

Reviews in Digital Humanities • Vol. 4, No. 3

Review: Outliers and Outlaws

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Published on: Mar 27, 2023

URL: <https://reviewsindh.pubpub.org/pub/outliers-outlaws>

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Project

Outliers and Outlaws: Eugene Lesbian History

Project Team

[Judith Raiskin](#), University of Oregon

[Courtney Hermann](#), Portland State University and Boxcar Assembly Productions

[Kerribeth Elliott](#), Boxcar Assembly Productions

A full list of team members is available on the [site](#).

Project URL

<https://outliersoutlaws.uoregon.edu/>

Project Reviewer

[Cameron Blevins](#), University of Colorado Denver

Project Overview**Judith Raiskin**

Outliers and Outlaws is a public digital humanities project that curates the [Eugene Lesbian Oral History Project](#), an archive of 82 video interviews with some of the hundreds of lesbians who came to Eugene, Oregon in the 1960s-90s and built a vibrant community that influenced local, state, and national LGBTQ politics. Judith Raiskin and Linda Long (University of Oregon Curator of Manuscripts) filmed these interviews in the summers of 2018 and 2019 and created a controlled vocabulary of search terms for the digitized interviews and transcripts.

Outliers and Outlaws provides several levels of engagement and ways into the rich content. The website provides an overview of the archives housed in the University of Oregon Special Collections and offers tutorials for using the complete videos and transcripts hosted on Oregon Digital. Students and scholars can easily engage with these primary documents to do original research.

The center of Outliers and Outlaws is a digital exhibit of 23 edited composite videos housed in 11 different “rooms” that explore topics ranging from personal stories of coming out to cultural and business collectives to state and national LGBTQ political activism. Each “room” provides historical context written for a public audience, digital galleries of photographs and documents donated by the narrators, and educational links and resources. As the artist [Tee Corinne](#) laments, “The lack of a publicly accessible history is a devastating form of oppression; lesbians face it constantly.” This project fills in an educational curricular gap and is especially powerful for intergenerational discussions about the meanings of LGBTQ history and identity. The narrators of

the Eugene Lesbian Oral History Project serve as “queer elders” for LGBTQ youth and all those who otherwise have little access to the experiences of this community that refused to be marginalized.

We began by establishing 11 subject areas to provide a focus for each “room” of the exhibit, compiling a list of keywords associated with each, and performing keyword searches in the Eugene Lesbian Oral History archive to pinpoint portions of interviews by topic to craft 23 vox pop-style short videos that put narrators in conversation with one another. The Oregon Digital platform, where the archive is housed, is a project of the Samvera community whose mission is to provide free open source software to promote the accessibility of digital collections.

To enhance user-friendliness we chose to use the Divi plugin in the WordPress content management system to build a responsive site from templates offering effective visual hierarchy and versatility. With Adobe Photoshop, we featured compelling “Then and Now” photos and galleries of historical photos to highlight the lives of the narrators and the vibrant culture they built. We edited the videos in Adobe Premiere Pro and hosted them on Panopto to then embed in the website. In addition, we include an ESRI StoryMap to provide a top-level introduction to “lesbian Eugene” and emphasize the hidden history of contemporary buildings and landmarks, adding another way to bring this history to life. The website also provides viewers with information about the in-progress documentary that focuses on the current lives and work of seven narrators.

Project Review

Cameron Blevins

For many years, queer historical scholarship tended to prioritize the experiences of gay men, often in large metropolitan areas like New York or San Francisco. More recently, activists and scholars alike have expanded this historical coverage to encompass a much wider range of voices and stories. The public history project Outliers and Outlaws contributes directly to this effort. Housed at the University of Oregon in Eugene, the project draws from 82 videotaped oral history interviews with people who lived, worked, and built a thriving “lesbian mecca” in Eugene between the late 1960s and 1990s. It led by Judith Raiskin, Associate Professor of Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, along with Courtney Hermann and Kerribeth Elliott, documentary filmmakers for Boxcar Assembly Productions.

Outliers and Outlaws presents rich historical material across a range of formats. The project’s landing page includes a useful welcome message and [“About”](#) page along with links to several types of content: a curated digital exhibit, a full archival collection of video interviews, and a forthcoming documentary. Clicking on the digital exhibit leads to eleven “rooms,” or sub-collection of videos, images, and text organized around a specific topic (such as “Art & Culture” or “Parenting”).

Each of these “rooms” includes one or more short videos, typically 4-12 minutes in length, made up of seamlessly edited clips of the participants speaking about that particular topic. The thematic organization gives users a variety of access points into this crucial history. Meanwhile, for those who wish to access the full interviews, the project team has created an easily searchable collection of videos and transcripts housed at the University of Oregon libraries. These interviews capture a wide breadth of lived experience, although as the project team notes on the landing page, also reflects the limited racial diversity of Eugene and its lesbian community.

The project is an exemplar of effective oral history done with thoughtful attention to community participation and engagement. It involved a huge amount of labor: finding and scheduling 82 participants, recording hundreds of hours of interviews, transcribing them, and then collecting and curating this material into an accessible digital platform. The videos are of top-notch visual and audio quality and showcase the skill of the interviewers in putting participants at ease, opening up space for them to share their stories. One such memory comes from Sally Sheklow, an improv performer who produced the parody musical *The Sound of Lesbians*: “It was pretty fun and I got to take out my safe sex kit and have Maria teach the Von Trampp family all about safe sex.” These sorts of rich details power the project.

My only wish is that these sorts of stories were a little bit easier to locate on the website. The project’s multi-faceted contributions are sometimes scattered across different pages or buried deep within the website. For instance, it took significant scrolling before I stumbled upon an impressive [ESRI StoryMap](#) that maps important sites in Eugene for its lesbian community, including bookstores, restaurants, a natural grocery co-op, and the local softball field.

As Raiskin explains, the inspiration for this project came when she attended a 2016 memorial service for a woman who was central to Eugene’s lesbian community, driving home the urgency to record this aging cohort’s history before it was lost. With that laudable goal in mind, *Outliers and Outlaws* is an unequivocal success and makes an important contribution to the wider field of queer digital history.