

# Trans/forming Collections

## The Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria

Lara Wilson

The Transgender Archives housed at the University of Victoria Libraries was formally founded in 2011 to preserve transgender histories for all who wish to know about them, and to promote understanding about transgender people, the challenges they face in society, and their successes. The materials we hold come from 17 countries and comprise the largest collection in the world of historical materials on trans people and their activism (approximately 320 linear feet / 98 linear meters, and growing).

### Definition of terms: transgender/trans

The following definitions are useful in order to understand the scope of experiences potentially documented in the Transgender Archives:

**trans-**, *prefix*: With the sense ‘across, through, over, to or on the other side of, beyond, outside of, from one place, person, thing, or state to another.’

**transgender**: “an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.”

**Right:** *Takarazuka Revue magazine, University of Ulster UK TGA Collection, Transgender Archives, UVic.*





**trans\*** (also without the \*): those people who transgress (binary) (western) gender norms, many of whom face human rights issues as a result. Trans people includes those people who have a gender identity which is different to the gender assigned at birth and/or those people who feel they have to, prefer to or choose to – whether by clothing, accessories, cosmetics or body modification – present themselves differently to the expectations of the gender role assigned to them at birth. This includes, among many others, transsexual and transgender people, transvestites, travesti, cross dressers, no gender and genderqueer people.

### Mandate

Although known as Transgender Archives, the materials we hold are a mixture of archival records in multiple media (textual records, photographs, audio histories, video recordings), rare monograph and journal materials, ephemera and objects, art works, motion pictures and music recordings (both mass market and self-published).

As word got out that UVic was acquiring trans materials, we realized we needed to articulate our acquisitions/collections mandate.

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**We decided to limit our acquisitions to “documents, rare publications, and memorabilia of persons and organizations that have worked for the betterment of transgendered people.”**

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Individual narratives of transition are not sought specifically, but they are frequently found in the archival fonds and rare print collections received.

Materials in our holdings are evidence of transgressive environments in which trans people have lived their lives, beyond or outside of the binary-based mainstream, and, not uncommonly, risking their lives by choosing to express their true gender. Our goal for this archival and

rare print collection (as with all of our holdings ) is that it may serve many communities: trans people and allies, secondary and post-secondary students, teachers and academics, the general public, journalists, writers and film-makers, and researchers from many areas of study.

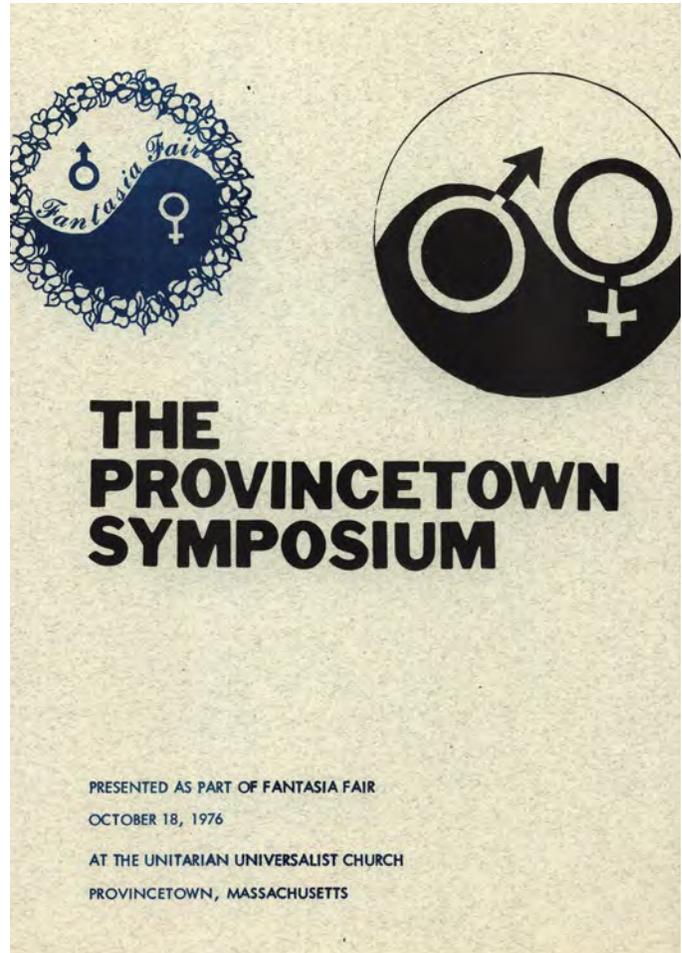
The Transgender Archives' mandate and acquisition activities, and promotion of the collection, is conducted in partnership with Dr. Aaron Devor, Chair in Transgender Studies, Founder and Academic Director of the Transgender Archives, professor of sociology, and UVic's former Dean of Graduate Studies. Dr. Devor's publications include *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*, *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society*, and *The Transgender Archives: Foundations for the Future*.

## Origins

The Transgender Archives began with a 2007 gift to UVic of the Rikki Swin Institute (RSI) research library and archives. Established in Chicago, Illinois, in 2001, the Institute had four objectives: the housing of a library and archives; conference co-sponsorship; digital video education; and research. RSI closed in December 2004. Rikki Swin offered this material to UVic via Aaron Devor. In addition to RSI's own organizational records and research materials, there was a reference library of mass-market publications, rare books, newsletters, and a sample collection of 20th century erotic periodicals, and the archival fonds of leading American trans activists and organizations, such as Virginia Prince, Ariadne Kane, the Fantasia Fair transgender conference, and the International Foundation for Gender Education.

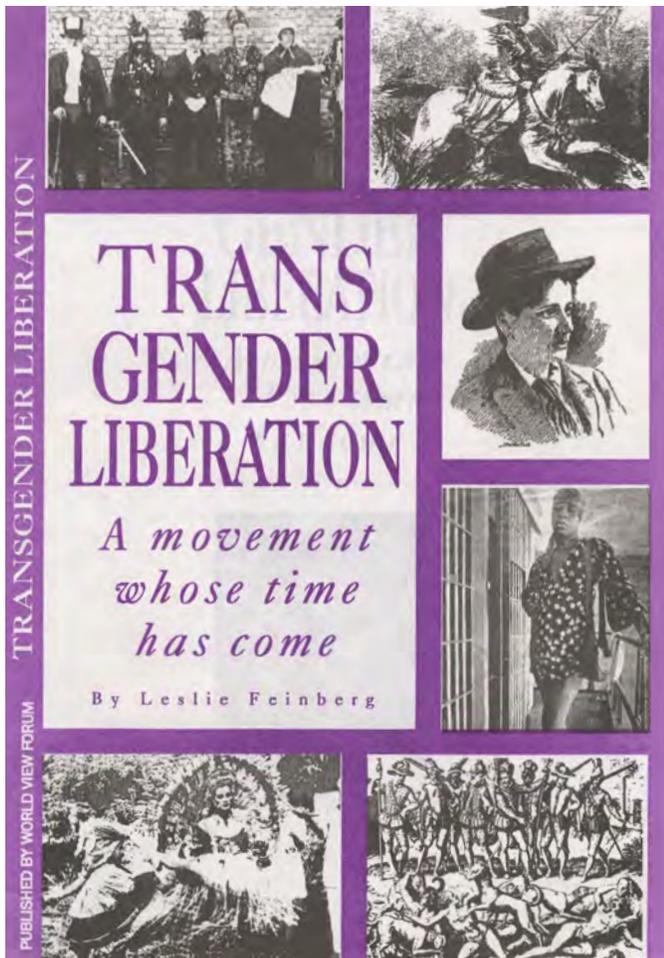
## Acquisitions

In addition to the RSI collection, UVic was offered more American material: Reed Erickson's personal and business papers, newsletters and pamphlets. Erikson was founder and president of the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF). EEF helped to support many aspects of work being done in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s in the field of transgenderism/transsexualism. The



**Top:** *Fantasia Fair Symposium programme, 1976, Rikki Swin Collection, Transgender Archives, UVic.*

**Below:** *Unidentified participant, Fantasia Fair, undated, Rikki Swin Collection, Transgender Archives, UVic.*



EEF funded many early research efforts, including the creation of the Harry Benjamin Foundation, and the early work of the Johns Hopkins Clinic.

The Transgender Archives received from Vancouver lawyer Barbara Findlay, Q.C., the Canadian court records from the Kimberly Nixon v. Vancouver Rape Relief human rights tribunal: Nixon was a trans woman whose offer of volunteer work as a rape counsellor was refused by Vancouver Rape Relief because she was trans. As well, author and activist Stephanie Castle donated the records and newsletters of the Vancouver-based Zenith Foundation, which made submissions in the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal regarding trans woman Synthia Kavanagh who sought the right to undergo sex reassignment surgery while incarcerated.

In late 2013, we received the University of Ulster UK TGA collection, donated by Professor Richard Ekins. Founded in January 1986, it was the first such collection in the world to be housed within a university setting. The collection is focused on understanding how attitudes and representations of transgender people have developed and changed over time. It includes a considerable amount of material relating to gender expression in popular culture and includes fiction and nonfiction books, magazines, newspaper clippings, scholarly papers, mass market and self-published audio and video recordings, photographs, and ephemera.

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**We continue to receive small donations on a regular basis, these include recent publications signed by their authors, small aggregations of research materials, magazines, fantasy fiction, community newsletters, vinyl records, organizational records, lapel pins, and photos.**

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**Top:** *Transgender liberation : a movement whose time has come / by Leslie Feinberg, Transgender Archives, UVic Special Collections call #HQ77.9 F45 1992.*

**Below:** *Transgendered with Attitude, button, undated. University of Ulster UK TGA Collection, Transgender Archives, UVic.*

Presently, the Transgender Archives holds more primary sources about transwomen than about transmen, and largely generated in Anglo-American middle class contexts – such is the nature of the documents, publications and ephemeral materials donated so far. Some potential donors are still using their materials every day, other material is only now being created by activists, advocates, and researchers.

## Challenges and Successes

While the very establishment of The Transgender Archives is a significant accomplishment, we need to be mindful of whether our on-going acquisition, access and preservation activities are meeting the needs of the communities that we serve. Unlike museums and public libraries, archives and rare book units are typically open during weekday business hours and are closed on weekends and evenings, limiting on-site use of materials; such limited hours are a barrier to all people who work those hours and a barrier to awareness about archives and special collections and their services. For many first time users of archival and rare print resources, specialized archival and rare book terminology may intimidate users, who may not be comfortable asking archives staff for explanation of terms.

Other challenges include managing expectations around access and use. Access to archives with sensitive personal information requires users to sign a research agreement identifying the files or items they wish to view. Research agreements typically collect names, contact information, purpose of visit and research project information, and are followed by discussions between researchers and archivists. This can be intimidating for a researcher who does not have a fully formed research plan or who has little experience using archives in a formal setting. Also, copyright or privacy concerns (or other specific restrictions) mean that we cannot digitize everything, and that still surprises many users who are used to accessing all their needed information online.

Major outreach initiatives for the Transgender Archives and the Chair in Transgender Studies have been our Moving Trans History Forward (MTHF) Conferences held in March 2014 and March 2016 at UVic, and book *The Transgender Archives: Foundations for the Future* by Dr. Aaron Devor, published by UVic Libraries.

Both conferences have served to raise awareness of our collections and the research taking place at UVic: MTHF14 focused on issues of acquisition, preservation, and access. MTHF16's theme was "Building Communities - Sharing Connections" and included presentations on a wide variety of topics. Over 175 people from around the world took in 4 days of programming; as well as keynotes from transgender thought leaders Martine Rothblatt and Jamison Green, broad session themes included gender identity in history and literature, current transgender activism initiatives, art performances and exhibits, poetry readings and a film screening.

*The Transgender Archives: Foundations for the Future* is now in its second edition. An overview of our collection, it situates our holdings within the history of trans activism and research. Both editions are available as a free download from the [UVic University Library](#).

The preceding was a brief, and hopefully informative, overview of our holdings. UVic welcomes collaboration and dialogue with trans and allied communities around access and outreach relating to the [Transgender Archives](#), as well as our many other collections.

**Lara Wilson is Director, Special Collections & University Archivist at the University of Victoria. Wilson holds masters degrees in art history and archival studies.**

