrance of the central library) would stumble upon it. Once visitors "discovered it," there were multiple ways they could connect with the resources of the other organizations and explore the virtual component. This connection demonstrates that while the physical and virtual exhibitions were distinct, they were intertwined.

Breaking the Binary Between Physical and Virtual: Accessibility

By working in physical and digital spaces, we could expand the number of stakeholders, combat access issues, and generate more awareness about the project. To create a version of the exhibition that would last beyond the October through December 2022 physical display, Jacob Williams, Kari Kuo, and I began to move digital files from our shared Google Drive and DropBox accounts into the digital exhibition on Airtable. A benefit of the platform is that multiple users can work on the project at once. Thanks to support from my SSHRC Insight Grant, we could purchase the domain name lgbtqactivismatmcgill.com for ten years as a redirect URL to the Airtable. To connect visitors of the physical exhibition to the digital exhibition, I also created a Linktree accessible via QR codes: https://linktr.ee/lgbtactivismatmcgill. This design meant that there was less of a distinction between

19 Alex Ketchum and Jacob Williams, "Behind the Scenes/Making of The Exhibit," LGBTQIA+ McGill Student, Faculty and Staff Activism Digital Exhibit, lgbtqactivismatmcgill.com.

the online and the offline. In-person visitors could browse the physical materials and participate in a hybrid experience by learning more by using their phones to scan QR codes. I also included contact information that encouraged visitors to share additional resources with us so that we could continue to add to the exhibition.

Collage of materials from the exhibition. (Photo by author)

Events complementing the exhibition also encouraged participation and challenged the distinction between the physical and virtual delineation within the project. Jacob Williams and I gave curator talks and tours during homecoming weekend, encouraging alumni and visitors to learn more about this history and share it within their online networks. On October 26, 2022, to entice more interest in the exhibition and to thank our stakeholders, I organized a launch party in the Colgate room of the McLennan Library, which is part of the McGill Archives and Special Collections. This section of the library is usually locked and requires a staff member to buzz in visitors. I wanted the event to be in the Colgate room firstly because it is an accessible space, reachable via elevator, only three floors above the physical exhibition. I also know that many students and community members feel intimidated by this space on campus and I wanted to break down the barrier by showing them that the McGill Archives and Special Collections can be a space for them. For accessibility purposes, we served vegan and vegetarian food and a variety of drinks. We also encouraged participants to mask when not eating due to the COVID-19 pandemic and most participants did mask. I also provided a version of the slideshow for people who were unable to physically attend. After a brief overview of the exhibition and introductions by Jacob Williams and myself, I wanted the

presentation to provide an opportunity for archivists Simone Beaudry-Pilotte of the AGQ, Laure Neuville of ALQ, Keith Nolwenn Bellec of the UGE and Queer McGill to speak about their amazing archives and resources. Alumni, students, archivists, staff, and faculty members all mingled. Over eighty people attended and I was told by library and archives staff that it was the biggest event that they had ever seen in the space.

During the launch party event I met with people interested in donating their papers, materials, and objects related to McGill's queer campus history to the archives and also showcasing those materials in the virtual exhibition. As many visitors did not know how to donate materials, at the suggestion of McGill librarian Michael David Miller I organized a virtual Zoom event on November 17 with Simone Beaudry-Pilotte of the AGQ, Laure Neuville of the ALQ, and Adria Seccareccia, then of McGill University Archives, to explain how people could preserve materials and donate them to archives. I recorded the event, uploaded it to You-Tube, shared it in the virtual exhibition, and embedded it on the Disrupting Disruptions: the Feminist and Accessible Publishing, Communications, and Technologies Speaker and Workshop Series website. Recording and sharing the recording made this information accessible to people outside of Montreal and people who want to learn these processes in the future, as well as serving as a record of this event.

One of the motivations for curating this exhibition in physical and digital forms was to provide resources for future research and exploration of LGBTQ+ student, faculty, and staff activism at McGill University, other universities, and larger LGBTQ+ histories within Montreal, Quebec, Canada, and beyond. As the university has ongoing student turnover, I wanted to create materials for instructors, students, and researchers to be able to use this material in course assignments, thesis projects, articles, and more. I created a special section in the digital exhibition that explains how instructors, students, and researchers can use its resources and find information about the source of the materials they examine, where to locate this material outside of the exhibition, and how to cite this information. I also have included a list of possible research topics based on materials in the exhibitions. These class and teaching resources also were amplified when Jacob Williams guest lectured in a 150-student class, Intro to Sexual Diversity Studies, and I spoke to 230 students in my Intro to Feminist and Social Justice Studies class. I also gave multiple public talks, including speaking at the year-end volunteers' appreciation banquet for the Union for Gender Empowerment. I asked that the exhibition be included in the Gender, Sexuality, Feminist, and Sexuality Studies research guide section of the McGill Library so that students in the future can find it even if their professor does not mention it during class or include it in a resource tab in the Learning Management Software (LMS) for their course. I worked with the managers of Gert's to display framed posters with images of the 1991 McGill *Daily* cover that began this article within Gert's Bar and in the recently opened, Gert's Café (also in the student center). The poster includes a caption and QR code to "learn more about this

history at lgbtqactivismatmcgill.com" so that students relaxing at the campus bar can learn about this establishment's queer history and the virtual exhibition's resources.[20] Furthermore, I have included links to other queer research projects within the student and researcher sections of the exhibitions to amplify other important queer projects and encourage ongoing research.

Creating a digital exhibition meant that people who could not be physically present due to health, the COVID-19 pandemic, living outside of Montreal, or time constraints could still connect with the materials. The digital exhibition also created a space to document the physical component via photos, document the creation process, and provide many more resources and context, making other materials in the city more accessible. The physical exhibition was wheelchair accessible and in a part of campus utilized by the general public. Accessibility was a driving factor in decision-making about the location, documentation, and distribution of the exhibitions, events, and materials.

Sustainability and Maintenance

An ongoing challenge for the project has been the question of how to maintain the project after the initial grant money is gone, technologies update, file formats change, and publicity efforts have waned. The physical exhibition had a limited duration, from October through January, until another exhibition moved into the space. Documentation of the physical project exists in the online exhibition, the McGill University Archives, and the AGQ and ALQ records. I bought the domain name lgbtqactivismatmcgill.com for ten years while I had available grant money to do so. One of the vulnerabilities of the virtual exhibition is there is no guarantee that Airtable will still exist in ten years. Airtable, however, has some clear advantages, as it is free (up to a certain file size limit) with an aesthetically pleasing interface that is easily navigable for users. Most importantly, Airtable makes it easy for visitors to download information. Visitors can download the .csv file of the collection by clicking on the three dots, which appear as " . . . " in the header, and selecting the download .csv option. Although having the virtual exhibition on Airtable does create a kind of software dependency, I have backed up the site, the digitized archives, and the other materials on external hard drives. I have also backed up the website with the free, open-source web archiving software "Webrecorder," created by Rhizome. As previously mentioned, I also used this project to facilitate the digitization of the materials of Queer McGill, UGE, and QPIRG-McGill. These organizations have had access to the Google Drive folders with their materials and have been able to back up these files to their own systems. One error I made early on was to not create a separate Google Drive account for all of the materials; instead the files were spread between Google Drive and several

---

20   The poster has been so popular that someone stole a copy from the bar, which I subsequently have replaced.

Dropbox accounts. I have since collated these materials on the external drive. Although Rhizome's Conifer tool is meant to web archive dynamic websites, it currently does not work on Airtable but I hope to work with Rhizome's tech support to ameliorate this problem and I have already submitted multiple tickets. While the technological maintenance and sustainability of this project are presently feasible, the ability to maintain visitors and knowledge going forward may be more challenging.

As this exhibition sought to bolster against institutional memory loss of LGBTQIA2S+ student, faculty, and staff activism and community building on campus, ongoing outreach has been and will continue to be necessary. Eighteen months after the exhibition's launch, the challenge of maintaining institutional memory is even more evident, but the systems we established when curating the exhibitions have lessened the burden on one individual needing to maintain this institutional memory. By integrating this exhibition into course syllabi, the library website, and reference lists, and maintaining the network with the different archives and stakeholders, we are working towards the goal of ensuring that the exhibition will continue to be relevant for at least the next ten years. In addition to the initial strategies employed, I have worked with the institutions' queer working groups, the Queer History Month strategy group, and other faculty and staff at McGill to include information about the project on their websites. Universities have a frequent turnover of students, faculty, and staff, and education and publicity efforts must remain ongoing. Tying the exhibition to the institution's recurring Queer History Month's programming and publicity efforts has provided some stability and made use of institutional infrastructure beyond the exhibition team.

Guidelines

Curating an exhibition in virtual and physical forms simultaneously can combat institutional memory loss. As with any project, it is important to begin by planning the scope of the exhibitions' content and time frame. I encourage others to be realistic about how much time can be allocated to this project. Between initial conception to the de-installation of the physical exhibition and ongoing maintenance, updates, and additions to the virtual exhibition, the combined work from Jacob Williams, Kari Kuo, Shannon Salick, and me has been over 450 hours. Securing grant money to support the project was additional labor but being able to hire research assistants made the project more feasible. The greatest cost for curating exhibitions is labor. I recommend budgeting a few hundred dollars for printing posters, purchasing domain names, buying external hard drives, and potentially buying additional cloud storage space. Catering the launch party also cost a few hundred dollars. The archivists who participated in the virtual event on donating materials to LGBTQ+ archives also received $800 (CAD) honorariums, standard for the Disrupting Disruptions speaker series. Depending on what

platform used to host the virtual exhibition, it might be necessary to pay software subscription fees.

One of the earliest tasks will be speaking with different stakeholders and securing a space for the physical exhibition. The availability of space will impact the work timeline. The more archives and collections used, the more complicated the organization of the exhibitions will be. Plan initial visits to archives and collections to see what materials are available. Archivists may have a sense of other community members that might be interested in the project. As materials are selected, plan also to make digital copies for the virtual exhibition. Be mindful to document all of the necessary metadata so that it can be included in the exhibitions. Take screenshots of born-digital materials (such as social media posts) as they may not be preserved by the Internet Wayback Machine. I recommend creating a mock-up of the physical exhibition in advance as this will facilitate installation. On installation day, arrive with all of the primary source materials and objects, extra paper, pens and pencils, tape, posters, exhibition materials, scissors, and all citations printed and cut out.

Before the opening day, be sure to generate publicity alongside stakeholders and to share this information with local communities. I recommend having some sort of launch event that will encourage people to visit the physical exhibition. Ideally, there will be links to the virtual component within the physical exhibition so that visitors can connect with this digital material. Be prepared for visitors to reach out with suggestions of potential additions to the exhibition after the launch and consider how to incorporate these suggestions within the digital exhibition. It may be necessary to maintain outreach activities for years to come.

While the costs I have outlined above may feel discouraging or overwhelming, it is also possible to curate physical and virtual exhibitions with lower overhead costs, although this might require more sweat equity. If you are interested in experimenting with simultaneously curating an exhibition in physical and virtual space, you could focus on a more specific subject, create a smaller exhibition, and/or make the virtual exhibition more of a long blog post or documentation of the exhibition, techniques I utilized in my "The Gendered Cultures of Beer and Cheese: the Regulation of Human and Microbial Bodies on the Home and Industrial Scales, 1616–2017 " and "What's the Recipe for a Queer Cookbook?," both housed at The Historical Cooking Project.[21] Curating physical and virtual exhibitions requires organization and adaptability. It is likely that it will be necessary to vary plans somewhat throughout the process.

---

21 Ketchum, "The Gendered Cultures of Beer and Cheese: the Regulation of Human and Microbial Bodies on the Home and Industrial Scales, 1616–2017," https://www.historical cookingproject.com/2017/09/digitized-exhibit-gendered-cultures-of.html; Ketchum, "What's the Recipe for a Queer Cookbook?," https://www.historicalcookingproject.com/2021/08/digitized-whats-recipe-for-queer.html

Conclusion

The physical and virtual exhibitions of the LGBTQIA2S+ McGill Student, Faculty, and Staff Exhibit were a way to bring together materials from multiple different archives across the city of Montreal, strengthening the networks between them. Although involving more organizations and individuals in the project did make it more of a complicated organizational endeavor, this process also created multiple stakeholders, including current McGill students, faculty, and staff; the McGill University Archives; other archives in the city; and alumni. By having the physical exhibition in a central location on campus, passersby could learn about queer campus history without much effort. This central location also signaled the importance of this history. Additionally, the use of QR codes and links enabled the exhibition to move beyond physical space. While the physical exhibition from October through early January was visited by thousands of people, the online component meant that visitors did not have to be physically present in Montreal and people can continue to have access to the materials outside of the ninety-five-day period of the physical exhibition.

The practice of curating physical and virtual exhibitions at the same time seeks to preserve institutional history by making use of digital humanities strategies such as distributed knowledge production, collaboration, multimodal creation and distribution, animating the archive, accessibility, and more. Institutional memory and digital humanities projects share the ongoing challenge of maintenance and sustainability, requiring regular outreach and education. By integrating features for students and researchers within the physical exhibition, including sample paper topic ideas, the exhibition can be used by new groups of writers, researchers, and students. These class and teaching resources also were amplified through events, guest lectures, and ongoing outreach. Creating an in-person space through organizing a launch event where the archivists, students in attendance, and alumni facilitated networking and led to more collaborations. Organizing events covered in student and institutional publications, which are some of them on-campus events best preserved by the university archives, also contributes to the sustainability of this institutional knowledge. Including events and materials on donating and sharing other related materials to the topic contributes to ongoing engagement. Web archiving, backup of files to physical and cloud platforms, creation of print materials related to the exhibitions, and sharing materials with other organizations contribute to sustainability.

The exhibitions continue to connect the current McGill campus community with its LGBTQIA2S+ history. The attention garnered by the physical and virtual exhibitions has led to ongoing interest in contributing materials to the virtual exhibition by groups and individuals. In July 2024, McGill's Trans Patient Union (founded in November 2022) contacted me about donating its materials to the digital exhibition. Although before the creation of exhibitions the staff at Gert's had no knowledge of the bar's history, on April 4, 2024, after the exhibitions drew

attention to this history and due to my collaboration with the bar, Gert's posted an image of Gertrude Stein collaged with a bottle of Fireball Whisky with the caption "Gert's big 50th BIRTHDAY BASH is tonight and we expect all of you there to celebrate our bar and big Gertrude herself." At the top of his McGill webpage about resources for research on sexuality studies and gender studies, McGill librarian Michael David Miller has placed a link to the online exhibition, and when giving guest lectures in undergraduate classes, he highlights the materials available for research papers. The Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity Committee of McGill plans to add a link to the exhibition to its website in fall 2024. While the McGill University Archives still do not prioritize collecting student group materials, due to its collecting mandate all of the posters, QR code print outs that link to the digital exhibition, and information placards that I made for the physical exhibition are now in the McGill University Archives. Furthermore, as the McGill University Archives collect materials from student newspapers and publications, the information about the exhibitions and its history are further preserved in the archived copies of the October 2022 *McGill Daily* and November 2022 *Le Delit* articles about the exhibitions. Although measuring impact is always a challenge, the exhibitions have kept these campus histories alive. The efforts documented in this article showcase both passive and active ways to maintain this kind of institutional memory.

The online and virtual exhibitions enable this history to be maintained within and outside of the institution. Although creating the physical and digital exhibitions required a small group of individuals to undertake significant labor, the initial work of involving numerous community partners, creating redundant physical and digital copies of materials, and setting up a system of active and passive publicity and outreach strategies means that preserving the institutional memory no longer rests with one or a few people in perpetuity. Creating a virtual exhibition that compliments the physical exhibition, paired with ongoing outreach, facilitates the sustainability of the exhibition and works to preserve the institutional memory of marginalized groups and histories.

· · · · ·

Alex Ketchum (she/her) is an Associate Professor at McGill University's Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies (IGSF). She is the Director of the Just Feminist Tech and Scholarship Lab. She is the author of several books including *Engage in Public Scholarship!: A Guidebook on Feminist and Accessible Communication*; *Ingredients for Revolution: A History of American Feminist Restaurants, Cafes, and Coffeehouses,* and the forthcoming "Digital Queers and High Tech Gays: A History of LGBTQ+ Cyber Activism." She is also co-editor of the forthcoming anthology: *Queers at the Table: An Illustrated Guide to Queer Food with Recipes,* which will be out in October 2025 with Arsenal Pulp Press and the author of *How to Organize Inclusive Events and Conferences* (Microcosm Publishing 2026). For more, check out alexketchum.ca.