

Edgeless

conforming for community and identity

A Thesis

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Edgeless

I've started to question why people try to put so many parameters on something that feels edgeless. I'm not sure if the exclusivity reached by hyper-categorization in a desperation for identity is as positive as I once did.

I used to think that by every group finding a definition for itself, it would make it easier for people to find like-minded communities and foster more inclusion, but in reality I've found it can also do just the opposite.

The pressures of trading one cultural insistence for another can lead to guilt by disingenuous portrayal of self.¹ Trying to interpret someone's social cues who isn't adhering to the cultural insistence, can be blurry and intimidating—in my experience.

Advertising the "type" of person you are with signs and symbols is not exclusive to queer women, but it is the lens that I'll be using. David Bereby says in his book *Us and Them*,

*"Just as these letters are both fixed chemicals arranged on the paper and a sequence of words, so anything that conveys a code is both itself and the thing it represents. In the case of human kinds, people themselves often are the objects that carry code."*²

I think semiotics are used universally to create code in everything from graphic design to the performance of one's identity. I'm looking at everyone, not just the queers.

This common thread of coding that runs through how we design ourselves seems so obvious but I think it's so ingrained in us, we forget that we're doing it.

1. Ex: masking/mustache

2. David Berreby, *Us and Them: the Science of Identity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 324.

It's everything—the body language, the type face, the hair cut, the colors—it can all be a conscious choice.³
The pressures to conform aren't exclusive to identity and presentation—I fear the extreme taxonomy of people becoming a standard of human interaction.

3. Not all choices are conscious after all

It's like when you're online shopping and start layering filters. You might filter through your innumerable options by checking boxes for “red,” “sleeveless,” “linen,” “round neck,” and so on until only a handful of items show up. But what happens to the one-sleeved linen shirt with red detailing? Where does it go? Like a website designed to shop for humans, we filter with pre-defined identities leading to either not fully describing the uniqueness of an individual, or forcing that individual to conform to our preconceived notions. I'm curious as to how such a situation relates to graphic design as a sector of cultural production.

Through a combination of first-person research, archival research, and faking it 'til I make it—this work explores micro and macro conformity in queer culture for community and identity. This research, as well as learning to be a “researcher” is and will be ongoing.

As someone who can barely doggy-paddle in the world of research (forget about floating on my back, I'll choke and die), wading into murky waters in search of islands without inflatable floaties or knowledge of what's in the water is potentially a little ambitious. But as I fill out my knowledge of women's queer culture, I'm realizing the characters I meet and experiences I have are just as telling as anything else found in boxes of ephemera in the archives I've visited.

**Searching amongst the
concealed through a dark glass of dialects
has convinced me that the
breadth of one's village extends
forward and back in time
further than I'd imagine—
if you know what you're looking at.**

Is it a date?

I sat nervously swinging my foot back and forth with enough vigor to power a small lamp.

We exceeded the two-sip glance more than once.⁴

I'd be lying to say I didn't internet-stalk her entire online existence before meeting—that was why we were sitting in the coffee shop having forced conversation, after all.

Through my *narrow* research of the visual language of queer women, I stumbled onto an exhibition in NYC, *The Wide World of Lesbian Cats*, that explored the appeal of cats to lesbians, feminists, and queer political projects.

Sick. Who would curate this?

14 tabs on my internet browser later—

I gathered that Dr. Rachel Corbman sourced the exhibition largely from the Lesbian Herstory Archive, where she had previously volunteered for years. She also was currently a visiting Assistant Professor at a university only an hour from me in North Carolina. What the fuck are those odds?

I had a budget trip to NYC planned for the next month where I'd be visiting the Herstory Archive, checking out her exhibit at the LGBT Community Center, and some lesbian bars—you know, for research.

4. "2 sip glance" = *during a gap in the conversation when one person takes a sip of their drink, and the other person follows suit; completely normal unless it is exchanged twice or more in a row*

Beep boop I found her email address online and within the hour we had a coffee date set up to talk about queer visual culture and were following each other on Twitter.

My jitters told me to chug my chai tea so quickly that the spices got caught in the back of my throat, sending me into a coughing fit. Logically, the only thing to do was down more chai to calm my cough. This worked, albeit only temporarily. My cheeks inflated like a puffer fish every few minutes as an attempt to stifle the barks. I'm not even sure what we were talking about because my eyes were focused on her glass of water she wasn't offering me as I suffered.

I brought us here today, so I tried to lead the conversation— asking about her research, experience working in the archives, and just about queer topics in general but it all fell flat as the first pancake. Almost every question I asked was responded to with a single phrase in return. If she was challenging herself to cap each reply at 5 words, congrats. Trying to overcompensate for the lack of energy was painfully exhausting and I wasn't doing a great job between my coughing fits.

I circled back to talk more about the Lesbian Herstory Archives since I'd be visiting them so soon and there is very limited information online. I guess her coffee kicked in and something lit up in her eyes when I talked about the accessibility, or rather inaccessibility, of the place.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives is a New York City-based archive, community center, and museum dedicated to preserving lesbian history. Located in Park Slope, Brooklyn, it is the world's largest collection of materials by and about lesbians.

In 1972, a group of people (including [Joan Nestle](#)) from the City University of New York who had participated in the liberation movements of the 1960s, founded the Gay Academic Union (GAU). Dedicated to representing the concerns of lesbian and gay students, teachers, and workers, GAU also launched projects to ensure gay inclusion in course content. At the first conference of the organization, a bomb threat emptied the auditorium, but the conference continued.

As was common in the early 1970s, after a year of working together, several of the women decided they needed a separate meeting space to discuss sexism in the organization, among other things. Two consciousness- raising groups were formed and one of them, which included Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel, became the founding site of the Lesbian Herstory Archives. At one meeting in 1974, Julia Stanley and Joan Nestle, who had come out before the Gay Liberation Movement, talked about the precariousness of lesbian culture and how so much of our past culture was seen only through patriarchal eyes. Deborah Edel, Sahli Cavallaro and Pamela Oline, with histories ranging from lesbian-feminism to political lesbianism, joined in and, thus, a new concept was born - a grassroots Lesbian archives.

Later in 1974, a larger group of women started meeting on a regular basis to work out the deeper vision of this undertaking. One of the first tasks the group undertook was to send off a news release to all of the then existing lesbian, feminist and gay publications announcing the groundbreaking undertaking. This was a testing of the waters, to see if the community shared in our vision. The answer was “yes”, and in the next year, 1975, LHA published its first free newsletter.

In the same year, the Archives found its home for the next 15 years in Joan Nestle's Upper West Side Manhattan apartment on 92nd St. Deborah Edel and Joan shared these years with the Archives in this home. And so did thousands of volunteers and visitors. Deb and Joan agreed that the first ten years of the Archives would be to build the trust of the communities it was serving. They were determined to keep all of the services of the Archives free, to not seek government funding, and to build grassroots support for the project. To accomplish this, Deb and Joan had carried around early journal issues, photographs, letters, and so on, in shopping bags, speaking to whomever invited them. The venues ranged from living rooms

where all present were sworn to secrecy, to women's festivals, gay church and synagogue gatherings, classrooms and bars.

By the late 1970s, to save wear and tear on the more fragile artifacts, they created the Archives' slide show. The slide show meant they could demonstrate the history of the Archives and raise issues about the challenges facing a Lesbian Archives and Lesbian history work in general, while making appeals for more materials. The main point of the slide show was to turn shame into a sense of cherished history, to change the meaning of history to include every woman who had the courage to touch another woman, whether for a night or a lifetime. “To change deprivation into cultural plentitude” as Joan said in hundreds of tours she gave in the apartment of the overflowing collection. A version of the slideshow still exists today, custom fitted to whomever is showing it.

In 1978, Judith Schwarz, a pioneering grassroots Lesbian historian, joined the collective, bringing with her all her skills in information organizing. Georgia Brooks, a tireless activist in the New Jersey and New York communities, also joined. Georgia launched the first Black Lesbian Studies group at the Archives, which held its meetings around the famous French peasant dining room table that we bought for \$30 on Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn in 1973. It is now back in Brooklyn in our permanent home.

One other person closely connected with the Archives until her death was Mabel Hampton, (1902-1986), a woman who had lived her long life in the African-American Lesbian community. Mabel donated her extensive collection of 1950s lesbian paperbacks and often came to volunteer nights. From the earliest days of the Archives, one night a week was devoted to volunteers working with the collection -groups of very different women spread out over the whole apartment filing, sorting, cataloging, and opening mail. Many women came to volunteer nights just to hear Mabel tell her tales of drag balls in Harlem and her version of the wild parties of the Harlem Renaissance.

In the mid-1980s when we realized we needed to find a larger home for the Archives and to spread the responsibility for the now huge collection, we created a Coordinating Committee that spearheaded a concerted fundraising drive so we could purchase a building for the collection. We purchased our new home, in Park Slope, Brooklyn, in 1992 and officially opened it in June 1993. The bank was dubious about taking a risk on our non-hierarchical collective with no guaranteed source of income, but we raised the money to pay back the bank in record time. That trust we had talked about building in 1974 was there when we - all of us -needed it.

Lesbian Hestory Archives



I was talking fairly idealistically about archives being accessible for everyone because I think primary sources are essential to get an unbiased view on the past. I couldn't see the point in hoarding all these rad resources in a box for limited eyes to see. It felt like typical academia, knowledge hoarding for an exclusive group that sits at a table you aren't invited to.

I could see my words making hairline cracks until finally the conversation I was looking for split wide open. Apparently the Herstory Archives have some ethical dilemmas specific to their organization. With their refusal to seek government funding, some of their biggest donors will still put notes on their checks or on boxes of donated materials that read “**lesbian eyes only**”.

My immediate internal reaction was “yikes how gatekeeper-y”. But I kept quiet and let her continue. What do I know. I’m the new kid strolling in with no knowledge of the socially constructed hierarchy in the room.

These donors’ wishes usually stemmed from the danger of being “out” at the time. Women in academia would donate their papers about their same-sex lovers with their unknowing husband at home. Many times these people were/are in academia, meaning it wouldn't be out of question for someone to get outed by the archives, leading to almost certain persecution—both professionally and at home. One of the problems the archive faces is how to respect the privacy of contributors, specifically now in the digital age as efforts are focused on digitizing all the materials.

I couldn't help but chuckle picturing me knocking on the door of the Brooklyn apartment and a tiny slat opening to reveal a set of eyes asking me to show my nails to see if I'm a lesbian.

In the traditional feminist/lesbian-feminist way, the Herstory Archive is doing the slow work of DIY digitization on their own with their shoestring budget and volunteers.⁵ It's an ongoing struggle to determine the best plan of action when handling the materials and organization—but they have and will make it work.

From there, exhausted and sore from an hour of inhaling coughs, the conversation had peaked so I was looking for my out—

5. Cait McKinney, *Out of the Basement and on to Internet: Digitizing Oral History Tapes at the Lesbian Herstory Archives*. (No More Potlucks, 2014).

Remembering she mentioned grading papers earlier I offered to let her get back to it and thanked her for her time. I may have also tossed a lie about needing to get back home. She reached up on her toes to give a stiff hug, no one to blame here for this weird encounter but myself. I slipped out the back to head down to a pizza joint to meet a friend.

I looked in the reflection of a storefront walking down the street and see her walking directly behind me as I get caught at a crosswalk. More gawky grins and deflated banter before she watches me walk into a pizza joint.

At this point the research is going swimmingly, thanks for your concern.

If reading that made you cringe, imagine how we felt. However, it was not a wasted trip. I walked away with tips and information I couldn't find online and some rad resources, namely Agatha Beins' “Liberation in Print: Feminist Periodicals and Social Movement Identity” (2017). This is the first analysis of periodicals' key role in U.S. feminism's formation as a collective identity and set of political practices in the 1970s—it analyzes collective identity formation and highlights the significance of print culture in activist organizing.

Beins focuses on five periodicals of that era, all from different regions in the United States. Her emphasis on how local context affected the manifestation of ideas or political values was particularly interesting to me as I'd be traveling to the Lesbian Herstory Archives to see the periodicals she studied along with others from the same era but different regions in the United States.

It will be valuable to get context and see how Charlotte, North Carolina weaves into the history.

NY Research Trip

**Upon arriving in Brooklyn,
I went into the agreed diner,
and was handed a paper bag by
the cashier with my name on it.**

The owner of the shoe box apartment told me her son would ring me up and if anyone asked, to say I'm her sons friend and to please stick to the story. The flat was just a bed tucked into a closet with a curtain between it and the rest of the house. That was fine with me—I dropped my bag and headed up the street to find the 3 story apartment that housed the largest collection of lesbian materials by lesbians.

I walked up and down the street a few times past the address that was on their website—I thought surely there would be some kind of signage to indicate I was in the right place but everything just looked residential. It was getting dark but on my third pass by I saw the tiny pride flag sticker in the window and decided to go up and check it out. The door was locked but there was 2 door bells and a taped piece of paper saying to ring both.

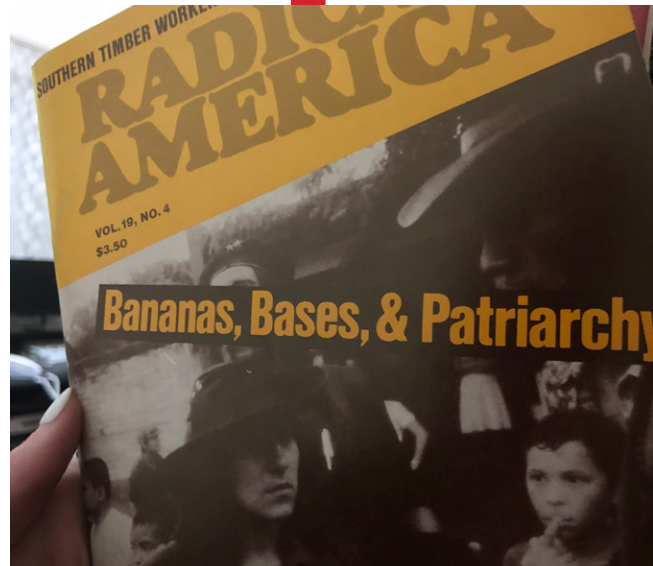
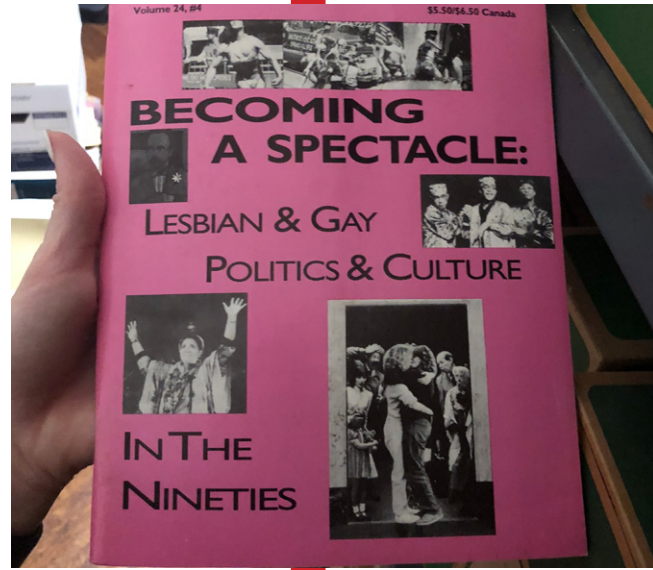
What the fuck am I doing here? I rang both and debated running back to my bed in the closet to forget about this whole trip. **Continued on Page 23**

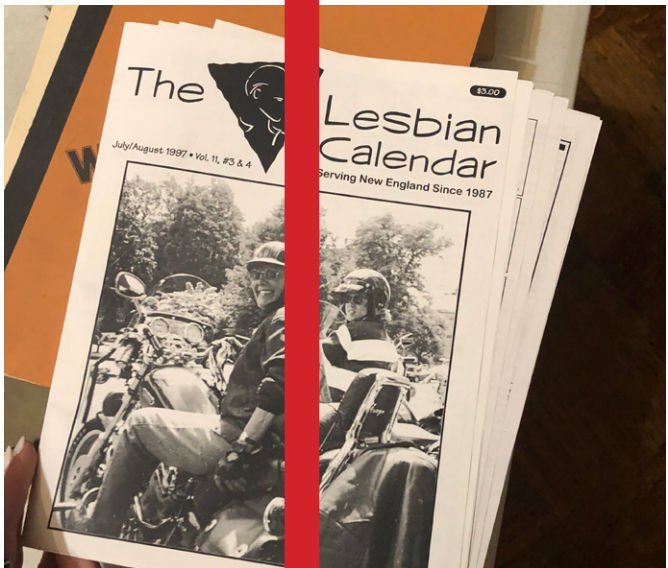
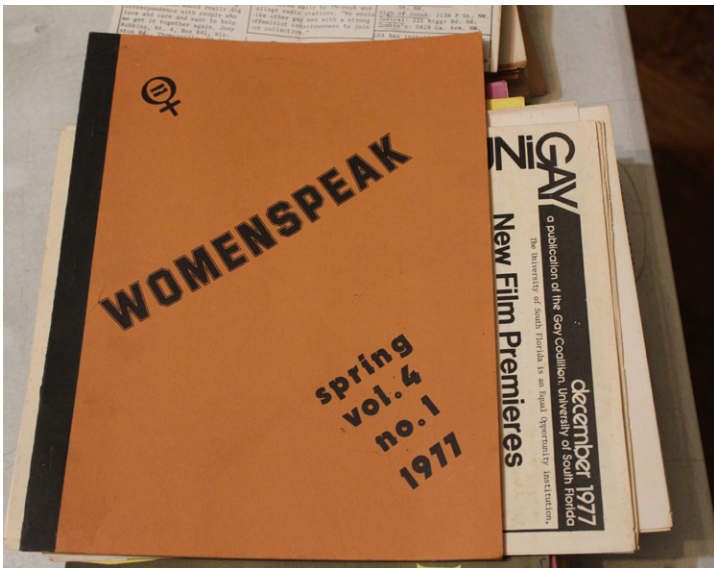
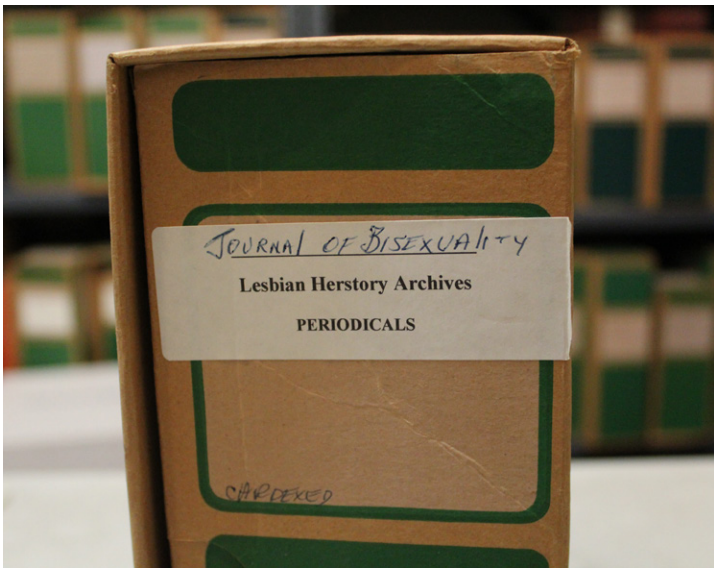
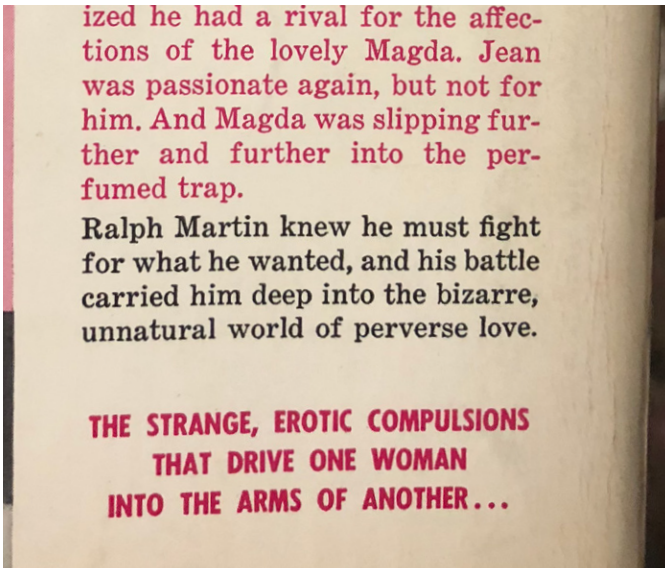
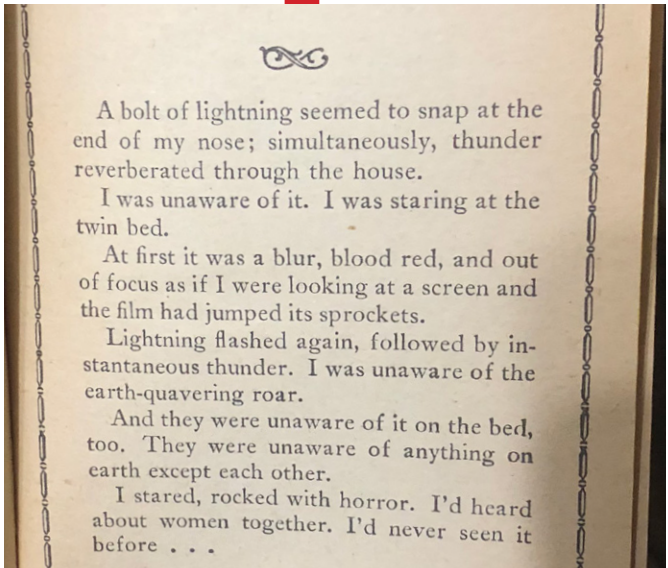
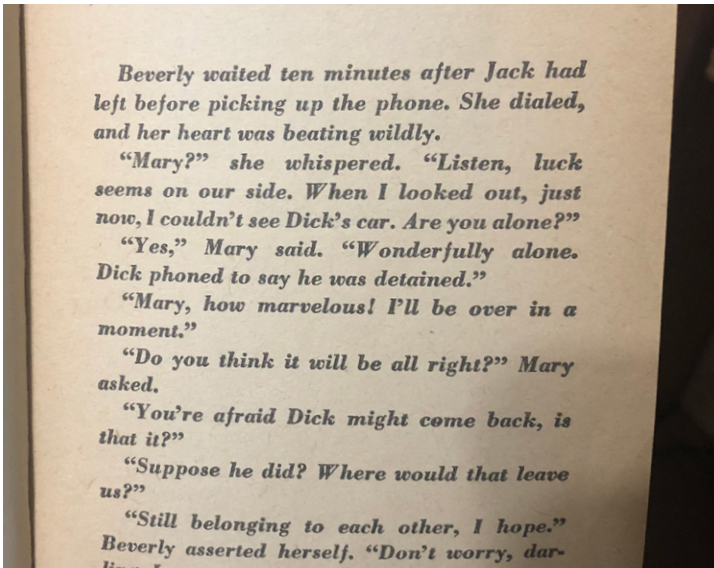
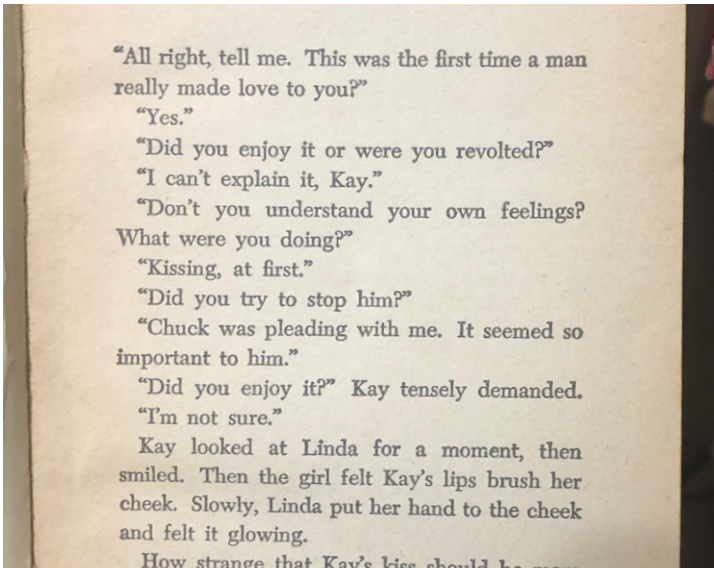
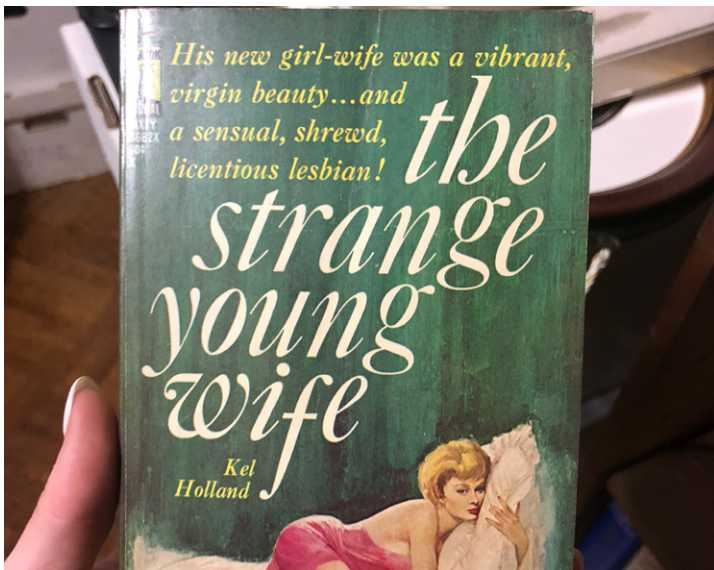
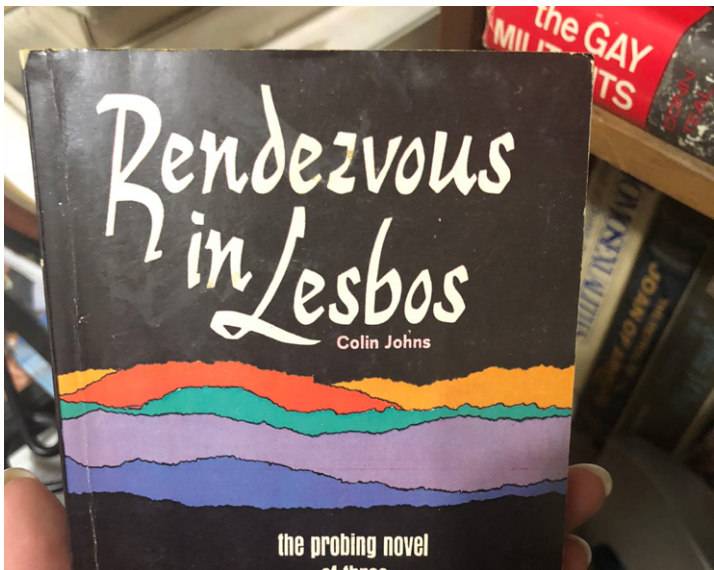
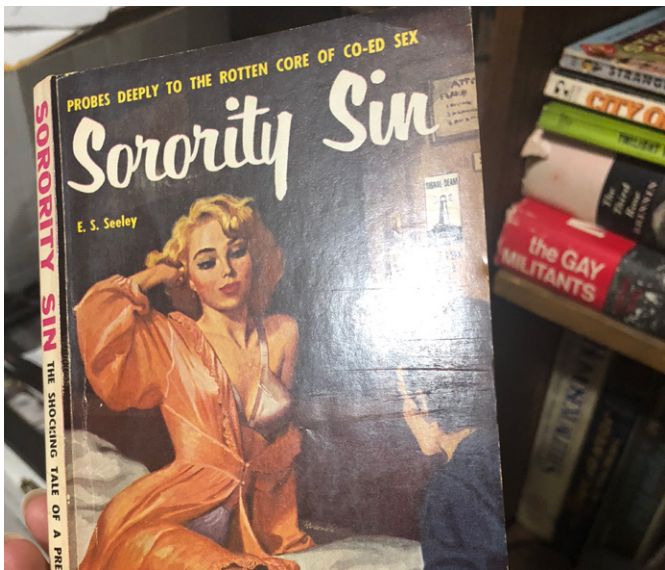


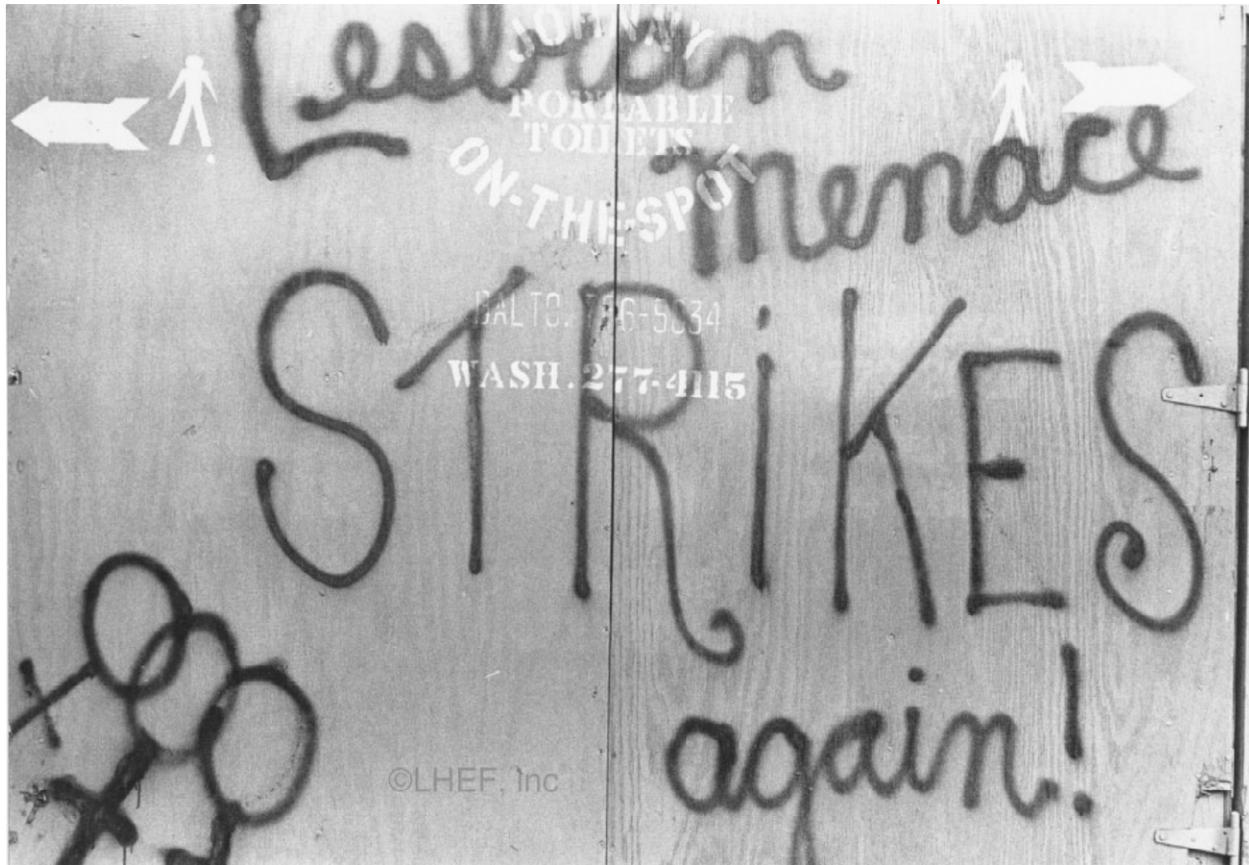












Maybe it was a long shot all this would work out. I'm not even a real researcher or know what I'm looking for or identify as anything other than Lex.

My insecure internal monologue rambled on a little too long as a trans man with a bright green beard answered the door, peering indifferently at me.

Hi! Is this the Lesbian Herstory Archives?
Why did you whisper that.

Yep!

May I enter?
Bitch, what do you think they're going to do to you.

Yep! Have you been here before?

They proceeded to have a doe-eyed intern show me around that had no idea what the rules were or if there was any so I just went on my merry way upstairs to dig around and go camera crazy. It was absolutely overflowing with boxes and ephemera.

The tilted third story creaked with every step as I began going through my first boxes. I started with lesbian American erotic novels of the 1950s—the titles and covers alone were fucking ridiculous.

Rendezvous in Lesbos
Restless Wives
The One Between
Homewrecker
Strange Sisters
The Strange Young Wife

I worked through a good amount before passing through a hallway(?) with closets exploding with boxes and sinks covered in ephemera. On past the leather jacket with “Dyke Tactics” hand-studded across the back and the “Clit Power” buttons, I found the room I’d spend the rest of the night. I wasn’t sure what I was looking for but after opening my first box of periodicals I think I got a better idea. Tons of bright colored newsletters and personal papers that wreaked of patchouli.

I rummaged through the boxes and didn't see a soul for the 4 hours I was there until the lights flickered off on me. My first thought was—good.

They can totally lock me in this apartment for the night and I'll dream on these boxes instead of finding my way back to my closet. But I made a creak and totally startled that poor intern who was shutting the place down. She screamed thinking I was a ghost and apologized for forgetting me up there, made me sign something, and I was on my way.

The owner of the place I crashed at was either hosting a Zumba class or an orgy but she had a rule to not go past the curtain so I guess I'll never know what the hell goes on in that apartment.

Onward we go to the lesbian bars—*for research*.

**The assumption that
mundane, ordinary
suburban gay men or
Midwestern lesbians
are somehow less
authentically
gay than visible urban
coastal gays and
lesbians is problematic.⁶**

6. Wayne Brekhus, "Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs": *Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

Are you a tomboy?

I texted my hometown dyke that escaped to NYC a few years ago for some lady-friendly queer bars.

She gave me an impressive list but wasn't in town that weekend—time to find someone else to join. A girl from the camp I volunteer at each summer had been hitting me up about questioning her sexuality. She wanted to hang while I was there so what better a place than a lesbian bar to figure it out—Henrietta Hudson's here we come.

I have since realized that sexuality isn't something I think needs to be "figured out". Do you feel fuzzy and shit when you think about them? Do they make you happy? Neat.

Too nervous to socialize with anyone else, she was the sidecar to my motorcycle. I didn't have a destination so we were just parked by a pool table while I listened to her drone about some love interest. I went to respond but before I knew it I was mid-kiss...

Eyes still very much open I leaned back away from it seeing a random woman that had swooped in between us to lay one on me.

Hi I'm Lex? *God why did I say that.*

Hi I've been watching you across the room and can't figure you out. I know you're gay though.

Yup I like women. *No shit, we're in a lesbian bar. I don't like people smashing their face on mine without knowing them.*

I know but like are you a tomboy or..? Because I like women with long hair and nails and you kiss too softly to be a tomboy. Don't shave your head please you're not a tomboy. I know girls like you, you're going to shave your head.

Well I like my hair like this and I don't know you so. *How the fuck did she know I had been building up the courage to buzz my shoulder length hair for the past year just by looking at me across the bar???*

I still can't read you—do you think you're a tomboy? Tell me—also how old are you? I think I'm quite a bit older than you but all my girlfriends have been younger so I like that.

I don't like the word tomboy but I guess I'm a bit of one and a bit not.
STEPH MAKE GODDAMN EYE CONTACT WITH ME AND HELP A BITCH! HELLOOOO...

Realizing her friends left, she asked for my number before leaving to continue "figuring me out". Time to sweep up the puddle of Steph that melted into the floor watching that whole encounter 8 inches from my face. She was rightfully confused on what the hell just happened, but things like this go on all the time in the queer community.



Gay Pride March
"On the Way There"

London 1988
© Della Disgrace

A lot of the time it isn't enough to just know if someone is into you—you need to pick a letter from the LGBTQIA+ alphabet and from there, choose a category within it, and assume the cultural insistence.

This hyper categorization files everyone away into their own folder. Organizing the filing cabinet is attractive for many reasons—you can better find what you're looking for and people can better find you. It feels safe.

However, it creates an exclusivity around each group that can be isolating. This is seen a lot in the bisexual community as they are seen as not gay enough or straight enough. Zooming in further—if you identify as a lesbian, cool but what *kind* of lesbian?

**In my personal experience,
the pressure to conform to
fit into a category leads to guilt and a disingenuous portrayal of self—
whether intentional or not.**

Assume the identity

Hi! I'm a new lesbian.

"I know", I wanted to say.

She wore a stiff leather jacket and pristine doc martin boots that squeaked through their first wear. For someone who just came out at 38, she looked wildly uncomfortable in her skin.

I had been waiting for this night for months—a pop up lesbian bar in Charlotte, NC that wasn't during pride. I don't think I'd ever been in a room with so many women that like other women—or at least been aware of it. Half the fun was people watching and labeling what category people put themselves in. I'm not sure why people try to put so many filters on something that feels edgeless but guessing their probable identity is a guilty pleasure game I like to play in my head.

**Tight fro with abs wearing
only a sports bra, suspenders,
leather pants, and boots,
seen dancing and buying
drinks with more women
than I can count—stud.**

**Straight-presenting woman
with long curled hair and acrylics—
lipstick/femme lesbian.**

**The woman with the pixie cut,
cut off t-shirt, and arms that
could break me in half—butch.
Actually, are those work boots?
—possible diesel dyke.**

I'm not saying these assumptions were fair but it's second nature—just like coupling women by heteronormative standards. Stud for stud? Femme for femme? It seems harder for people to wrap their head around when there isn't a "man" of the relationship...Which is the whole point for some :) Don't fit any of the sub-categories? You should probably figure that out or how can anyone know if they're into you?

I can also guess pretty accurately what type of person I will attract depending on how I'm presenting that day. The morning after the party I buzzed off all my hair. The lack of hair seems to be a beacon for femme women—interesting.

**Just as these letters
are both fixed chemicals
arranged on the
paper and a sequence
of words, so anything
that conveys a code is
both itself and the
thing it represents.**

**In the case of
human kinds,
people themselves
often are the
objects that carry
code.⁷**

7. David Berreby, *Us and Them: the Science of Identity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 324.

Sunscreen, sweat, glitter, and regret

**Every pride-themed shirt,
hat, koozie, fanny pack, sock, tits,
and you name it descended on
uptown as Rainbow Capitalism's favorite day of the year commenced.**

With each step approaching the pride festival the closer I got to liquid form, convinced I'd evaporate before we got there. August in North Carolina was not your friend when covered in Vaseline and glitter and filled with beer. We turned the final corner to the throngs of sweaty bodies and I wished my puddle of a self had cycled into a cloud sooner to float back home.

I was with friends-adjacent since mine didn't feel comfortable going with me. We were crammed in a small strip of the city with vendors, drag queens, and free mom hugs. These were supposed to be my people- I should've felt better. I toured around, piled on free merch from vendors to add to the mess of products on my body, grabbed a beer, and headed to the stage to watch the performers. Flowing through the crowd, I realized how warm I was getting. Radiating heat, I thought to go sit on the curb to retain what I had left. I tried to make eye contact with people in an effort to be friends but felt shamefully awkward.

I stood there and realized I didn't want to be there. I had such high hopes of meeting other people "like me" and making friends but I looked around and saw everyone had come with their friends and I felt no more or less uncomfortable talking to strangers. I felt silly. What I thought to be one of the best days of the year was a literal hot mess and all I wanted was to click my heels and be the puddle in my shower.

I've never been a fan of huge crowds but I had just moved out on my own to a new city, desperately wanted to make queer friends, and didn't know where else to find them—and if you say gay bars or dating apps so help me *GOD*.

Where do the quiet gays go?

Drinking and partying have long been woven in the history of the LGBT community, it almost feels like a right of passage.

Not only that, but bars and nightclubs are some of the only places to find each other. But as Hannah Gadsy questions in her Netflix special *Nanette*, “*Where do the quiet gays go?*”

Charlotte has a handful of gay bars and queer friendly places— but the bars are mostly men and queer-friendly is lovely of course but that doesn’t mean you’re going to find your people, it means the business tolerates you being there. Where do the quiet queers go? The sober ones? This has been a question that’s been bubbling in the community across the nation.

Though there is no LGBT Community Center, there are several LGBT organizations in Charlotte. “Time Out Youth” is the closest thing to a community center but it is focused on, well, youth.

It is the only brick and mortar place, but is definitely no watering hole. “*Genderlines*” is focused on the trans youth community. “*PFLAG*” is focused on parents and youth, and “Transcend” is focused on the adult

trans community. These are all rad organizations with great and worthy causes, but there are still people who don’t fit in these buckets. It feels like in an effort to cover the gutters, the margins were forgotten.

Lara Americo saw a need for a space to fill this gap in the midst of the HB2, anti-trans “bathroom bill.” In 2016, after Charlotte passed a nondiscrimination ordinance to protect its LGBT citizens, North Carolina responded by instituting HB2, its notorious anti-trans legislation that forbade trans people from using public restrooms that correspond to their gender identity. Doing so essentially overturned the Charlotte ordinance. HB2 was repealed and replaced in October 2017 after costing the state millions of dollars in canceled or relocated concerts, conferences, and sporting events.

Lara Americo was a key voice in the fight to repeal HB2. In September 2017 she opened Comic Girl Coffee.

“Small, DIY-ish shop that serves vegan drinks with names like Harry Potter Butter Beer and The Gay Pride Glitter Bomb, and offers a selection of comic books that feature marginalized characters. Ultimately, the goal is to be a widely inclusive space where queer people, people of color, immigrants, poor people, and others can hang out without worrying about being judged or confronted.”

My idea of a safe space is a non-sexualized, sober space where you don’t have to worry about being mis-gendered, and you don’t have to worry about your income level.

Lara Americo



Unfortunately, Comic Girl Coffee & Books closed in 2019 from lack of funds. This blows for many reasons but notably that the Republican National Convention is coming to Charlotte in fall 2020—a safe space for the marginalized is needed now more than ever.

Since the closing, Lara Americo has moved to NY with her wife and daughter but visits Charlotte, NC often. She's also a designer and performance artist. Since my Internet stalking can only get me so far—I reached out to her for a Skype interview.

I wanted to know more about her experience creating a queer space—what works and doesn't. Through my research, I had hatched the idea to have monthly queer meetups at rotating locations around the city called "Queer City Hangouts" (QCH).

Using existing businesses as venues would help keep costs down while leveraging their platforms to promote the events. So far there are events planned for the next 4 months—games in a coffee shop, games outside at a brewery, a blacklight chakti yoga class, and indoor rock climbing.

After some phone tag—we connected. That's one of the things people don't tell you about being a researcher, tracking people down and syncing up is fucking exhausting.

Lara thought the structure for QCH should work well but warned that her biggest issues were not with conservatives in the community but with other queers. Unfortunately, this wasn't a shock to me.

**Everyone had a clear,
ideal safe space for queer
people but reality doesn't
always coincide. It's about
how much you're willing to compromise.**

Lara Americo

Did you say more coffee dates with strangers?

So I've been texting this 72 year old lesbian.

We first met for coffee after I had been trying to reach her via email for 3 months- to be fair, I was unaware of her age until she called me up, we set the coffee date for the next morning, and she said, "I'm short with glasses, and brownish-gray hair, and I'm 72 so I'm past my good looking years!"

Ah—

While researching the history of Charlotte's queer scene, I found UNCC's "King-Henry-Brockington LGBTQ+ Archive," a community project founded in 2013 designed to collect, preserve, and protect the LGBTQ+ community history. This includes (but not limited to) personal and organizational papers, ephemera, and oral histories.

Historian and archivist, Josh Burford, founded the collection on his mission to document the Queer and Trans history of the city. Burford spent six years building this archive before returning to his home state of Alabama to begin the Invisible Histories Project, designed to be a repository

for the preservation of the history of LGBTQ life first in the state of Alabama and then the entire Southeast. The archive will preserve, collect, and protect the living history of the diversity of the Queer community—both urban and rural.⁸

Before leaving Charlotte, Josh left the Queer History Project to Linda Lawyer to continue gathering interviews and materials. And THAT my friends is my 72 year old coffee date I internet stalked to get here.
I'm getting good at this.

I sat sipping my chai, no cinnamon this time to choke on, and waited for her to spot the "tall girl with a shaved head". Linda shortly bustled in the coffee shop, and sat right down with no problem finding me. Our original purpose for meeting was to discuss my potential involvement with the oral history project, getting trained to interview, and just getting the interviews back up and going in general. That all went as planned but I couldn't miss out on asking a seasoned veteran what growing up gay in the 60's was like. Like where did they even meet people?

She said most people met in bars but while taking calls at the switchboard, women would vent their frustrations about not wanting to go to bars, they wanted a place all their own. Linda started Queen City Friends (QCF) as a "women only" social group, a place to meet and make friends because the men had plenty of places to meet.

Well as history repeats itself...

⁸ Joshua Burford, *History and Mission: Invisible Histories Project*.

Switchboard's Class Times To Be Decided

Times for the next training class for Gay Lesbian Switchboard phone volunteers are expected to be finalized in November. The class will include meetings on three weeknights 7:30 to 9:45 and on two Sunday afternoons 2 to 5.

The Switchboard is experiencing a severe shortage of volunteers. To find out how to participate in training and in staffing the phone, call 525-6128 and leave your name and phone number on the tape, or write P.O. Box 221841, Charlotte 28222.

The primary function of the switchboard is to disperse information about activities and gay/lesbian clubs, and to provide information and counseling. No prior counseling experience is needed.

Gay/Lesbian Switchboard 525-6128

An information and referral service as well as a crisis line. Staffed most nights 7 to 11 p.m.

9 Charlotte Gay/
Lesbian Switchboard
1980-2006

A phone helpline and information service, that became the longest-running LGBTQ outreach resource of its kind in the South. The location was known only to those who were part of the organization, for fear of being beaten by homophobes when leaving at 11p.m. This resource was crucial in the effort to educate the community about safe sex during the AIDS outbreak.

They made it protocol to ask if the caller was practicing safe sex but more often than not they would say they've never heard of it—prompting lesbians describing how to put on a condom over the phone and demonstrating on bananas (this really tickled Linda).

We were sitting in the exact coffee shop I had planned the first Queer City Hangouts event!

AH.

We were practically yelling at each other over our mugs in excitement that history was repeating itself and that something she started almost 40 years ago was happening again (in some shape or form). One difference she emphasized considering to change in my plan was having separate men's and women's groups rather than whoever together. I see her point but putting more filters on a space was kinda going against everything I was trying to build by reinforcing a binary.

A call from her partner was the perfect transition to ask about dating in a small murky pool of a scene.

Did you ever date anyone in One Voice?
(a chorus started in 1990-present to bring LGBTQ members and allies together)

Actually I met my partner that way!

No shit! I should really watch my mouth in these meetups.

She asked Linda for a pencil a few times before she realized she wasn't after the pencil. She went on to tell me they broke up and got back together so many times it was almost shameful when they finally decided they wanted to be together. They hid it from the rest of the ensemble for awhile out of embarrassment and to "be sure."

I wish I would've met Linda before joining the Charlotte Pride Band so I would've thought a bit more about shitting where I eat.

Let's all sit together and have tea

**I sat on stage peering over
my music stand at my boyfriend
on the right of the crowd, my ex-girlfriend
in the center, my parents on the left, and my girlfriend
on stage with me 3 rows up.**

Yes, you read that right. Kill me.

As if the stage lights weren't enough to get me sweating, this *situation* had me drenched before we even got through "Carol of the Bells".

Believe it or not, I had planned on all these factors being at play besides the ex-girlfriend planting herself in the literal middle of it all. Intermission came and the entire concert band and audience flooded out to the lobby for snacks and mingling before finishing the second half of the concert. Everyone is texting me asking where I am like I wasn't the only soul that stayed on stage to "fix her trombone". How weird it would break right after the first set. Odd.

With such a small community of queer women in the area, it's not only easy to run into your ex but highly likely you share a common denominator in past partners. As seen in "The L-Word", all lesbians can be connected to each other using a nodal map of who you've slept with. Trust me, if you live in

Charlotte and are a woman who sleeps with women—I've slept with someone who has slept with someone who has slept with you. It's *science*.

I single-handedly took the tempo up 10 clicks in "Jingle Bells" in my clouded nerves. Between pieces I texted my parents I needed to break down the stage so to see them at a bar after, texted my boyfriend to tell them to go to said bar, and told my girlfriend to let me handle the ex-girlfriend. Unfortunately this wasn't one of those unavoidable run-ins but intentional. After an anxious second set with my miraculously cured instrument, it was time to face the music (ha).

Just know that the night ended with a bottle of wine and I've never seen that ex-girlfriend again. Yet.¹⁰

If you haven't gathered by now, I get myself into a variety of uncomfortable situations—usually by choice. If it seems there is more to gain than lose, it's for me.

¹⁰ I've seen her at least 6 times since then

Shark Tank

I willingly entered the shark tank of queer crusaders as fresh bait.

Perched in the corner of a quiet small room with fluorescent lights, tiles on floor and ceiling, and a kitchenette shoved in the corner—easy to say this is not what I envisioned. As dusk set in, I drove up and down a street of warehouses looking for this makeshift coffee shop before ditching my car in a muddy lot to search on foot. While wandering the street to check the building numbers, I finally come up on a side door to a larger building with a paper sign reading “Ritual Coffee”.

No. No, there’s no way. Clearly being set up for murder, I went inside. The conversation of 3 people abruptly stopped as their heads whipped to look at me coming in the door.

Sup! Awesome I can feel the love already.

I took my perch in the corner as their conversation picked back up. Being 20 minutes early for the game night they invited me to, I just went up to the counter(?) to order a chai and find my perch to pretend to text and wait it out.

With no music and close quarters, it was impossible not to eavesdrop as an outsider. Also since I had been chatting with them via the “Queer City Hangouts” social media account, they had no idea who I was.

“I don’t understand why the community pits itself against one another”, they started—going on to list enemies and question why they were losing traction. Among the list in question were Laura Americo and Comic Girl Books in Coffee, now someone wants to smash a coffee mug at the wall. As the tensions reached a peak, so did the hour, and it was time for a hunky-dory game night.

Me and 8 others circled up around a table—the 3 people of the “meeting” plus their partners and the owner of the coffee shop and her partner. Tight group I suppose.

“Alright, let’s go around and do names and pronouns.”

**glancing around* Okay well this is definitely for me because they clearly all know each other.*

As it comes around to me I can’t help but wonder who the hell they think I am. Being invited to this game night yesterday and given the circumstances, I don’t think it’s much of a mystery.

Hi, I’m Lex. She/her or whatever you’re feelin’. *Surprise I came.*

Her bright red acrylic nails stopped tapping the table as she widened her eyes at me. Fluffing her curled bangs raised halfway up her forehead, Kelli Baron widened her eyes in realization.

Yeah hey we met on the inter-webs. *Yikes.*

We all played games for about an hour before Kelli asks, “So tell us about your organization

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the LESBIAN AVENGERS



WE RECRUIT

PARTY/FUNDRAISER/BLAST
GO-GO GIRLS/MUSIC/MEDIA INSTALLATION
SATURDAY, OCT 24, 9PM-4AM
119 AVENUE D, 2nd FLOOR
\$5 AT THE DOOR

The LESBIAN AVENGERS is a direct-action group focused on issues vital to lesbian survival and visibility.
We meet every Tuesday at 8PM at the Lesbian & Gay Community Services Center, 208 W 13 Street, NYC. For information: (212) 967-7711 ext. 3204



40

the LESBIAN AVENGERS



WE RECRUIT

PARTY & FUNDRAISER
GO-GO GIRLS MUSIC
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and what events you’ve managed to pull together.”

Well it’s really just an event series at rotating locations around the city. So far I have events nailed down for a coffee shop hang, games outside at a brewery, a blacklight chakti yoga class, and indoor rock climbing that will be quarterly.

Oh, those are active.
Guess that leaves out the handicap.

I think there’s a good mix for everyone to hopefully find what they’re looking for and meet people in different circles.

She didn’t feel inclined to respond and we went on to play games for almost another hour without another mention of why I was there. Nearing exhaustion from trying to make friends with people who already saw me as an enemy and pretending to drink the chai with full leaves in it, I needed an out. As the next round of games ended, I started to get up saying I had to get going but thanks for the games and convo (*and 10 years of my life but who’s counting*). Kelli stops me saying she wants to talk with me. Leading me to a dark back room through the building accompanied by her cane, we sit across from each other at a fold out table with a plastic table cloth. This is the murder scene I was waiting for.

See their organization is called “Queer City Charity” and my event series is called “Queer City Hangouts” and they are not happy about it. After accusing me of not doing my research I explained I did much more than just a google search—I searched

national trademark and copyright databases, Charlotte business databases, and more importantly talked to people and leaders in the community—including Lara Americo. Her eyes widened again. After some back and forth exchanging information, I think I gathered what this was.

The same group of 8 people meeting once a week at this “coffee shop”; that is all they do. And that’s totally fine but I’m trying to do something different for the community.

Before she walked me back past the table of snickering onlookers and out the door, I tried to remind her that we’re on the same team and want what’s best for the community—I wish I believed that.

The Point

I was going to wrap this all up with a cute bow, climaxing at the first Queer City Hangouts event, but I'm sitting here going on month 6 of quarantine in the middle of a civil rights movement and a global pandemic, neither of which is a writing retreat. With the Black Lives Matter movement in full swing; protesting for racial equality, further educating myself on the race issues of our country and amplifying BIPOC voices seems to take a precedent, as does reflecting on ways these issues affect my work, my life, and vice versa. All the things that seemed to matter so much before this spring suddenly have a cloudy, shrink-wrapped, distant feel to them, lacking the urgency they once had.

I put a lot of heart and effort into research, traveling to a city that was the epicenter for lesbian herstory— now an epicenter of a viral outbreak and protests— all while navigating cliquy tribes of old-guard queer activists, unwanted advances, attending and eventually planning an entire branded event series which is now postponed. Visiting the archives would require an act of Congress and biohazard suit, so collecting interviews for the Charlotte Queer Oral History Archive will have to wait until a week or two after the end of the world wraps up. Just what am I going to do with all this internet stalking now?

How do my plans for the above move forward when so much of what i wanted to pursue hinges on face to face connections?

Ultimately, that is what my work has been all about: human connections.

Though the gatekeeping and rule breaking—I've seen parallels between graphic design and how we conform for community and identity. I don't have a 12 step program for what to do next, but I feel like something is wrong. Fighting against structures and standards that come from a vacuum feels like a place to start. Now seems like the time where, with everything being molten and malleable, change can actually be made. Consciousnesses can be changed.

Finding our place, for those like us, to meet people who aren't like us, to find the similarities between us and further understand the complex tapestry of our own community, is still a priority. I've only just begun to tug at the threads of this, the understanding of how to design human connection. In the shadow of the pandemic, my pursuit of that goal hasn't changed. The need to find community is a constant for all people, and no global pandemic can change that. But, perhaps the *way* in which we find that connection has, and for my next trick, it will be to discover how so.











66



67





Layering in Identity

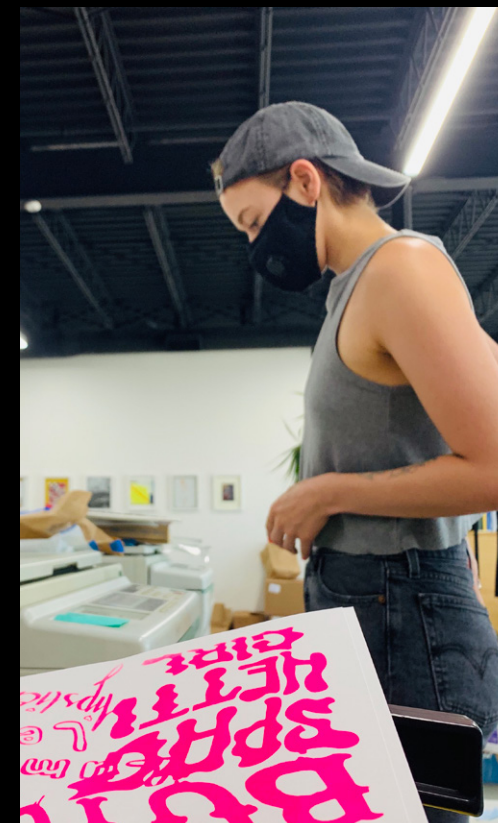
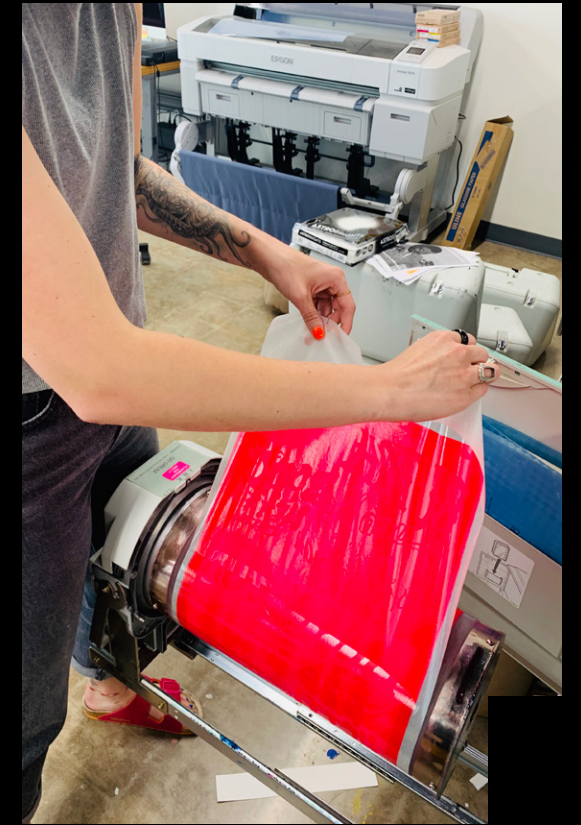
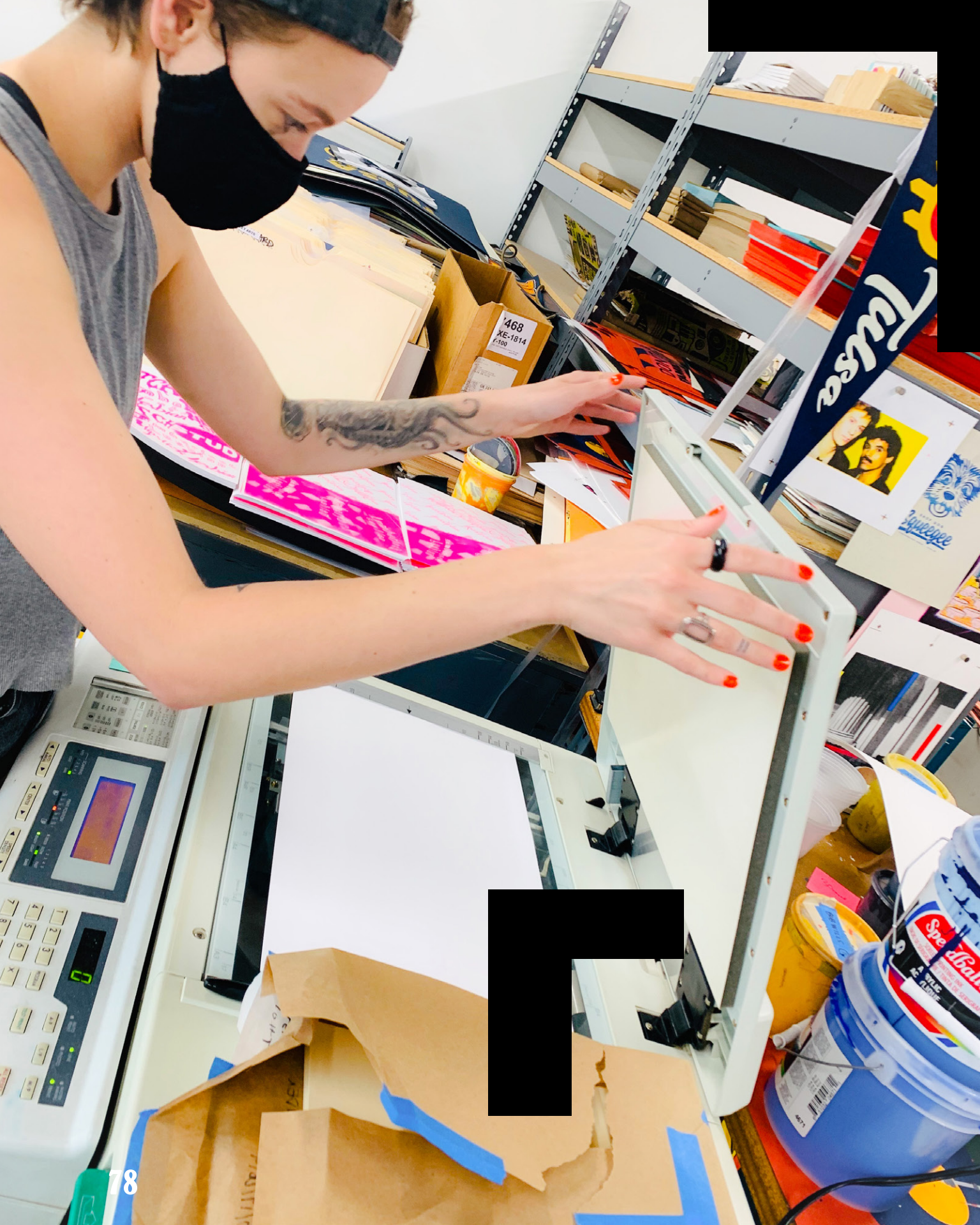


Layering in Identity

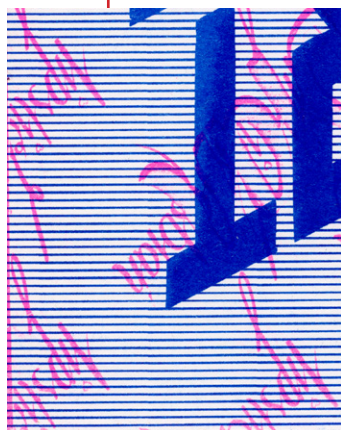
If you identify as the “L” in LGBTQ, great! Now let’s drill down and pick an archetype to assume with it. Don’t worry, this comes with clothes, demeanor, hobbies, sexual roles, and more! Not much thought required! Whether you like living off the grid with your plant nursery or play 32 different sports, we have the stereotype for you.

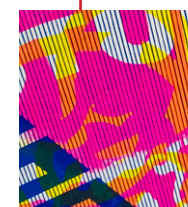
The following *typographic risograph* posters about each lesbian archetype (*See what I did there?*) attempt to embody those socially designated characteristics of a person assuming a supposedly all-defining identity. The type’s challenge the “rules” I’ve learned in design over the years about matching bowls, where typefaces are built (why not spray painted in a lawn?) and so on. It can be a bit uncomfortable to read or look at (much like this book— do you like this red line?), but that’s the point.

I like poking fun at these lesbian tropes— they’re so limiting and couldn’t possibly define the complexities of any real human. We all subconsciously fall into our roles to some extent, and it was fun to make posters taking those tropes to an extreme, but in real life we are all naturally more than one thing at the same time. The same is true in printing techniques, with it’s translucent inks randomly layered over each other creating a more complex image than could ever be devised intentionally. Layering the *stereotypographic* posters on the risograph allowed for the queering of my original designs, creating unique compositions and sometimes illegible textures.









Lumberjack Lesbian

Do you wanna build a house later?



BUTCH

Do you wanna ride my bike later?



SPAGHETTI GIRL

Do you wanna come over later?

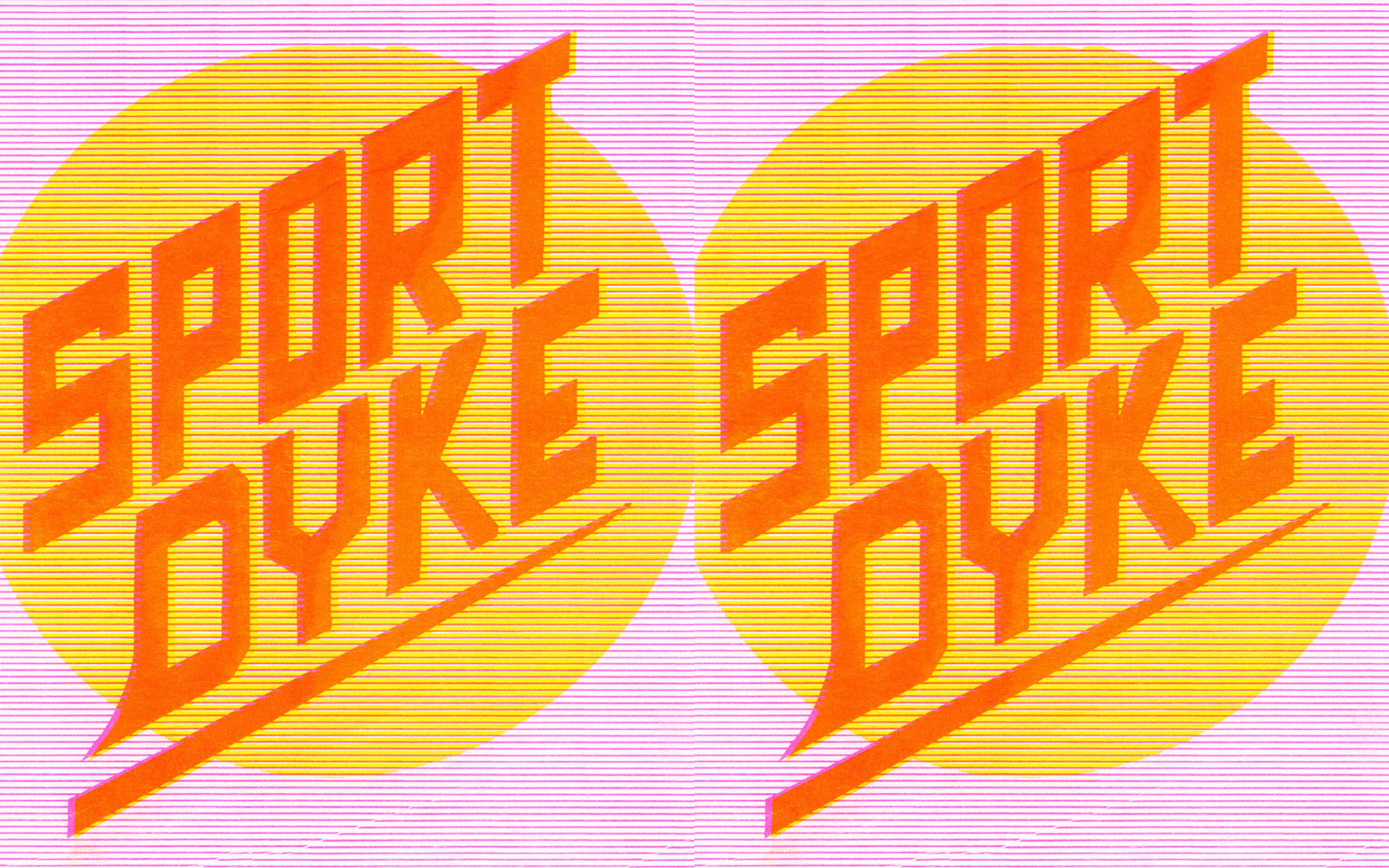
**SPAG
HETTI
GIRL**



SPORT DYKE

Do you wanna come to my rugby game?





ACTIVIST
LESBIAN

Do you wanna sign my petition?

ACTIVIST
LESBIAN

STUD

Yes, I'll kill the damn spider.

STUD

lipsticklesbian

Do you wanna go to Sephora later?











Exhibitionist

A local Charlotte coffee shop (the same one I met my 72 year old lesbian friend at, see page 44) asked me to exhibit these prints and much to my delight, I sold out of all of the random-layered prints. People direct messaged me saying they loved that “they didn’t have to choose just one thing.” These patrons summed up with their questions what I was trying to say with this thesis even better than I could. Sure, we’ll all continue to advertise the kind of person we are through semiotics, designing our appearance, and flying our subtle (or not so subtle) cultural flags, but my hope will remain that we can all find a community while at the same time allowing each other to be *Edgeless*.





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Colophon

Typeset in two typefaces:

Garamond is a classic, ubiquitous font. It was used throughout the ephemera in the archives I visited, making it feel fitting for the body copy

Windsor originally issued by Stephenson Blake in 1903. With the subject matter challenging stereotypes, I thought this wonky typeface seemed fitting as display type. Everything feels a little off to me— with capital M and W widely splayed, P and R’s big upper bowls, lowercase a, h, m and n and the angled right hand stems—it’s a bit uncomfortable. Apparently, Bitstream calls it “a creative variation on the old-style form” in their release notes to its digitization.

