Travel Report:
Research Trip to the United States: Summer in New York and California, 2017

With the generous support of a Santander Travel Fund Award, I spent two months of the summer between the first and second year of my DPhil in New York and California carrying out primary research for my dissertation. I was able to visit a number of libraries and archives in New York and California, as well as meet and interview people involved in my project. The funding I received from the Santander travel fund was therefore vital to the progression of my doctoral project, and I am hugely grateful to the donors for the opportunity.

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, diverse groups of women and men began forming arts and activist organisations to address contemporary issues pertaining to gay and lesbian, feminist, and civil rights, and to the developing AIDS crisis. By charting activist interventions into the AIDS epidemic in New York and San Francisco, my research explores how activists and artists from a wide variety of racial backgrounds and sexual identities built coalitions and devised strategies of resistance and resilience that reflected a continued culture of grassroots activism.

My research strives to foreground the far-reaching impact of the AIDS crisis in the United States, not only through its losses, but through the activist response it galvanised. I hope to construct new narratives that places the HIV and AIDS epidemic at the centre of our understanding of the political culture of the 1980s and 1990s, and which situates the epidemic within the context of broader movements for social justice in the twentieth century United States. I argue that the study of AIDS activism therefore not only sheds light on the deep currents of activism forged in communities often living at the intersection of related systems of oppression and discrimination, but also expands our understanding of larger histories of race relations and sexuality, and mobilizations for social justice.

During the first month in New York, I spent much time researching at the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library, located in mid-town Manhattan. Here, I explored the work of feminist organisations founded in the 1990s to agitate for social change whilst addressing contemporary issues pertaining to women, such as healthcare services, childcare, and reproductive rights, as well as the developing AIDS crisis. I also consulted the records of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), the first AIDS service organisation established in 1982 to educate the public about HIV/AIDS and to provide care for people with AIDS; Fierce Pussy, the lesbian public art collective formed in 1991 to promote lesbian visibility and lesbian and gay rights; the Women’s Action Coalition (WAC), a feminist direct-action organisation founded in 1992 to fight discrimination against women; and the AIDS Activist Videotape Collection, a series of films documenting the story of AIDS as told from the viewpoint of people living with the virus.

At the Tamiment Library at New York University, I observed how the papers of the feminist activist organisation, Women’s Health Action Mobilization (WHAM!), founded in 1989 to support women’s health and access to abortion whilst also addressing the ramifications of the
AIDS crisis, further highlighted the centrality of AIDS to the concerns of this ‘new generation’ of feminists in 1990s New York.

New York is also home to a number of brilliant independent archives dedicated to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans history, run by volunteers who ensure that the lives of groups and individuals often neglected by the more conventional forms of record keeping and documentation are preserved.

At the Lesbian Herstory Archive in Brooklyn, an archive founded in 1974 by members of the Gay Academic Union, I continued exploring the ways in which lesbians challenged their marginalised position in the political and medical responses to AIDS during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1991, Gran Fury, the New York AIDS artist collective created posters that intervened in public and advertising spaces that read, ‘Women Don’t Get AIDS, They Just Die From It,’ objecting that many women with AIDS were being diagnosed later in the course of the illness and dying faster than men. Women began forming organisations such as the GMHC Lesbian AIDS Project, the Women’s AIDS Network, and the ACT UP Women’s Caucus, providing more comprehensive sex education and support for at risk women and lesbians, and petitioning the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to recognise and name women-specific immunodeficiency symptoms, such as cervical cancer, as AIDS.

Situated a short walk from the historic Stonewall Inn and the New York City AIDS Memorial in Greenwich Village, the LGBT Community Center has since 1983 provided a resource hub

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for members of New York's LGBT community, and, like the Lesbian Herstory archive, also houses an extensive library and archive celebrating the history of America's gay past. Continuing my research into women’s diverse involvement in AIDS activism, I became fascinated by the papers of California-based activist Judy Greenspan, who founded the HIV/AIDS in Prison Project of Catholic Charities of the East Bay, an advocacy group working on behalf of women prisoners with HIV and AIDS. Unlike the more visible direct action tactics of other 1990s feminist collectives, uncovering the organising of women in prison presents greater methodological challenges for historians. Using material from the collection, such as prison newsletters, literature on HIV/AIDS, correspondence, legal documents, and medical records, I hope to give voice to a population who due to incarceration and death history has often rendered voiceless, and demonstrate the ways in which the history of the AIDS epidemic sheds light on the rise of the carceral state over the past three decades in the United States.

In addition to visiting archives in the city, I also had the opportunity to meet and tape an interview with sisters Elvira and Hortensia Colorado, Chichimec Otomi performers and storytellers based in New York. In 1987, the Colorado sisters founded the Coatlicue Theatre Company, a performance group designed to ‘address issues of identity, racism, appropriation, historical trauma, migration, and violence against women.’ Using performance to confront the historic oppression of Native people, the Colorado sister’s theatre work also spoke to the survival of Native Americans, and Native women in particular, faced with the poverty, racism, substance abuse, and HIV and AIDS, often threatening urban Native communities. For performance groups such as the Coatlicue Theatre Company, who for three decades have toured reservations, health care facilities, universities, and community centres raising awareness about HIV/AIDS in different communities, interviews are a crucial way of documenting the work of artists whose unconventional use of space often transcends the formal archive.

As my time in New York came to an end, I looked forward to visiting my next research destination: San Francisco, a centre of liberal activism in the United States, who’s grassroots history, like New York's, is reflected in its archives and libraries. For example, the James C. Hormel LGBTQIA Center at the San Francisco Public Library and the GLBT Historical Society Archives house extensive collections documenting San Francisco’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and allies’ history and culture. I continued researching the ways in which women and men from non-white communities responded to an epidemic as it devastated their city. I consulted the papers of Randy Burns and Barbara Cameron, Native American gay and lesbian political activists and co-founders of the organisation Gay American Indians (GAI). Like the Colorado sisters, Burns and Cameron’s leading involvement in HIV education and advocacy in Native communities tells a more complex story about the racial and gender diversity of those infected and affected by HIV/AIDS than the largely white androcentric focus of existing AIDS histories.

My second month in the US was also spent visiting universities around California, including

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the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, Stanford University, and the ONE National Archives at the University of Southern California (USC).

In New York, I had consulted the collections of author Joseph Beam and poet Essex Hemphill at the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. Their writings, correspondence, and art foregrounded the under-represented experiences of black gay life in the United States. In conjunction with my research at the Schomburg Center, in California I explored further the creative endeavours of artists who, like Beam and Hill, similarly used poetry, film, and performance to depict the specificities of their identity whilst grappling with their HIV-positive status.

Documentary director Marlon T. Riggs, whose papers are located at the Special Collections & University Archives at Stanford University, produced pioneering films exploring the life experiences of gay black men. His groundbreaking 1989 film, Tongues United, which featured Hemphill and Beam, sought to counter the nation’s silence on matters of sexual and racial difference, whilst also recording his experience coping with the deaths of many of his friends to AIDS. Gay black artists such as Beam, Hill, and Riggs frequently attested to the struggle to find ‘home’ within the predominantly white gay culture of places like San Francisco, as well as the predominantly heterosexual culture of black communities. In 1992, for example, artist Wayne T. Corbitt, a Bay Area performance artist whose papers are located at the GLBT Historical Society and Bancroft Library, Berkeley, reflected, ‘I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply.’ By the close of the 1990s, Beam, Hemphill, Riggs, and Corbitt had each lost their life to AIDS-related illnesses, highlighting the extent to which the epidemic had devastated a generation coming of age at the close of the twentieth century.

On reflecting on the materials I consulted and the people I met in New York and California, I was struck not only by the exceptional levels of human loss caused by the epidemic, but also the resilience of those who dedicated their lives to helping the people dying and the communities fighting HIV and AIDS. At the end of my trip, I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing Jack Porter, one of the founding members of the National AIDS Memorial Grove located in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park. When Jack lost his partner, Stephen, to AIDS, he, along with a small group of other local residents, set out to create a collective space to express their grief. In 1989, the group conceived of a natural setting where people could come to remember lives lost to AIDS, and in 1996, Congress and the President of the United States, Bill Clinton, approved the National AIDS Memorial Grove Act, designating the Grove as the nation’s first AIDS memorial. For over thirty years, thousands of volunteers have donated time and energy to restore the Grove as a natural site of mourning and reflection.

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The AIDS Memorial Grove highlights the importance of remembrance as an act of healing, and I believe that historians have a role in ensuring that the history of AIDS is not forgotten by future generations. My project therefore seeks to historicize the 1980s as the beginning of an ongoing epidemic, and, in continuing my research into the twenty-first century, explore the experiential shift from dying to living with HIV.

My research trip to the United States enabled me to explore first-hand the rich historical record of the social movement activism that developed alongside the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and into the twenty-first century. I am now able to develop my research project in ways not possible before my visit, as I can use the primary material to create an outline of my dissertation in order to begin writing, as well as plan for future research trips, such as visiting the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in California, and the Schlesinger Library on the Research of Women in America located at Harvard University. I am extremely grateful to the wonderful archivists who helped facilitate my research, and of course to the donors who helped make the trip possible.
Archives visited:

- Archives & Special Collections. University of California, San Francisco.
- Bancroft Library Special Collections. University of California, Berkeley.
- Book Arts & Special Collections and the San Francisco History Center. San Francisco Public Library.
- GLBT Historical Society Archives. San Francisco.
- LGBT Community Center National History Archive. New York.
- Manuscripts and Archives Division. The New York Public Library.
- ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. University of Southern California.
- Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The New York Public Library.
- Special Collections & University Archives. Stanford University.


Donald Moffett, ‘He Kills Me,’ 1987 Voice = Survival, The 8th Floor Gallery, Manhattan.

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