

# From Joan Nestle's Apartment to Mine: Lesbian Lineages and Legacies

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One of the origins of creating my lesbian collection was the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in New York City. I first visited the Park Slope building as an 18-year-old, and took one of the free print-outs they had available by the front door. The print out was a copy of “Radical Archiving: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective,” by Joan Nestle, who argued that lesbians must preserve their own history outside of the elitism of academic institutions. She presented a vision of archives as involved in political struggles and housed within a community. She asserted that archiving is “a first step to reclaiming a place in time” (Nestle 1979). I was moved by Nestle’s call for lesbians to radically archive their lives, and amazed by how much the LHA had grown from a collection housed in Nestle’s Upper West Side apartment into the world’s largest collection of material by and about lesbians. Maybe my collection of lesbian history in my own UWS apartment can become a large lending library or a community bookstore one day.

Lesbian archiving asserts a sense of home and rootedness for lesbians across time, while also protecting materials by providing them with a physical home. For me, collecting books that tell stories of lesbians past and present is a form of radical lesbian archiving. Some of the books I collect tell personal narratives by and for lesbians. Others include biographies of other lesbians. Others discuss LHA or other lesbian archives, and the importance of lesbian archival practice. All of them ground me in lesbian history and connect me to generations of lesbians past, present and future.

In creating the LHA, Nestle and her lovers and friends excavated materials that may have otherwise been lost and discarded. The LHA asserted that its existence, and the existence of others like it, “will enable us to analyze and reevaluate the lesbian experience; we also anticipate that the existence of these archives will encourage lesbians to record their experiences in order to formulate our living herstory” (Nestle 2022, 367-368). In this spirit, I keep my lesbian history books and autobiographical novels next to my own journals and notes and trinkets from my friends. I want to hold a physical reminder that lesbian existence cannot be erased from the historical record. I want to tell other lesbians that every personal note we keep or zine we make is part of formulating “our living herstory.”

My collection is deeply personal. It is a reminder of all my past and future efforts to explore and understand lesbian experiences. I see the person I was when I purchased each book reflected back to me through their pages. I remember the queer, feminist and sometimes explicitly lesbian bookstores I visited, many of them in my home city of New York but also from Chicago, Philadelphia, Paris, and more. Many of my books are secondhand, and some of them even have notes or annotations that provide physical marks of other lesbian readers before me. Each book explores how lesbians have reclaimed their place in time and have found home in their bodies and communities.

Building my own lesbian archive by collecting lesbian memoirs and histories is an act of revolutionary optimism and a way of learning from lesbians who came before me. I love seeing dykes in conversation with each other, through biographies exploring each other's lives or blurbs on each other's covers. I feel at home with these lesbians who (whether in person or on the page) argued with each other and gossiped about each other and loved each other fiercely.

## References:

Nestle, Joan. 2022. *A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings*. Sinister Wisdom.

Nestle, Joan. 1990. "The Will to Remember: The Lesbian Herstory Archives of New York." *Feminist Review* (4) : 86–94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1395308>.

OutHistory. 2011. "An Early Conversation about Gay and Lesbian Archives: From the Pages of *The Gay Insurgent 1979*, by Jim Monahan and Joan Nestle." Last modified March 15, 2022. <https://outhistory.org/exhibits/show/an-early-conversation-about-ga/voice-2-joan-nestle>

Thistlethwaite, Polly. 1990. "The Lesbian Herstory Archives." In *Gay and Lesbian Library Service*, edited by Ellen Greenblatt and Cal Goug. McFarland & Company, 1990.

## Annotated Bibliography:

**Anzaldua, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Fifth edition. Aunt Lute Books, 2022.**

I love this beautiful collection of essays and poems, which I have been assigned for multiple classes at Swarthmore. I got this copy from the Swarthmore bookstore, and it

was also available for checkout at the People's Library during the encampment in Spring 2024.

**Bulkin, Elly, Minnie Bruce Pratt and Barbara Smith. *Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism*. Firebrand Books, 1988.**

I bought this collection of essays at A House of Our Own Books in Philly. It is a dialogue between three lesbian feminist political organizers and writers: Minnie Bruce Pratt, a white Christian-raised Southerner femme poet from Alabama; Barbara Smith, a Black lesbian feminist from Cleveland who co-founded the Combahee River Collective; and Elly Bulkin, an Ashkenazi Jewish organizer from the Bronx who co-founded the Jewish feminist periodical *Bridges*.

**Bechdel, Alison. *Spent: A Comic Novel*. Mariner Books, 2025.**

This hilarious autofictional graphic novel explores Alison Bechdel running a goat sanctuary in Vermont and trying to read Marx's *Capital*. Purchased at Good Books in Cornwall, NY.

**Bouraoui, Nina. *All Men Want to Know*. Penguin Books, 2020.**

I bought this book from Shakespeare and Co., an iconic English-language bookstore in Paris founded by a lesbian, Sylvia Beach, which has been the site of decades of queer literary history. The book, translated from French by Aneesa Abbas Higgins, is autofiction about a French-Algerian lesbian coming of age in 1980s Paris.

**Bourcier, Sam. *Les Pouls de L'Archive, C'est en Nous Qu'il Bat*. Cambourakis, 2025.**

This book, whose title translates to *The Pulse of the Archive Beats Within Us*, explores the importance of engaging with queer archives and promoting public history based on archival material in an age of digital capitalism. Bourcier also fought to open the LGBTQ+ Archives in Paris. I bought this book in Paris at Violette and Co., a lesbian feminist bookstore-café in Paris.

**Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*. Vintage Books, 2023.**

I got this memoir, originally published in 1994, at a New York Public Library book sale. Bornstein who refers to herself as a nonbinary transfeminine diesel femme dyke. I love that there is a blurb on the first page by Leslie Feinberg, whose classic trans lesbian autofictional novel *Stone Butch Blues* was published a year earlier.

**Brown, Rita Mae. *Rubyfruit Jungle*. Corgi Books, 1978.**

I love this edition of Rita Mae Brown's classic autobiographical lesbian novel originally published in 1973. The mass-market paperback version was often published with just a subtle flower on the cover, but I love the addition of two lesbians embracing in the flower. I consider this book to be a part of my lesbian pulp fiction collection, which I write more about later on. While the book was originally published in 1973 by a small feminist publishing house called Daughter, Inc., this version is reminiscent of 1950s-60s pulp novels produced by major publishing houses (of which I have also collected at least a dozen). Unlike most lesbian pulp which was censored and forced to uphold conservative, homophobic narratives, *Rubyfruit Jungle* was one of the first lesbian coming-of-age novels that centered lesbian identity while exploring complex lesbian relationships and life experiences. Purchased from Alabaster Books, NYC.

**Cogswell, Kelly, Sarah Schulman and Ana Simo. *The Lesbian Avengers Handbook: A Handy Guide to Homemade Revolution*. Homocom, 2021.**

This book serves as its own archive of the Lesbian Avengers, established in 1992 in New York City with the goal of making the world safe for lesbians. Lesbian Avengers became an international organization with dozens of chapters. The Lesbian Avengers collaborated with ACT UP to found the first Dyke March which now takes place annually around the world. I love all the ephemera from Lesbian Avengers actions and events that are preserved in the book. Bought at Giovanni's Room, Philadelphia.

**Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Duke University Press, 2003.**

This classic of lesbian cultural criticism is a feminist, sex-positive intervention into trauma studies that discusses queer archiving as a recognition of trauma, as well as a form

of cultural heritage and political work. The book is in conversation with many other lesbians on my shelves. Cvetkovich's blurb is featured on my copy of *A Sturdy Yes of a People* (below). The book includes oral histories about ACT UP and analysis of work by lesbian writers such as Dorothy Allison, Leslie Feinberg, Amber Hollibaugh, Lilian Faderman and Cherríe Moraga. The book also discusses the creation of the LHA and other lesbian archives, and also analyzes "the archive of the archives," or movies and documentaries like *The Watermelon Woman* which feature lesbian archives and archivists. Bought used from Book Culture, NYC.

**Dugger, Mary. *The History of Lesbian Hair*. Doubleday, 1996.**

This satirical, lighthearted book is a reflection of lesbian culture and humor in the 1990s. Some drawings and commentaries read as if they are memes from today, while other jokes have aged more poorly. I found this in the used section of the Strand at Union Square, NYC.

**Feinberg, Leslie. *Stone Butch Blues*. 20th Anniversary Author Edition, 2014.**

This book is an award-winning classic of lesbian and transgender literature (and one of my personal favorites) for a reason. As Alison Bechdel has written, "Stone Butch Blues has probably touched your life even if you haven't read it yet." Many people on the internet say that a physical copy of *Stone Butch Blues* is hard to come by, but Feinberg made the book available for free on her website (<https://www.lesliefeinberg.net/>) with a link to a lower cost copy available on Lulu. Feinberg worked up to days before his death to make the twentieth anniversary edition of *Stone Butch Blues* available to free for all as part of his communist politics. I got my copy from Giovanni's Room, Philadelphia.

**Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: a History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America*. Penguin, 1991.**

This book is, as written on the back cover, considered "the definitive study of modern lesbian life." Faderman analyzes the evolution of lesbian subcultures and media and includes interviews with a wide range of lesbians.

**Fonseca, Sarah and Octavia S. Saenz, ed. *The New Lesbian Pulp*. Feminist Press, 2025.**

I have a collection of lesbian pulp fiction amassed from Ebay and used bookstores. My interest was first sparked by a published zine called *T is For*

*Trash* by Becca Sticker, which I saw in MacNally Jackson in New York City when I was shopping there on my eighteenth birthday. This book, while it is a contemporary collection of pulpy stories, is a tribute to an iconic genre of lesbian book which Trish Bindix describes in the foreword.

Bindix celebrates that past pulp novels endured despite the censorship of queer stories, although they were meant to serve as erotica for straight men. At the same time, however, some lesbian authors, often writing under pseudonyms, wrote pulp fiction novels for major publishers at a time when very few lesbian authors were published. There is a pulp fiction collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and Joan Nestle has referred to pulp fiction as “survival literature” in which she was able to find lesbian stories within mass-produced books considered trashy while coming of age in the 1950s. *The New Lesbian Pulp* combines classic stories by writers who were closeted lesbians during their lifetime such as Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Dunbar Nelson with contemporary stories by lesbian authors. Purchased at Pilsen Community Books, Chicago.

**Gumbs, Alexis Pauline. *Survival is a Promise: The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024.**

This edition was signed for my best friend at Harrietts Bookshop in Philadelphia and gifted to me, making this copy incredibly special to me. Gumbs’ biography of Audre Lorde completely transforms the biography genre and what it means to honor one’s legacy. Gumbs is a poet and Gumbs’ tribute to Audre Lorde is exactly that. In the legacy of archives, narrative, and memory, Gumbs intimately traces Audre Lorde’s life through her treasured artifacts and relationships, creating a beautiful and mystical tribute to Audre Lorde that reflects Lorde’s brilliance in every way.

**Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. W. W. Norton, 2019.**

This book was assigned for my Archives and Activism class, and I first read it in high school when my mother also gave me a copy. Hartman’s speculative narrative uses “critical fabulation” to tell stories from scraps of archival materials. locates humanity in an archive that only readily presents carcerality, finding her subjects within sociological data sets, reports and records of incarceration and articles written about them by outsiders. She imagines her way into well-known characters like W. E. B. Dubois and Ida Wells as well as the unnamed people who left little trace in the archive and were

relegated to scraps and shadows. Dubois engaged in discourse on Black pathology and patriarchy as he analyzed the “wayward,” and Hartman uses his journals and archival information to both observe alongside him and analyze Dubois’ own character.

Hartman challenges her reader to see archiving as a continuous process with multiple intersecting timelines. Hartman traces her own journey through the records and photographs she finds in the archives. Recognizing that removing the researcher from the narrative is an act of power, Hartman instead inserts herself into the narrative as she “follows” an illusive subject who she spots but sometimes fails to notice. Hartman expresses camaraderie with and love for the “nameless and forgotten” lesbians, gender-queer people, and Black working-class people whose counter histories she writes.

**Hernandez, Daisy and Bushra Rehman, ed. *Colonize This! On Today’s Feminism*. Seal Press, 2022.**

This anthology by young women of color discusses feminism and resistance to racism, patriarchy, homophobia, exploitation and oppression. The book also critiques mainstream white, academic feminism that can promote ideologies of imperialism. The anthology, while not exclusively by lesbians, includes several personal essays by lesbians. Bought used from Book Culture, NYC.

**Hollibaugh, Amber L. *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home*. Duke University Press, 2000.**

As written on the back cover, Amber Hollibaugh is a self-described “ex radical, ex-hooker, incest survivor, gypsy child, poor-white-trash, high femme dyke” whose essay collection is also a self-archive, containing photographs from her childhood, her butch friends and lovers, her femme comrades, alongside transcripts of interviews and conversations with other iconic lesbians. Hollibaugh’s essays are a testament to the connections between radical leftist politics and butch/femme lesbianism, as she writes about how her radicalization and communist organizing are inextricably linked to her femme lesbianism. In writing of her experiences as a high femme communist dyke, she emphasizes the explicit connection between class and butchfemme culture, a historical truth that has become abstracted by many lesbians today. As Hollibaugh writes of high femme gender and butchfemme desire, she resists the erasure of butchfemme lesbians and narratives of butchfemme “heteronormativity.” High femme lesbianism is not merely an aesthetic and treating it as such erases the political and trans lineage of high femme lesbians who created butchfemme culture. This book is special to me because my best friend, a high femme lesbian communist, has a deep connection to this book, and I see

them in so much of Hollibaugh's work and testimony. Bought second-hand from a Palestine mutual fundraiser for the Sameer Project at Brooklyn Poets, where I also bought *Sister Spit*.

**Lorde, Audre. *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. The Crossing Press, 1996.**

This book is another essential lesbian classic and is a "biomythography," a genre Lorde created that combines biography and myth, history and fiction. I have had multiple copies of *Zami* that I have borrowed from or given to friends. This copy I got secondhand from Binnacle Books in Beacon.

**Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals*. Penguin, 2020.**

This book, written mostly as journal entries when Lorde was undergoing breast cancer treatment, was life-changing and an instant favorite. Lorde explores disability, grief, illness and surviving as a Black lesbian mother under capitalism and heteropatriarchy. This book is not only essential to lesbian archiving, but to disability justice as a whole. When Lorde writes of the pressure to wear a prosthetic breast post-masectomy, in her sacred rage she dreams of an army of one-breasted women storming Congress, refusing to concede to ableist, patriarchal, racist desires to invisibilize disability. I got my physical copy of this book from the Campus Bookstore for a class, but I first read it from the Free Library of Philadelphia.

**Lovatt, Elizabeth. *Thank You For Calling the Lesbian Line*. Legacy Lit, 2025.**

This book centers around the London-based Lesbian Line which served as a hotline for lesbians in the 1990s. Lovatt explores living-history and combines historical narrative with memoir and cultural criticism. I got this Advanced Reader's Copy from the Lesbian Library Day event at Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library in NYC, where I participated in a book swap with other lesbians passionate about building safe spaces within libraries and celebrating lesbian literature.

**Machado, Carmen Maria. *In the Dream House*. Graywolf Press, 2019.**

This memoir, which explores an abusive relationship between two queer women, is haunting and beautifully written. Purchased from Café con Libros, NYC.

**McKinley, Catherine. *Afrekete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing*. Knopf Doubleday, 1995.**

This collection features Black lesbian writing by writers like Jacqueline Woodson, Barbara Smith, Sapphire and Audre Lorde (an excerpt of *Zami*, who introduced the figure of Afrekete). The book includes essays, memoir, poetry and short stories. Purchased it on Ebay.

**Moraga, Cherríe and Gloria Anzaldua, ed.. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. SUNY Press, 2021.**

I bought this from Bluestockings, which was my favorite queer bookstore in NYC before it closed. This book combines the writing of incredible Third World feminist thinkers, and was published in the 1980s by a lesbian-feminist collective called Persephone Press, but went out of print until 2015. In her introduction, Cherríe Moraga says the book is “best understood as a document of the living legacy of forebearers bound not by blood but by the bridge *of* intracultural women of color consciousness.” Moraga wrote that, “My hope is that you might see yourselves and the promise of your own radicalization reflected in their principles, poetry, and passion for change.” The essays I have read in this book have impacted me greatly and combine writing from some of my all-time favorite authors.

**Nestle, Joan. *A Sturdy Yes of a People: Selected Writings*. Sinister Wisdom, 2022.**

Joan Nestle has shaped my understanding of archiving and lesbian history. The collection combines essays published between the 1970s and 2000s and is divided into the sections Liberation, History, Sex, Education and Archives. Purchased at Bluestockings, NYC.

**Possanza, Amelia. *Lesbian Love Story: A Memoir in Archives*. Catapult, 2023.**

I was a little jealous (but mostly thrilled) when I heard about this book because it seemed like a book idea that had come out of my own mind. I had two separate people give me a copy of this book for my 19th birthday. Amelia Possanza is a Swarthmore alum and she came to visit Swarthmore in 2023, when she signed my copy.

**Souhami, Diana. *No Modernism Without Lesbians*. Head of Zeus, 2020.**

This book explores the world of lesbian and queer icons of modernist literature who lived in Paris in the 1940s, including Sylvia Beach and Gertrude Stein. The book explores these Parisian lesbians' role in shaping the modernist movement. Bought used from Book Culture, NYC.

**Tea, Michelle, ed. *Sister Spit: Writings, Rants & Reminiscence from the Road. City Lights*, 2012.**

I had just finished reading *Valencia* when I found this collection of writing and art from the underground institution Sister Spit founded in 1997. Purchased at a mutual aid fundraiser selling books secondhand for the Sameer Project which took place at Brooklyn Poets.

**Tea, Michelle, ed. *Valencia*. Seal Press, 2025.**

This novel has shaped autofictional lesbian novels since its publication in 2000, and is one of my favorite books of all time. In this twenty-fifth anniversary edition, Maggie Nelson wrote in the introduction that the book serves as a record of “the San Francisco dyke scene of the nineties” and is “a shimmering, ever-alive thing” that encapsulates a moment in history and continues to live on with lesbians today.

## **Wish List**

**Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Mariner Books, 2007.**

I love this book, and going to see the musical on Broadway in 2016 was a moment of lesbian awakening for me.

**H., Lamya.. *Hijab Butch Blues*. Dial Press, 2024.**

I loved reading this coming-of-age memoir about a hijabi Muslim immigrant grappling with her lesbian identity. H combines her own personal history with interpretations of stories from the Quran.

**Jones, Alethia, Virginia Eubanks, ed., with Barbara Smith. *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around: Forty Years of Movement Building with Barbara Smith*. State University of New York Press, 2014.**

This book includes historical documents and oral histories by activists who organized with Barbara Smith.

**McKinney, Cait. *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*. Duke University Press, 2020.**

I am fascinated with information management theory and understanding how women utilized digital archives and communication networks. This book covers media technologies from newsletters to hotlines to archival digitization. I am especially interested in the essay “Feminist Digitization Practices at the Lesbian Herstory Archives.”

**Taylor, Yeeanga-Yamahtta. *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Haymarket Books, 2017.**

This book includes essays and interviews with members of the Combahee River Collective and explores the organization’s legacy within Black feminism. I got my copy from the library.