

## Visiting Doctoral Program Report 2013

### Teaching the LGBT Past Through Oral Testimony and Archives

**Danielle Cooper**  
PhD Candidate, York University

During my tenure as a Visiting Doctoral Student, I visited with Dr. Elise Chenier at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Vancouver, British Columbia. Elise is a well-known scholar and educator on the history of sexuality in Canada. As part of her work, Elise founded and continues to direct the Archive of Lesbian Oral Testimony (A LOT), which is housed within the SFU Library. As I discuss in [my post for the THEN/HiER's Teaching the Past blog](#), A LOT is an excellent example of how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) archives complement history of sexuality pedagogy.



A LOT is based within Special Collections and Rare Books (interior shot at right), which is inside Bennett Library at SFU's Burnaby campus (exterior shot at left)

My research examines the history and development of LGBT archives and libraries within North America from the mid twentieth century to the present. A crucial component of this development is the increasing visibility of LGBT-based topics within history and history education, often through the advocacy work of educators, which leads to the creating of academic LGBT archives. Visiting Elise at SFU allowed me to experience this process directly by observing her work as a professor and as an archives creator and director. While at SFU, I spent time at A LOT becoming acquainted with the collection and talking about the collection with both Elise and the A LOT archivist, Nailisa Tanner. Some of the themes that emerged from our discussions included how Elise's expertise as an oral historian informs her approach to A LOT, the evolving landscape of LGBT archives from grassroots to institutional settings, and continuing and emerging issues for archives like A LOT surrounding copyright.

Another major highlight of my visit was becoming better acquainted with Elise's approach to oral history in a classroom setting by attending her upper level undergraduate seminar course in oral history. Set in SFU's state of the art oral history laboratory, I was not only introduced to new methods and technologies of conducting oral history

interviews, but also to Elise's approach to teaching these methods. Most notably, my visit coincided with a session devoted to an in-course exercise when students were interviewing one another about the value of oral history towards developing a polished interview intended to promote the method. This classroom exercise was highly effective because students concurrently applied their knowledge of the importance oral history with their practical knowledge for conducting an oral history interview. Observing and experiencing Elise's teaching techniques also led to further one on one discussion with her about pedagogical, methodological and technological approaches to oral history.

In addition to spending time at SFU, Elise also introduced and accompanied me to relevant cultural activities taking place in the greater Vancouver area. A major highlight was attending the Rez Erect: Native Erotica exhibition at the Bill Reid Gallery, which included the weekly Sunday "sexy storytelling" programming event to complement the exhibition. Another highlight was attending the Litany queer reading series at Gallery Gachet.



Images of art featured in the Rez Erect exhibition from left to right: Hot Box by Shaun Hunt; Geoduck by Preston Singletary, and Xwimiq (Mussel) by Dionne Paul

SFU's location in Vancouver, BC, including its relative proximity to Victoria, BC also enabled me to visit other LGBT information organizations relevant to my research. These organizations included BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, Out on the Shelves library at QMUNITY Queer Resource Centre and the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria. Meeting with founder and director of the Transgender Archives Professor Aaron Devor alongside the collection's archivist Lara Wilson was particularly complementary to my Visiting Doctoral Student mandate because Aaron is also an LGBT scholar utilizing his pedagogical and research expertise towards creating an LGBT archives in an academic context.

My experiences as a Visiting Doctoral Student will benefit me in a variety of ways. I learned new pedagogical approaches to teaching history and LGBT studies, particularly oral history, in both classroom and archival settings. I also learned about how the history and pedagogy of LGBT studies relate to the development of LGBT archives, which will be beneficial to my research.