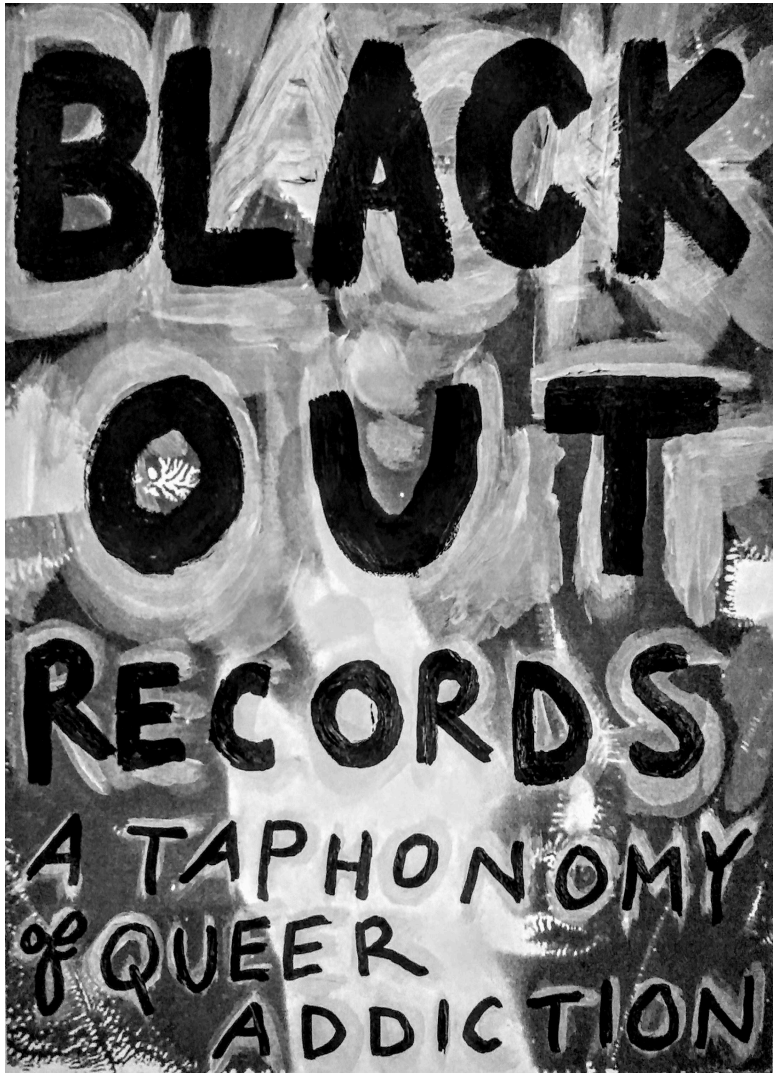
Jesse Eisenmann is a white, queer, and disabled artist living in Minneapolis. They live and work amongst obsolescence, monotony, and an embrace of the fuck-it-all joy of existence. See jesse-eisenmann.com for more.



Blackout Records
A Taphonomy of Queer Addiction

Written by Jesse Eisenmann
in collaboration with Rachel Mattson
Minneapolis, MN
2020

A Zine from
The Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies
at the University of Minnesota Libraries
lib.umn.edu/tretter

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Special thanks to Donna Choih, Emily Butler, Curly, Tapiwa Manase, Amy Hilsen. To those featured here in moments large and small: it's been a goddamn honor. Thank you to all at the Tretter Collection for help and guidance on research (and for being wonderful comrades); perpetual shout out to all who made Mxdxme possible, even/especially those outside of my own orbit, and to Andi, who taught me.

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The Archival Reading Room, Andersen Library, University of Minnesota
December 2019

The Andersen Library at the University of Minnesota looks like an architectural drawing come to life. The building is framed in clean lines and is free of embellishment, with neat rows of rectangle windows peering around the vanishing point of the building's curve, arching towards the nearby river bank. Inside, the lobby is quiet and has a gravity to it. There aren't many people around, but there is lots of space and open light; the ceiling is three stories high, and a spiral staircase climbs across the space. My steps echo on the polished floor as I head to the stairs that will take me to the building's reading room.

It's December in a mild Minneapolis winter. Before entering the reading room itself, I drop off my backpack in a locker provided by the library in a little enclave with motion-sensored lights and digital locks. I walked outside for a few minutes to get here and now that I'm indoors I'm warm, so I take off my sweater to cool down, but keep it at the ready across my arm. The rest goes into the locker––water bottle, snacks, books. This is the Archives and Special Collections library, and the reading room has specific rules to its use. I bring just enough paper to take notes with and sign in at the registration desk, where I am compelled to speak with a hushed voice.

I greet someone who responds with a smile, eager to help.

"Have you used the reading room before?"

I have, so I can forego the initial ID check. The reading room doesn't require a University ID to use it––the space is technically open to the public––but the desk staff usually asks anyway. Being asked to show my identification documents here is somewhat dispiriting, like I'm expected to abscond with documents and need to be tracked.

"I see you've got a phone?"

Whatever items I bring into the room have to be accounted for.

"Yeah, and my journal and a pencil."

"If you want to bring your sweater in you have to put it on. I know it's a total pain, but it counts as a jacket otherwise and you'll have to put it in a locker."

I'm still warm but I know in no time my shirt won't be enough, so I throw the extra layer back on. The desk attendant gives me a piece of paper with my items tracked and my name recorded to give to the attendant inside the actual reading room. I open a heavy glass door with a long vertical handle, sign in again, hand off my slip, and an aide gives me a table assignment. They tell me that my items will be brought to my table shortly; there are a few other researchers scattered at tables, pouring over materials. The room is silent while I wait.

I am here to continue my search for queer histories of addiction and recovery in the Twin Cities. For this visit, I have requested a set of materials from the Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies, including a box of records documenting the work of mental health care providers, and some materials that relate to the history of LGBT youth homelessness in the Twin Cities.[1] I'm thinking I'll maybe find protocols, testimonials, or other pieces of information that can be placed together to fill in some of this history.

As a reading room aide rolls a cart with my requested materials to my spot, I remind myself of the protocol for handling archival items here. One box at a time, and one item at a time––and remember to place the placard where I've taken the folder, so it can go back in the same order it was in when I got it. When I take out a folder and look at whatever material is inside, be it a pamphlet or small book or single sheet of paper, I have to resist the urge to hold it in my hands. Instead, I need to lay it flat on the table to prevent indents or any handling damage to what could be fragile paper. I need to keep the view of the folder and material I'm handling clear, unobscured by other boxes, so the desk attendant can keep their eyes on it and make sure the materials are being cared for correctly.

It is very annoying. Alas.

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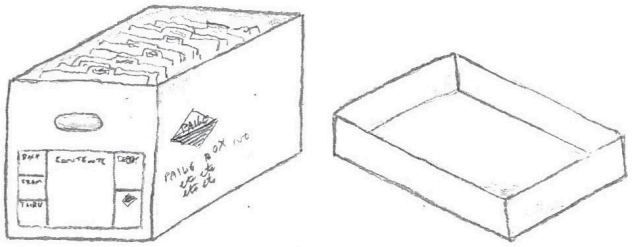
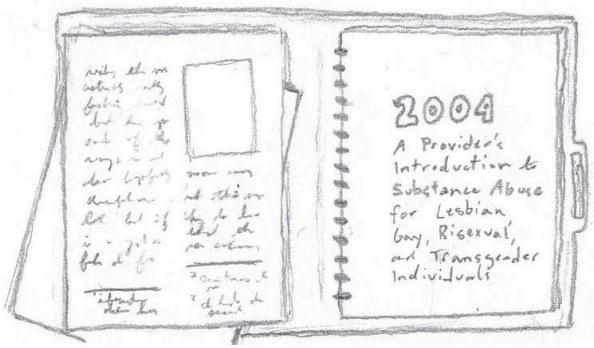
[1] The Trans Youth Support Network (TYSN) Records, Tretter Collection in GLBT Studies, University of Minnesota.

I pull out a box from the "LGBT Mental Health Providers Network Records,"[2] which contains several beige file folders with handwritten labels, stuffed with papers, brochures, and reports. In one folder, there is a 2004 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services *Guide to Substance Abuse Treatment for LGBT Individuals*.[3] Inside this guide is a 1991 San Francisco study[4] which found that 18% of all lesbian or bisexual women and 31% of all gay or bisexual men used drugs and alcohol at the "highest risk level." This "highest risk level" is not defined, except insofar as it was "established by the survey"––which is not included in full. I assume this means daily use or use multiple times per day, and a significant amount (i.e., more than three beers a day). But that's my own extrapolation. I'm certainly no Department of Health officer.



[2] The LGBT Mental Health Providers Network Records, Tretter Collection.
[3] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Guide to Substance Abuse Treatment for LGBT Individuals," 2004.
[4] "EMT Associates, San Francisco Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Substance Abuse Needs Assessment Executive Summary," (EMT Associates, Inc, Sacramento, CA, 1991), pp 2-3.



In the same guide, I read about a 1978 study[5] that found attempted suicide rates for lesbian and gay men was between 21% - 36%. These results contain stark variations by race and gender: in the period studied, 36% of black lesbians (versus 21% of white lesbians) and 32% of black gay men (versus 27% of white gay men) had attempted suicide. I am paging through this guide, watching the numbers come in fast, feeling my brow furrow, feeling my jaw clench.

I know something of how the surveyed feel, but not from reading this report. I don't want to just take note of these numbers. I want to reach out and touch these people, hold their shaking hands, lay their head on my shoulder. *You're not alone*, I want to remind them.

[5] Bell and Weinberg, *Homosexualities: A Study of Diversity Among Men and Women* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 1978)

The paper instead lays flat on the table. I take a few pictures with my phone and place the folder at its placard.

I look out the window and take a deep breath.

The subject of my search is personal, bred in bars and loss and love. I am a queer addict researching queer addiction, looking for a history of recovery within which to place my own.

This is my first significant research project. Before I started this research, I had no idea what to expect: I had never utilized archives before and hardly understood what they were, or what kind of records I would actually find here. On this day in December, I am not far into my research, and haven't come close to seeing everything that I want to explore. But what I have seen hasn't included a lot of first-person information; the voices representing the experiences of queer addiction are mostly coming from the outside.

It makes me feel studied, instead of seen.

It isn't *me* in the statistics, not really. Still, I am projecting myself onto the survey results, inputting my own feelings where I find the data lacking, and I am discovering that I do not like reading about myself, or my community, in empirical form.

The sterility of the reading room compounds my unrest; protocols suggest that to be serious is to be silent and still. My research feels vital, but I feel like I have to subdue the part of me that is represented in what I'm trying to find in order to find it. This discomfort is making me sweat––but according to reading room rules, I can't take off my sweater. I lean back and bring my hands into my lap.

How do I look at this messy, personally meaningful historical documentation while it is kept––necessarily and importantly, but also off-puttingly––in order?

I got here through happenstance, really. I'm a first generation college student and started attending the University in 2008 at 18, already plagued with substance use issues. After my junior year, I dropped out to let go and devote myself full time to the addiction that had left more than a few Fs on my transcript. In the seven years between dropping out and coming back to school, a slew of predictable events like homelessness, treatment, and sobriety rolled through my life, and eventually led me to re-enroll so I could remember how to write. I was in my final year when I started working on this research project about the history of addiction and recovery in the LGBT communities of the Twin Cities. The irony is not lost on me that the thing that made me drop out of school the first time around is now a subject I am using my proximity to the University to dive further into.

It feels serendipitous then to be in a room with a picture-window view of the Mississippi River, my phone on silent and my breath the loudest thing around me––hoping to find a human touch in the records on

the table. But whose touch could I find in this space? What blackout drunk, what queer drug user would donate their life's records to an archive? What would those records even be? I know I am not finding what I expected. But what exactly *did* I expect? A map of all the publicly accessible sharps containers in the Cities, or of safer sleep spots? A collection of letters written from rehab, or food stamp grocery lists? In my head, honestly, yeah. But then, what archive has any of that? And if they did, would I even know how to find it?

For what I've seen so far, I wonder about how these materials have made it from wherever they were before, to the archive now. For decades, notebooks and pamphlets and letters and flyers would have had to survive dusty attics, humid garages, evictions, despair, floods, tornadoes––all of the things that, when they happen, easily wipe out entire collections. Even the most well funded organizations would have a hell of a time maintaining their records; what hope would someone living out of a backpack have? Could any of the records I hoped to find in this archive have survived long enough to even make it here? These questions keep coming.

One thing about returning to get a BA after dropping out is that the experience is marked by a desperate cobbling together of credits to make a degree. For me, this meant taking one of my liberal education requirements––a biological learning core, whatever that means––in the form of a course on dinosaurs. In one of our lectures, the instructor, Professor Kent Kirkby, explained the concept of *taphonomy*, the study of fossilization. It's the idea of archival memory expressed in paleozoic terms. In order to become a fossil, I learned, organic materials––say the remains of a dinosaur, or a fish, or a fern––need to go through a series of extraordinary steps to be preserved for a long period of time and still be found intact. The type of material affects chances of survival––bones and teeth and pollen have a greater chance of being molded into forms immemorial; less so skin, cartilage, or organs. *Where* the organism died matters, too. If an animal met their end on a mountain slope, or in wet mud, or in any number of moveable moments, they will likely be gone forever, lost in time. Most of what has been present on earth has not, and will not, become fossilized.

That process of unlikely survival was more or less what I seemed to be grappling with in my archival search––only instead of dinosaurs, I had meeting notes and surveys. It was becoming clear that precious few records sync up with conditions necessary for long-term preservation. Of those that do survive, only a few whose skeletons are kept whole, protected from the onslaught of storms and fire. So far as I could tell, conditions seemed to favor the records of established organizations or people with the means to safely house their records for decades. The precariousness of survival means that so much is lost, especially documentation created and collected by marginalized people, like those who use drugs or experience dependencies, many of whom live

lives of upheaval and movement without the means to protect their belongings.

We contend with extinction and erasure in life and death, and still struggle towards making ourselves known.

This is not my first experience of trying to contextualize learning about addiction, or drug use, or queer identity. But the reading room is a space dedicated to the records of memories that lend themselves to *materiality*, and when it comes to the experience of queer adddiction, I am used to spaces in which blackouts preclude any lasting record of knowledge.

The 19 Bar, Minneapolis
2012

A crack of laughter shoots from across the patio. I can hear the looseness of sweaty bodies and brains being melted on a hot July day in heightened voices and the clanking of glass. We are in the back patio of the 19 Bar, settled at our round table and sheltered from the sunlight under its broad umbrella. I'm sitting next to my girlfriend Viv, winding my arm through hers to use the armrest of her chair, as she's engaged in a deep discussion with Toothless Adam across the table. Adam is missing his four front teeth, and wears his nickname like a badge of honor. Thelma is sitting next to Viv, looking down at his phone, brows furrowed, shins resting against the edge of the table. Thelma and I are

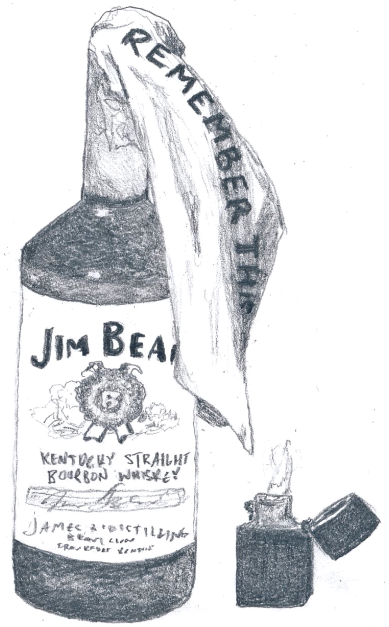
old friends, sibling-like, the history between us encompassing the awkward youth of high school, shared acid trips, scrappy travelling. Our bond is certainly not hurt by us both being queer, anarchist-ish, and alcoholic. John, Thelma's silver fox boyfriend, comes up scooting behind Viv and me with a pitcher in one hand spilling all over the place, and two mugs in the other. He got the wrong kind of beer, Blue Moon instead of Grain Belt––Thelma can tell by its color––and now they are bickering about it.

Viv and Adam are commiserating about the loss of true punk shows, and raising each other's storytelling stakes with better and bloodier stories. Viv is a real piece of work, tattooed Scorpio energy from top to bottom, a vocal comrade for the fuck-ups of the world. She is in her element here, telling stories. Her and Adam laugh and I listen as they sling favorite rumors and gossip long past relevance. Viv's ex-girlfriend lived with Courtney Love before she met Kurt, and Courtney was a monster of a housemate––allegedly––and so on and so forth. It's all hot blondes, defunct punk houses with sex dungeons, and punching out transphobic club bouncers in Detroit. Those were the cocaine years, of course, and we'd all have stories like that if we were around back then, or so I'm told.

After taking a breath to light a cigarette, Adam is laughing about my hair. It's blue-ish green, and he says, *you can't tell what someone is like by their hair color anymore. Used to be you'd draw real attention to yourself but now everyone's wearing different styles and don't even know what it means. Like straight boys flagging with red bandanas, and people wearing white shoelaces on black boots*. I don't know what that last reference means, and ask him to explain. *White laces on black boots is a neo-Nazi thing* he says, *it's an old white supremacy skinhead flag*. Apparently there's some whole boot-based code, and I gotta watch out depending where I am. I recognize this is valuable to know, but my hand is busy fanning myself from the heat and I can't be bothered to take notes.

Thelma and John reach a grumbled agreement that Thelma can get whatever beer he wants next round, and can pay for it himself. Adam grabs a top off from our pitcher and overflows his mug as we hear an insightful shout of "party foul!" from a passing body as the patio starts to get crowded. I remember that Viv told me a story once about getting jumped by someone with some specific type of boot, I think it was, and how she didn't go to the hospital because she didn't want to be put in the psych ward if they asked what had happened or why she had gotten jumped. Or maybe it was a tattoo she saw that signified something, and maybe it all happened in a different state, with different codes. It's a faded enough glimmer that I don't bother asking her for the particulars. Forgetting is the nature of the beast, I guess. My back sticks to the black metal of the patio chair as I reach towards the table for my glass.

What would the archival records of the 19 Bar look like? Event flyers, sure; also budgets, menus, photographs... But what about the stories and friendships that informed and shaped my queerness, my experience with addiction? Stories from people who have died or who I've entirely lost contact with; stories that others shared with me about what it was like to be a queer person through the decades that came before me; stories about what life looked like then, felt like. These stories allowed me to place myself outside of my own isolation and fear, and into a rich, personal, continuing story of survival. Now, through alcohol and time, I can't remember so many of them.



In moments of optimism, I see forgetting as the only right course of action, like a message set to disappear. At other moments I feel like these stories are the only things that ground us to being human, and are the most important thing in the world to remember; that through my forgetting, I failed to uphold my part of the relay race.

Those stories were a lifeline for me. As a young person tied down by my addiction, I spent so much time alone, only out in the world during bar hours like a drunken vampire. My queerness was an easy entry into despair, but at least through my use I could realize that I was profoundly *un*-alone; and not just each night on the patio, but through decades.

It is also not-nothing that these stories were told in a space where our fears and internalized phobias and traumas were numbed; a place that courted our pain as *cash-only* as we let each other feel finally at home, only to watch each other disintegrate, and often, die. I don't know how any of it would end up with a paper trail. It seems impossible to get documentation of that world, at least the kind I wish for, into an archive.

The Archival Reading Room, Andersen Library, University of Minnesota
January 2020

It is now early January and I am back at the reading room for another day of research. My bag is stashed in a locker and I give a tight lipped smile to the check-in person, who now recognizes me and goes right to recording the items I am bringing in: laptop, headphones, journal, pencil, phone. My sweater is on and not in my hands so no trouble there. I give the slip to the reading room attendant, who gives me a table assignment, and an aide brings a cart of requested materials swiftly to my seat.

Today I have decided to look into an audio collection donated to the Tretter by David Thorstad–– a set of unique recordings of conferences and forums from the 1970s.[6] One of these cassette recordings is labeled "Drug Addiction and Homosexual Oppression" and dated 1978.[7] I was delighted and intrigued when I saw this recording––here, finally, was a historical document that might transmit the voices of LGBT addicts themselves; a first-person record that made it through time and survived long enough to reach me.

I put my headphones on and the digitized audio is crackly, occasionally hard to understand. I lean into my laptop, as if that can help me understand the voices and words more clearly.

This audio is a recording of a conference panel led by individuals working at Pompous, one of the first rehab facilities in the US to offer a so-called "gay and lesbian-competent" treatment program. I listen as the lead panelist introduces the other participants, all of whom work at the facility. One by one, they each take a moment to summarize their personal stories. It's a professional setting, but intimate enough that panelists can talk openly about their sexuality and their experiences as self-identified addicts, if only in reference to their careers.

The original recording is not professional-grade, and the speakers are far away; the audio is sometimes interrupted by a nearby cough or shuffle or a finger brushing over the microphone. Some words are lost. I discern what I can.

I think back again to the giant lecture hall of my dinosaur class, learning the processes of taphonomy as my professor displayed them for us. I learned about interference, and how it can disrupt the process of fossilization. *Natural events such as floods, wind, earthquakes and volcanic activity, as well as continued animal predation, can disrupt the location at which the*

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[6] The David Thorstad Cassette Tapes collection, Tretter Collection.

[7] At the moment, the finding aid describes this item as Gay Activists Alliance Forum, "Homosexuals Drug Addiction: Ex-Addicts Speak Out" 1975 [*sic*], Sides A and B. (See https://archives.lib.umn.edu/repositories/13/archival_objects/1152627 and https://archives.lib.umn.edu/repositories/13/archival_objects/1152628.

initial stages of decay occurred and disfigure the organism, further complicating the reading of the fossil record.[8] In other words, it isn't enough for something to be preserved, it also matters *how* it was preserved, and what happened while the preservation was in process. *The amount of time the object spent exposed to the elements before its burial will also affect its record. Very specific chemical and biological conditions must occur for a fossil to be preserved in a way that is recognizable at discovery*. The necessary conditions for survival, and threats of interference, are different in the preservation of film, paper, and other historical records. Still, I can see that the format or storage location of a document is like the weather forecast near a newly dead dinosaur: that which you hope to remember is at the mercy of where you place that information, or where it ends up. If the tape skips or degrades, if the rain rolls through––just like that, you're unrecoverable.

What survived here is lucky to say the least, no matter how crackly: this is the first time I'm hearing the voices of people, unabridged, untranslated into clinical jargon.

I keep listening. One by one the panelists talk about their experiences of going through drug treatment while gay, describing how they were ostracized, unable to heal, discriminated against and dismissed outright for their sexuality. They now work in the treatment world, and bring their experiences to their day-to-day grind. One panelist, with a deep voice and a name that gets muddled in the crackly audio, says "It's not a surprise to anybody that's here"––at a panel about "homosexual addiction"––"that for a long long time, even in the drug field, there was this thing that if you're gay, then you're sick, so if we make you un-gay then we make you un-sick."

Someone explains that the founders and leaders of Pompous "didn't sit down and think it all out and say 'let's have a program for gay addicts'." Rather, they were approached by the organization that was then called the National Gay Taskforce (now the National LGBTQ Task Force), which was trying to get employees around the country trained to deal properly with gay people who sought treatment. The program was started because of the Taskforce's advocacy.

[8] Italicized phrases related to taphonomy are taken and embellished from my lecture notes from Professor Kent Kirkby's course "Dinosaurs and Our World" (ESCI 1003), Spring semester 2020, University of Minnesota Twin Cities.

The next story, told by a panelist named Diane, catches my attention; I am struck by its clarity and what it revealed about levels of discrimination. “I’m a counselor at Pompous,” she says. “I’m also an ex-addict, and I’m also gay”:

> When I first went in [to rehab], you know they asked me if I was married, I said *no*. They asked me if I had ever had an affair with a woman and I said *yes* . . . And they didn’t say anything about it for a couple of months. And then they started telling me that I had shot dope because I was gay, and that the only way to be happy and adjusted in society is to get a boyfriend, get married, and kind of, you know, do the whole thing.

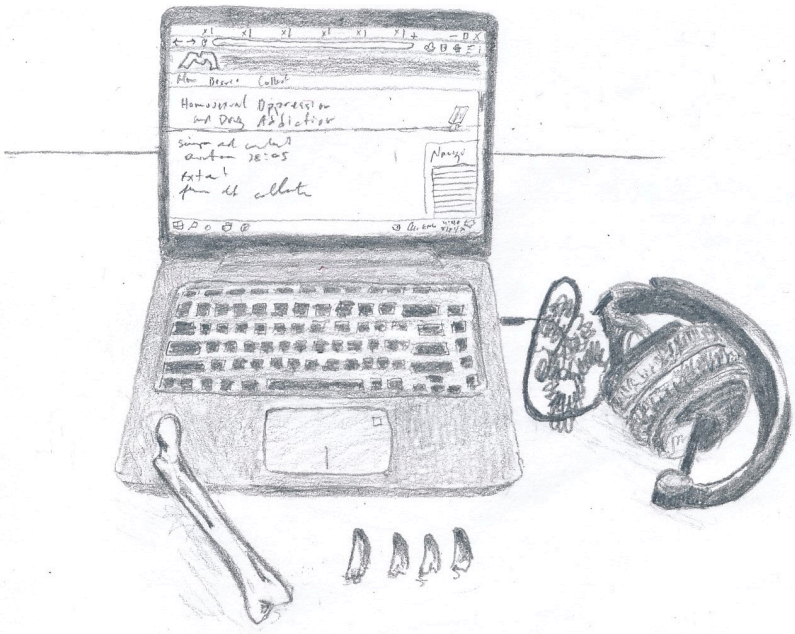
Diane describes how, after leaving treatment for refusing to agree to sexuality conversion practices, she looked for a job at a treatment center, vowing to not say anything about being gay. The journey that led her to be speaking now, to being recorded, was not without risk. “I came and I ended up at Pompous,” she says.

> And the director then said *well, what do you think about homosexuality?* And I almost died ‘cause I didn’t know whether to lie. And then I say *fuck that* and I told him [that I was gay]. And you know, I was hired. The women there that are gay and straight, and the males––it’s really encouraging to see because you know they learn from each other . . . And I think the most important thing is that since residents are mostly adolescents, they can explore, they can talk about their feelings and they don’t have to feel uptight and say *well, I can't talk about this because it's wrong, its bad,* you know, *if I think I love another woman my whole life is gonna be fucked up*. And I think with the gay people on the staff, and the contacts that they have with gay organizations, and just all kinds of people they see that they have a choice in their lifestyles.

I go back to listen again. “And then I say *fuck that*.” I love that “fuck that.” I know that “fuck that.” I smile to myself.

I take my headphones off and set them on the table. I lean back into my chair, inhale, stretch my arms far above my head, exhale, and roll my neck from side to side to get the crinks out. Diane’s “fuck that” is a refusal to remain invisible, to remain unknown, unheard, a refusal to be scared or intimidated. It is a refusal to die in the shaky mudflats, to disappear from the historical record. Despite all of the interference, and on a muffled, deteriorating tape, her words are clear as day. I look around the silent room to my fellow researchers as they lean in towards their materials, and look back to my notes.

However alienated I might feel in this rarified archival space, I am reckoning with the fact that the history it contains is for me, too. For me and for my scrappy, loud, outsider community. No matter where that history is told––in a reading room, in a conference, at a bar. Diane knew that spaces belonged to her too, all of her, and said as much. I refuse to be intimidated out of that connection by the silence of an organized University space, not willingly. *Fuck that*. This is for me too.



The Archival Reading Room, Andersen Library, University of Minnesota
February 2020

I am now practically a regular at the reading room as a mild winter is graduating into an early spring, and I pour through more and more boxes of material. What I want to know is the texture, the detail, the community that existed around LGBT people dealing with substance use in the past.

I know what clawing out of a physical dependency and what trying to survive looks like *now*, at least what it looked like to me: hand drawn calendars with days X-ed out and yards upon yards of construction paper circle chains (to keep my hands busy), empty journal pages, tabs left open for local queer meetings just to be closed out. It looked like being alone alone alone until I couldn't anymore and then finding myself at the mercy of spaces other people had established, hoping to belong. That part, I know.

What I am wondering now, is if you were "LGBT" and if you named yourself an addict in the past--in the 1970s, say--*what happened next for you*? How did people treat you? Where did you go? What did it look like to be exposed in these ways to the world in decades past?

Searching through the Tretter Collection's finding aids, I had seen reference to several spaces that existed in the Twin Cities in the late 20th century––including Gay House, The Lesbian Resource

Center, and A Woman's Coffeehouse. I was curious to know how previous generations of queer people thought about and made space for recovery, and what I could glean about them from their records. I want to imagine myself in these spaces, taking clues from what remained of their existence in these records, and filling in the blanks myself.

Gay House[9] was founded in 1971 and lasted only a handful of years, but was a watershed organization for "gay and lesbian" support in the Twin Cities. In its records, I find a publicity brochure that describes it as a place that tries "to serve the community good by lessening tensions, eliminating prejudice and discrimination, and supporting human rights." It offered a range of services––a telephone "rapline," in-person counseling, a speaker's bureau, a resource library, and "referrals for people who need help with legal, medical, religious, or personal conflicts."[10]

Gay House wasn't exclusively a space for people in recovery, but I know from experience how helpful free resources always are for anyone navigating housing, legal, or other issues; I imagine, I hope, that having a place like Gay House would make it at least a little easier for someone to escape their isolation. Yet there is no documentation here of what emotional role this space played for locals. I wish that there was more to represent the people who called the hotline, and the circumstances that precipitated these frantic calls. Police encounters? Vindictive landlords? But those details, the skin and tendons, have disintegrated in time, and I am forced to imagine the details. If the kind of evidence I seek ever existed, it didn't survive long enough for me to find––in this specific collection, at least.

Professor Kirkby's words filter in. He explained what happens after an organism has been buried, and all that must occur before its discovery. As time passes and fossils accrue in layers of sediment, the chances of actual exposure are slim. *Only a tiny percentage of rock is ever fully accessible on the surface of the Earth. Changes in tectonic action and plate movement can elevate the placements of previously buried organic records, and every significant geological upheaval increases the chance for further records to be exposed.* In other words, there is only so much we can do. We can try to enact the upheaval, to be an earthquake that reveals what has been hidden––through the gargantuan task of recovering and organizing records––all the while knowing that there's a million years of loss sitting beneath us. These boxes are display cases, their records precious fossils.

I want to know more.

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[9] Gay House Records, Tretter Collection.
[10] Pamphlet, "What is Gay House?" n.d.

I open a box containing the records of the Lesbian Resource Center (LRC), another Twin Cities-based organization founded in the 1970s.[11] A grant application written in 1975 described its mission as working with "frequent problems encountered within the lesbian community" including "isolation, discrimination, chemical dependency and the lack of accurate and up to date information about lesbians and related subjects." The founders of the LRC felt that the dynamics of Gay House favored men, and created the LRC in hopes of providing a better community climate for lesbians. Its founders wanted to gesture towards protection, to ward off further loneliness, to warm the harshness of exposure to a hostile world with empathy. With an eye to the particular risks of being a lesbian and the related factors leading to substance use, the LRC sought "to create a program of activities taking place in settings that do not include the bars[,]... to aid in the reduction and control of chemical dependency, [and] to continue its support groups for chemically dependent lesbians."[12]

[11] Lesbian Resource Center records, Tretter Collection. I also examined the personal papers of one of the LRC's founders, Karen Brown-Courage.

[12] LRC Finance Committee (Shirley Heyer, Kathy Jo Peterson, Katy Sheehy), "Funding proposal to United Methodist Voluntary Service for 1975-76," p. 5.

The LRC also organized non-bar, non-drug or alcohol ways to connect the community––events like "a day to connect with your body," an "appreciation dance," an "art therapy workshop," and a workshop called "chemical dependency exploration" (This was a group that offered "education around feelings and the diverse process of chemical dependency [and] an opportunity to explore how chemicals affect your life"). Some of these flyers are hand drawn and so earnest that if I could, I would hold them to my chest as I sit in the reading room. These records speak to a more internal aspect of healing, of recovery––not just logistical services, but the

human need for connection. There isn't any direct representation of the art that was made, or photos of the events, but I use my imagination: I can see an awkward start to the "appreciation dance," before laughter overcame anxiety and bonding occurred between movements. I can connect through time to these people, and empathize with wanting to be with others while sober, unbearably and nakedly yourself, and fumbling through how exactly to do that.

The reality of recovery is more nuanced than its record, but I see a whole world between the loss of information and its remains.

The next box I open––from the collection of A Woman's Coffeehouse[13]––yields more pamphlets and flyers and fundraising mailers. Here was a space that was founded expressly as "a chemically free meeting place"––specifically, in its case, "for all women[,] which supports and nurtures the social, cultural, and political life of the Twin Cities lesbian community."[14] It hosted music nights, political action events, and fostered a cooperative form of employment and collective decision-making; they decided as a group if an applicant would be hired or not. I can see in surviving meeting notes that its members were trying to build sustainable, healthy relationships (even if they had a tendency to yell at each other).

[13] A Woman's Coffeehouse Collective records, Tretter Collection.
[14] Woman's Coffeehouse Collective informational mailer. n.d.

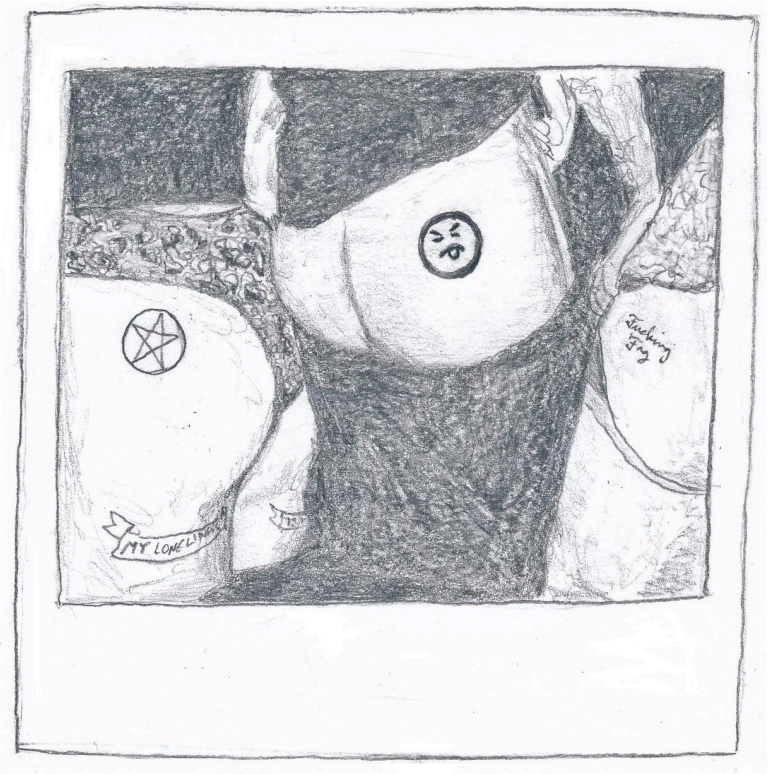
A Woman's Coffeehouse ultimately couldn't sustain its relationships, turns out, and despite its utopic desires, factions and dwindling revenue spelled its end. The LRC had similar struggles, and Gay House never made it out of the 1970s. The story of these records show that there are wounds that we use community spaces to heal from, and wounds that arise from these spaces that confound our ideals and leave us hurt and confused. The answer to isolation, or addiction, is never as clear cut as we would hope.

These community spaces of the past feel so familiar to me. The grasping for support, the offering of hands, the desire for a safe and sober community. The sad endings. Looking at these establishments and learning of their similar desires is enlightening; I see myself and my community reflected back at me, and I start to understand that the spaces I've walked through myself, in this decade, are just as necessary to the historical record as the ones I am researching.

Throughout this research, I"ve been thinking about a community space that existed in south Minneapolis from 2011 to 2016 called Madame (pronounced muh-DAM)––as well as other local spaces that have been important to me. Madame was there as I slowly and unstably emerged from the cocoon of early sobriety. It was a space that held performance art series, dance classes, film screenings, skill shares. It hosted legendary parties that were made by and for

edge-of-sanity, edge-of-reason, edge-of-the-underworld queers. Not all of its events were sober––most weren't––but it was a space outside of the bars where anything could happen, and it provided the freedom to choose your own adventure (sobriety included). The triggers of isolation, of fitting in, of performative selfhood were mitigated for many of us by Madame's existence. It was an exhale from the pressures of the outside world.

It's this kind of immaterial environment that I most want to be able to express, to preserve––and that is the most impossible to record. The *feeling* of it all. It's what I wanted to grasp from the records of past spaces that fostered a community in recovery. But how do you transmit the feeling of a space? In pictures? Would our written accounts, years old, sufficiently inform an organizer or researcher in the future?



Madame, Minneapolis
2015

I walk into an unmarked door squished in the middle of a city mural off of the corner of 34th and Chicago. My friends Paris and Brody lead the way, laughing between them and making last minute adjustments to their outfits. We "pre-gamed" with protein smoothies, truly embracing effective sober party-going. The door opens to a steep, dark staircase. Up the shadowy corridor I reach a sweet face I feel like

I've seen in a dozen places but have never properly met, who asks for a five dollar cover and offers me change out of a tin box. The wooden plank floors open into the homely, bustling rooms of this upper level space. Brody and Paris head directly to the hot pink bathroom, finding friendly faces immediately in a screaming embrace. I nod hi, and move onwards.

There is a two-person bar serving pink boozy punch with a ladle into plastic cups. To the left of this main landing room is a fully functional kitchen, with a door to the outside staircase that overlooks a playground for the day care center we're on top of, and where a constant task is trying to wrangle people to be respectful with their cigarette butts and empty cans.

I head to the right towards the main stage and dance room––the ceiling opens up to exposed rafters and miscellaneous bead necklaces, dead string lights, and feathered toys hanging unstably, having eluded clean up efforts for who knows how long. There are bodies dancing with the lights low, laughing at their moves and gyrations to the music. The theme of tonight is Twisted Barbie, or something. Sometimes it seems like the theme doesn't really matter; people show up in their various costume concoctions no matter what and still steal the show. I am wearing glitter, a high-vis vest, and not much else––Construction Worker Barbie? Works for me.

I am doing an eye-around, seeing who all is here before inevitably setting up a spot for myself on the staircase outside, catching people to say hi as they need a smoke and a breather.

Working my way back towards the bar, I step over the delighted screams of three people piled on the floor in front of the kitchen door, laughing and biting and whatever-ing each other. More people are piling in from the stairs, and I see flamboyantly molded bubble wrap crowns, hand sewn evening dresses with choice body parts exposed, colors and puppet heads and masks.

In the kitchen, there's a frantic conference happening. A loop of video is supposed to be playing on a wall in the main room, but there's an issue. The equipment is malfunctioning and a quick contingent of experts and unhelpful but curious drunk people have gathered to problem solve; we're in charge, after all. The entire space is volunteer led––shifts at the door, shifts at the bar, clean up, all of it. Bless 'em, I'm useless with electrical stuff, so I wish them luck and head out the door to the top of the iron staircase.

I bum a cigarette to a Neon Mermaid Barbie, and lean against the cool railing. Through the window I can see the scrappy, volunteer tech crew working, gesturing wildly at one another, gently pushing away impeccably coiffed hair from their faces. The party is going well, technology quibbles aside, which is a relief––rent has been hard to make the past few months. There's hope to do more daytime programs, devote more energy towards the youth art group, maybe host a naloxone training. But it's the parties that make the most money, with the bar

and door fees stacking up quicker than grants and donations do during daylight hours. Something good has happened with the projector, I think, as the kitchen empties out for the moment. Being in charge means learning on the go, and navigating conflict resolution with the priority of keeping this place alive for as long as possible. Where else would we be able to debut our perfectly vulgar outfits without fear or judgement, only awe?

Neon Mermaid Barbie says thanks for the smoke, and goes in for more punch. I put out my cigarette and head back to look for my friends.

My developing interest in preserving something of the memory of Madame, of documenting it for the archives, is in part an effort to recognize and honor its existence and greater impact. But it is also my attempt to reckon with my own recovery, and with how much more I wish I could have invested in the space. Many of my close friends were instrumental to Madame's existence and survival; but as much as the space was healing, my attendance at events was really only occasional. In the early years of recovery, my ability to leave the house often faltered against cold, hard, sober realities of housing trauma and lingering fears of public assault (It's hard to leave the safety of a home after not having one, and still trust it will be there when you return). But knowing Madame was there was a balm to my own isolation; I believed the space would still exist when I was ready for it. I heard all about it, the drama and struggles and successes, and eventually, I was able to participate enough to host my own raunchy party towards the end of its lifespan. Madame "closed" a few weeks later, after police cited the space for supposedly allowing illegal activity, and boarded up the doors.

For so many queer people, in recovery and not, Madame was an autonomous space for creativity removed from the established bar and club scene. For me, Madame was a bridge to the world. It was a place where I could show up and not have to worry about expectations or confrontations. I could just be me, sober queer wallflower, lazily costumed and all.

So much of what we desire to build and desire to remember has stayed the same, from Gay House to Madame: spaces that offer flawed but hopeful respite from our marginalizations and violence. From “gay and lesbian” to “queer and trans,” always struggling for funding, always building towards a better world, often flaming out because of rising rents, political disagreements, bad actors, the police. It’s heartening to recognize both in record and experience that no matter how we identify ourselves, the story stays familiar. We just keep trying to make space for ourselves. Maintaining that lineage of effort, success, and failure is vital work, and it is crucial to me that we record this history. It helps me remember the world in which my recovery was possible.

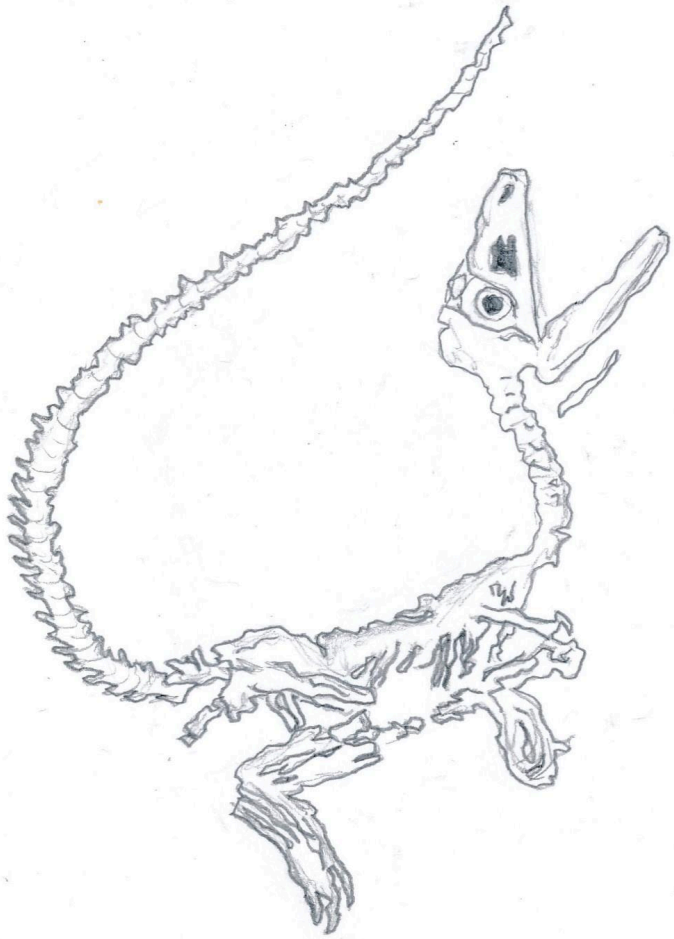
But it's not enough for the records to exist. We have to make them accessible.

Professor Kirkby’s ideas about fossilization and loss again help me make sense of this. He explained to us that the most valuable fossil means nothing if people can’t get to it. *As death occurs through time and space, the processes of taphonomy demonstrate an extreme precariousness to preserving records. If, against all odds, conditions allow for the fossilization of material, discovery is further complicated by modern access. A discovery site must be accessible to a team of researchers, as well as their equipment. Remote locations, high latitudes and particularly hard rock forms preclude final human contact. Open landscapes and favorable climates increase chances of discovery.*

For me, the engagement I’ve had with archival materials, and learning of the difficulty of maintaining them, has been a process of reckoning with a history that isn’t (and is never!) complete or perfect. Deciding exactly what you want to see and then making it appear isn't the way records work. The world turns and materials get lost, get missed, get forgotten. Nature of the beast.

I’ve been having conversations with younger queer people about how there aren't any truly autonomous spaces for them in this moment. They have heard of, or not heard of, the spaces that came before them, the places I can still see crystal clear images of in my head from my own experience within them. There’s no way for these young people to access the documentation of these spaces; they are still only accessible through our stories and in materials crammed under our beds, not anywhere for people to see, not yet. Maybe some people prefer it that way. But I’ve been emboldened by my research, and while the visibility may be uncomfortable (as Madame was no doubt imperfect), seeing that the spaces of previous generations were also flawed––and still worth remembering––reshapes my desires. Is it not our queer duty to help our descendents learn from our mistakes, and do better than we could ever dream of?

I become a researcher of my own life. Having caught my own tail as I had projected myself onto all of those statistics and stories from the past, I now want to put my own history into the archive.



South Minneapolis
March 2020

It's a Saturday afternoon in my living room. There are coats on the floor and over the arm of my big red couch, shoes kicked around, and I am sitting cross legged on the floor with a notebook in hand. My coffee table is covered in little bowls of snacks and jars of iced tea. Brody, Gillian, and Paris are sprawled across from me on the couch, Brody's feet on Paris's lap, Gillian trying and failing to get the attention of my haughty grey cat. I am here in my own space, with my own people, pink walls and background music and we are working together, voices over voices, limbs over limbs.

We are trying to figure out what kinds of documentation each of us has, of spaces we've organized or loved that no longer exist. They are telling stories and I am taking notes.

This time, I intend to remember.

Once Madame got busted, a frantic crew took hold to find a new location, and make a better coalition. Some tapped out, others joined in. In all this urgency, the remnant records of Madame got spread all over. No consolidation effort has yet occurred in the four-plus years since its demise. This is our task now, our own paleontology mission: to excavate our bedrooms and attempt to tell a story that does the space justice.

There are flyers, tons of photographs, videos of performances, meeting notes both handwritten and in email; probably records of grant applications, and

financial records. Some of this already exists in the homes of my friends, while other documentation still needs to be tracked down among the dozen or so individuals who may have some essential part of Madame's history. I want as much detail for us as I wanted from the spaces I have researched.

It's not just Madame that we are thinking of as we consider what the landscape of our respective recoveries has looked like, and the spaces that held us. There is so much that we have been holding onto that would guide some curious kid in the future as to what the world of recovery looked like, felt like, in this city, in our lifetime. There's also Mothership, Madame's successor, another well-intentioned and ill-fated community space, and the Queer NA meeting that Brody and Gillian convened there in 2016 and 2017. For that group, they created different prayer iterations with altered language to make it less ableist and cis-normative. We want to preserve that document and so many others that will help tell the story of that space, that community. And what about the queer sober houses we lived in? Or the syringe exchange calendars Brody made? What about Leather & Latte, the queer cafe that was half coffeehouse and half leather shop? Or Out & Proud, the gay sober social group, or a dozen other places and resources? There is a web of community spaces we want to remember, and to preserve so that other people can remember, too.

I know that seeing yourself is powerful. Being somewhere that allowed for a future, or a past, was what I was looking for when I was fucked up, and when I was leaning into recovery, and now. I don't know if the reading room is a community space, or if it ever could be. But if we can add texture and story to the experience of seeing and remembering, that's what I want to work towards.

For now, we start with each other. Start here and see what we can do, what we can recover to put together our own documentation of what hasn't yet slipped through the cracks. Our work is unfinished and in-progress, at the whim, as ever, of external forces (soon including a pandemic and a revolution, natch).

There are a hundred things working against us at any point in time. Individually, we contend with relapse, unemployment, resource scarcity, and housing issues, while communally all of these issues are amplified a hundred times. These are the taphonomical forces that threaten us with the disintegration of our record. We struggle to survive, and struggle to be remembered. Saving ourselves from being lost often feels impossible. But we do what we can in the time we are alive, and then hand off the baton to whoever comes next.