

# ARXIU DESENCAIXAT

a situated experiment in unstraightening the archive

**Lucía Egaña Rojas**

Independent Studies Program (Macba) / [lucysombra@gmail.com](mailto:lucysombra@gmail.com)

**Benzo**

independent / [47951845l@gmail.com](mailto:47951845l@gmail.com)

**Julieta Obiols**

Faculty of Psychology, University of Buenos Aires / [julieta.obiols@gmail.com](mailto:julieta.obiols@gmail.com)

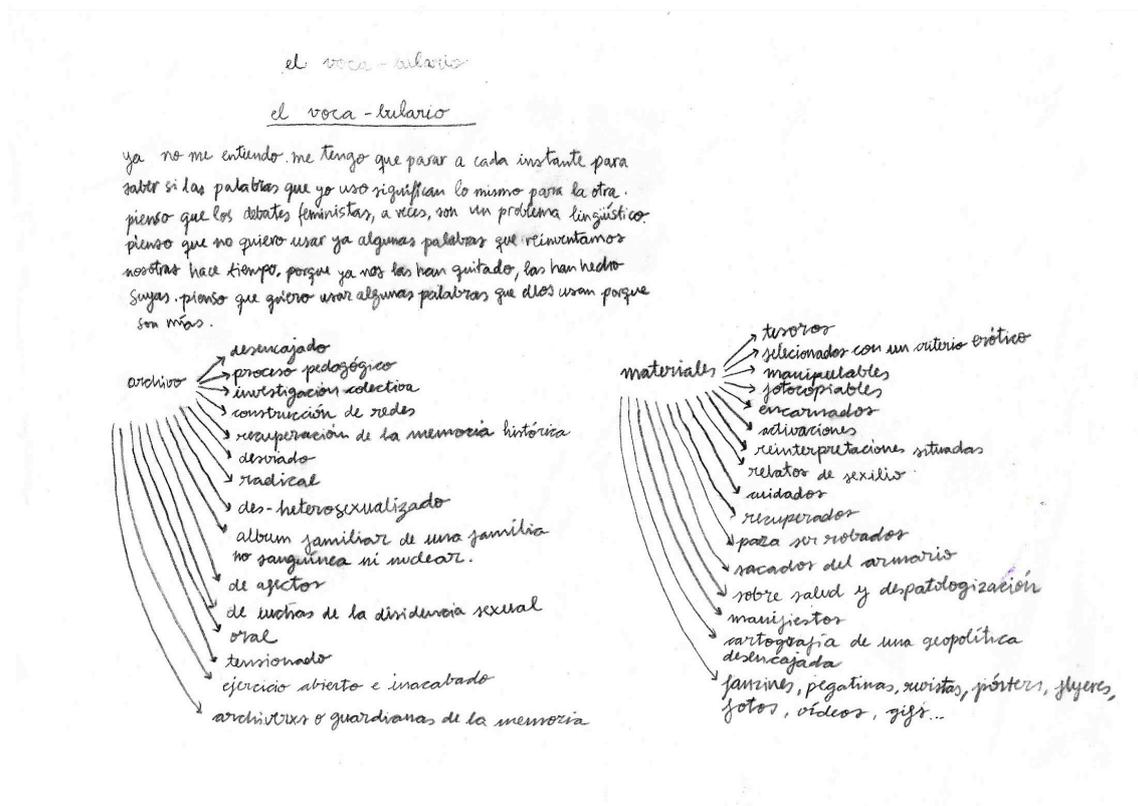
**Javiera Pizarro**

University of Chile / [javierapizarroconte@gmail.com](mailto:javierapizarroconte@gmail.com)

**Diego Posada**

University of Barcelona / [diegopg6@gmail.com](mailto:diegopg6@gmail.com)

Translated by Nicholas Callaway



voca-bulary

Picture inspired by Gretel Ammann's "vocabulary", in Gretel Ammann, *Escritos/Gretel Ammann* (Barcelona: Xarxa Feminista de Catalunya, 2000). Available in: <http://www.caladona.org/grups/?p=617>

## Introduction

Are institutional archives constructed from a heterosexual perspective? Is it possible to unstraighten the archive? What materials does the heteronormative gaze include and exclude? What happens to archives that are housed in organizations, in private homes, in boxes belonging to key figures in struggles of sexual dissidence?

*Arxiu desencaixat*<sup>1</sup> (Dislocated Archive) was an exhibit running from February 15 to July 13, 2018 on the lower floor of the MACBA Study Center<sup>2</sup>. But it was also an educational process, a collective research project, an excuse to build networks, a place to recover historical memory, and a space for creative experimentation. Taken in the strict sense, the project's multifaceted nature ventured far beyond the "archive" as such. At the same time, part of the aim was just this: to radically appropriate the meaning of the term itself, to blow it up from the inside, in order to destroy and dismantle our traditional understanding of "the archive." It was a flagrant insult hurled at the ways the term is normally defined<sup>3</sup>.

*Arxiu desencaixat* set out to investigate and shed light on a selection of materials that tell the story of sexual dissidence in Barcelona from the second half of the 1970s<sup>4</sup> up to the present. That these materials have come down to us at all is essentially thanks to the personal initiative of the key figures in these struggles who have safeguarded them over the years. Gaining access to them allowed us to discover, explore and reconstruct a plurality of biographies and histories that, both individually and collectively, suggest connections which run counter to official narratives based on a single cohesive movement.

Where to begin? Project coordinator Lucía Egaña invited us, the students in MACBA's Independent Study Program (PEI), to generate an archive—or space for remembering—of the city's sexual dissidence struggles. Of the thirteen students who accepted the invitation<sup>5</sup>, most of us hail from Latin America, which helped foster a unique, decentralized perspective. Our eagerness to participate can also be interpreted as stemming from the need to connect with the city through a specific thread of its historical fabric, namely that of sexual dissidence. As the project did not have any definitive or preconceived objectives, we started out by reading our fortune using a queer-feminist tarot deck created by Invasorix<sup>6</sup>, a gift from one of our godmothers, Kathleen Hanna. Its feminist, zine-style aura accompanied us throughout the entire process, to the extent that the tarot card became our first archival document and even found its way onto the exhibition poster.

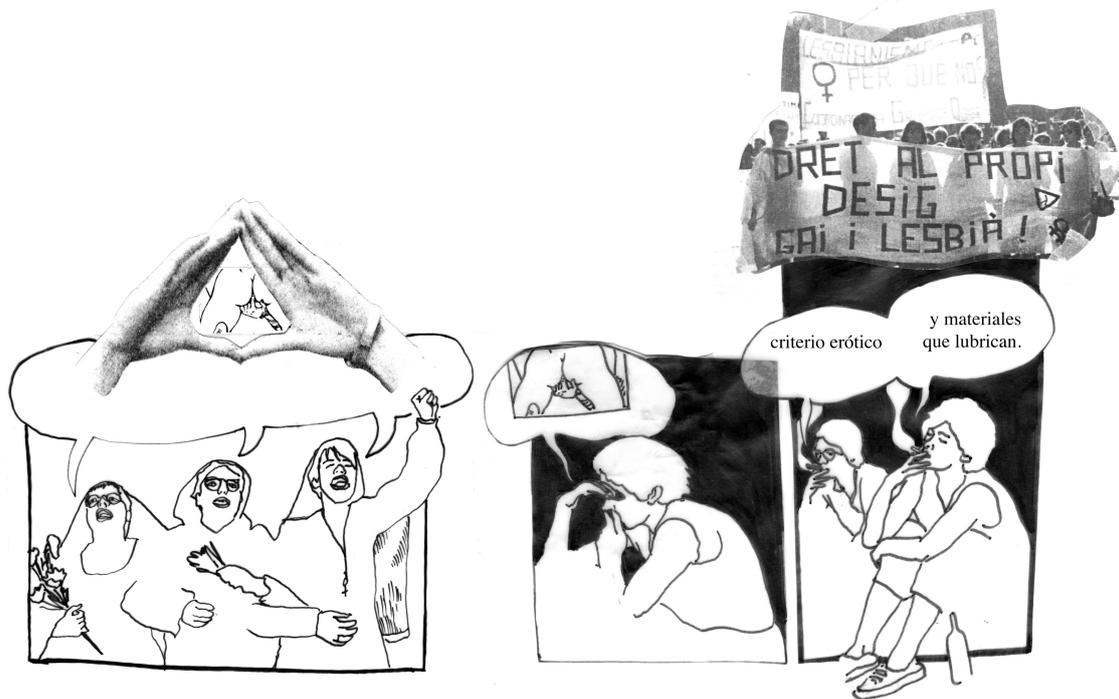
Both the *arxiu desencaixat* and this paper are the result of collective work that has been contaminated by the views, emotions and desires of the

participants. Motivated by a specific strand of activism, politics and aesthetics, the process was open to proposals and new ideas, and was full of curiosity, oversights and mistakes. The project's name arose over drinks at a bar near the MACBA, after we first decided to rule out the term "queer", both because it is so tied to the English-speaking world, and because it did not make sense for the time and place covered in the exhibit; in 1970s Barcelona the term *queer* did not have the same currency it enjoys today.

### On the "nature" of queer materials

The materials that make up these archives were not made with a mind to the museum-oriented posterity typically envisaged by artists. Many are undated and were created more to be used than to be put on display. They were produced as weapons with the power to transform a present that was exclusively, forcibly straight. These materials are tools in the struggle for a "dislocated" future, opening up the possibility of shattering the monolithic "straight time" of the present (Muñoz 2009) and the straight spatial geometries and orientations imposed by heterosexuality (Ahmed 2006). Although these documents bear witness to the struggles of sexual dissidence, they are not included in the archive for the sole purpose of perpetuating a historical narrative, but rather to preserve the transgressive potential of the micropolitical<sup>7</sup>.

These archives hold the memory of dissident ways of living, feeling and relating that have been permeated by struggle, and therefore are part of what Cvetkovich has called an "archive of feelings" that is "both material and immaterial, at once incorporating objects that might not ordinarily be considered archival, and at the same time, resisting documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or ephemeral to leave records" (Cvetkovich 2003).



*Erotic criterion and materials that lubricate*  
 Picture made from original photos from Ca La Dona's archive  
 and a picture from Tribades journal n.1, june 1988.

As observed by Cvetkovich, queer communities have an “emotional need for history,” hence the urgency of creating archives that question what is worthy of being documented and how to narrate history. For these and other reasons, archives of sexual dissidence are unusual and difficult to organize into a narrative with the sort of coherence found in other types of document collections.

Classifying the materials using labels and categories is one point of conflict that emerges when encountering a dislocated archive. Can that which has been dislocated be categorized? Should it be done? What happens when, to avoid labels, we become invisible again? What happens when labels constrain us or force us to relive the stigma attached to crime or illness? Can categories be reappropriated, along the lines of originally derogatory terms like “queer?” As we went about building the *arxiu desencaixat*, these tensions grew increasingly clear the more we engaged with the rationales and necessities of classification used in institutional archives (Rawson 2017).



*We are neither three nor four*

Picture made from a poster of the Grup de lesbianes feministes de Barcelona, original copy in Ca La Dona's archive.

The first space we visited in order to construct the exhibit was the MACBA. As with other institutional archives, it posed the contradiction of, on the one hand, the need to establish categories in order to make the materials retrievable, and, on the other, the difficulty of doing so in the case of materials related to sexual dissidence. Without categories many of these materials cannot be consulted because they are not visible in the catalog. The ability to locate them requires categories that, in turn, entail the risk of reinforcing the labels already imposed upon dissident identities.

The classification systems of dissident archives respond to diverse rationales and necessities related to the lived experiences recorded in the documents. For sociologist and feminist activist María Lugones, "one experiences her life in terms of the impoverished and degrading concepts others have found it convenient to use to describe her. We can't separate lives from the accounts given of them; the articulation of our experience is part of our experience" (Lugones and Spelman 1983, 573-574). These archives bring together and organize lives of dissent as a form of resistance to the ways in which others have tried to name such experiences.

## A dislocated research methodology and the tactile nature of the materials

The Catalan verb *desencaixar*, which we have rendered in English as “dislocate,” is related to *caixa*, or “box.” Thus, *desencaixar* is also to take out of the box, the warehouse, the closet. The participle *desencaixat* therefore refers to that which refuses to be classified, that which falls outside the norms of society, breaking out of recognizable frameworks. In terms of disciplines, this sort of “dislocation” raises the prospect of a blurry zone between areas of specialization. In the case of the *arxiu desencaixat*, we adopted a hybrid approach at the intersection of archival work, curatorship, artistic production, gender studies, sociology and detective work.



*Don't let them leash your desire*

Picture made from a sticker of Joves per l'Alliberament Gai (JAG), original copy in Armand de Fluvià documentary centre, Casal Lambda.

In methodological terms, “the dislocated” therefore represents a practice that eludes exclusive adhesion to one discipline and that defines its reflections based on actions, and not the other way around, as is often the case in more traditional research methodologies. This collective form of research involves visiting the existing archives in person, reading through

the finds together as a group, and coming up with personal criteria for how to navigate them that account for the unexpected.

In this sense we could say that the selection of the materials was guided by erotic criteria. Visual attraction, surprise, curiosity and resonance with one's personal history were all decisive criteria in selecting and accumulating materials for the *arxiu desencaixat*. The exhibit thus took shape as a chorus of desires, as the enthusiasm at rediscovering objects that others had safeguarded for years in order to preserve their own memory.

It was impossible to reduce this way of selecting the materials to the paradigm of the keyword search. Erotic criteria of selection demand immersion in the materials at one's disposal, poring over them. This often involves searching without knowing what one might find along the way. It is a selection process that requires direct contact with the materials and the ability to let oneself be guided along by attraction and desire. However, the relationship that arises between the researchers and the document is not a closed one, but one that is permeated by the desires, bodies, words and memories of the archives' caretakers. Our motivation in consulting and seeking out the materials was our own erotic criteria, in dialogue with and under the seductive influence of the archives' guardians (e.g. the people at Ca La Dona, the Centro de Documentación Armand de Fluviá, or Álex Brahim), in a sense the living catalogues, guides and connoisseurs of a corpus we were only beginning to explore.



*Tactile selection of materials*

Picture made from photos of Ca La Dona's archive and from República rarita (Diego Posada)

The *arxiu desencaixat* project, as a collective research process, revealed itself to be a transformational event both for the researchers, as we gained a new understanding of history, the city and memory, as well as for the materials themselves, which were reprinted, recreated and grouped together with other documents that forced them to be reinterpreted from a different standpoint. Following this experience, we believe that, more than the fact of coming face to face with an original historical artifact, the most important aspect of gaining access to these materials was discovering the ways of relating to them with the body. Because of this, at the practical level, we digitized all of the materials that were going to be included in the exhibit at high resolution, in order to then print copies that were similar to the originals, or that were modified in ways that would go unnoticed by most of the people who used the *arxiu desencaixat*. The materials could be touched, handled and moved around. In a way, this recreated our own experience of searching through the various archives throughout the city. At the same time, it offered visitors a taste of the eroticism of encountering these gems, allowing them to develop "body to body" relationships with the documents and push their own desire to the limit, even opening up the possibility of theft.

### Re-making the archive: activations as an unrehearsed exercise

The *arxiu desencaixat* occupied and inhabited the exhibition space through a diverse assortment of materials and a wide range of on-site activities<sup>8</sup>. Practically all of us who participated in the research process also took part in these activations, which reflected the non-static nature of the materials, and suggested ways of embodying them via a situated reinterpretation. We carried out thirteen activations in total, including talks, workshops, performances, on-site interventions and presentations of proposed readings. These activations sometimes gave rise to positions or topics that were not always contained in the original archives, a sign that they had found their way into the time and place of the present.



*Lesbians as it should be.*

Picture made in the workshop "Imagine your dyke, draw your faggot. How can we represent something dissident?" (09/04/2018) from a vignette of the Xoxo Sisters, photo novel published in Tribades jornal n.5, June 1990.

The activations included two workshops. One took place at the beginning of the show's run, titled, *Imagine your dyke, draw your faggot. How can we represent something dissident?*, which invited participants to rethink our collective imagination through the materials on display. The second workshop, held in the show's final days, was aimed at collectively putting together a fanzine, as a final report on the project that reflected its own

production process. Four performances were held. The show's opening event featured the performance *'Pink Guide' Information Service*, in which thirteen performers reproduced an experimental consultation service from the height of the AIDS crisis promoted by the Coordinadora Gai-Lesbiana during the 1990s. Another was the *Performative reading of oppressive laws*, in particular excerpts from the Law on Social Dangers and Rehabilitation, finally repealed in 1995. During the *Day and Night of the Museums* we organized a performative guided tour of the exhibit, a somatic experience in which visitors were invited to approach the materials on display with their bodies. That same night images from the archival materials were projected onto the outer walls of the MACBA. This was the only action done outside the confines of the Study Center, with the intent of breaking through the boundaries of the exhibit and its physical spaces.



*Bibliography: Abnormal and Sexing the body*

Pictures made from the covers of the books of Michel Foucault, *Los anormales* (Ediciones Akal, 2001) and Anne Fausto Sterling, *Cuerpos Sexuados. La política de género y la construcción de la sexualidad* (Melusina, 2006).

In the *arxiu desencaixat* we exhibited books from the museum's collection that responded to the topics addressed in the show. In two of the activations we presented selected readings articulated around the topics of queer diasporas and colonialism, and around the body and depathologization<sup>9</sup>. There was also a special bulletin board in the museum where we posted these reading lists<sup>10</sup>. Another activation based on the readings was the release of the Spanish translation of Jack Halberstam's

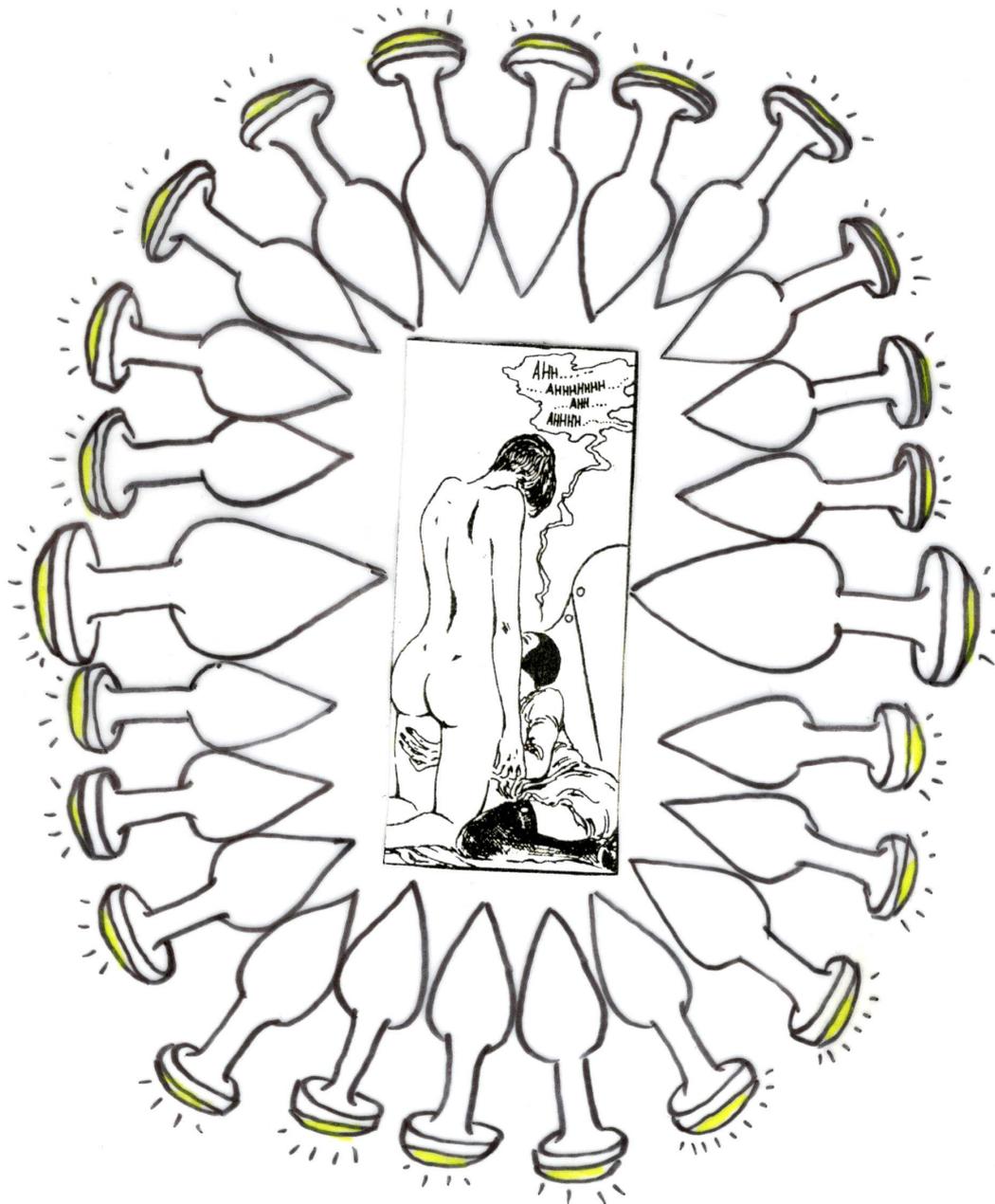
*The Queer Art of Failure* (Egales, 2018 [Duke, 2011]), seven years after its original publication. Part of our aim was to shed light on the slow pace of translations, and the time it takes for many books and ideas to reach beyond the English-speaking context.

Lastly, there were two further activations that directly addressed the importance of the spoken word in constructing archives of sexual dissidence. Some forms of history do not leave behind any material record, such as narratives of sexile, which is why we decided to include them in the activation series to provide them with a space —albeit ephemeral— within the exhibit. Such was the case of the *Living Library* activation, organized in collaboration with the ACATHI organization<sup>11</sup>, which turned the exhibition space into a stage where the audience could hear these experiences first hand. The activity reaffirmed the fact that in the field of sexual dissidence, the greatest repositories of memory are to be found in the bodies of the living.

Finally, we recorded the personal and collective stories of the caretakers of some of the archives from Barcelona. We conducted interviews that were then made public within the exhibit<sup>12</sup>, adding another dimension to the objects on display, and including the narratives of those who had made their conservation physically possible. What stories do the materials of these dissident struggles tell, and what happens to the stories that never get recorded? The spoken word plays a crucial role in the preservation of these stories (Boyd and Ramírez 2012), which is why we repeatedly insisted on including it while constructing the *arxiu desencaixat*, as a criticism of more hegemonic forms and in order to cultivate an affective and rebellious archive.

As a whole, the activations brought out aspects of the materials that were not necessarily contained in the documents themselves: interconnected histories, biographies, parallel materials, voices and performances.

## Dislocated futures



*Unstraighten the archive.*

Picture made from a vignette of the *Tribade* journal n.3, june 1989  
and pictures of *República rarita* (Diego Posada)

We began this paper by asking whether it was possible to unstraighten the archive, and how the heteronormative gaze manifests in the construction of memory. To a certain extent, all of the work throughout this process has been influenced by this question. We understand straightness as “a hegemonic form of knowledge that models our interpretation of our bodies and precludes the possibility of imagining or living them any other way”

(flores 2015, 4). In this sense, heteronormativity, which affects all institutions, also determines the ways in which memory is recognized and administered.

Neutrality —as a characteristic of science, of the construction of knowledge, and also of the management of institutional archives— limits the possible readings of sexual dissidence, obscuring the political and epistemological effects of this “distancing of one’s own body and those of others, as well as positing straightness as the supposed locus of neutrality through the silencing and self-imposed invisibility of the body” (flores 2015, 3). Straightness<sup>13</sup> is a catalyst for forms of subjectivization and epistemologies that can be interrupted by experiments and experiences that eschew such neutrality. In this sense, most of us who developed the *arxiu desencaixat* identify as members of the community of sexual dissidence, and it is from this standpoint of direct involvement that we have approached the archives and their materials. This gave us the sensitivity to recognize the importance of the guardians of these memories, making a sort of homage to the personal and emotionally involved care given to these materials, a gesture that stands in tension with the work of the museum conservator.

In educational terms, and as a proposed methodology for collective research, our experience in the *arxiu desencaixat* could be further developed in the future, in our context and in others. Whereas this process was situated in and circumscribed to a specific place and time, we believe that our experience provides tools to face the challenge of continuing to unstraighten the many forms of knowing, remembering, and constructing one’s own history.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The name of the project has been kept in Catalan because we worked with materials from our most immediate context. By maintaining the original Catalan title, our goal is to take the phenomenon commonly referred to with the English word "queer" and bring it back to the local level. Queerness is thus framed as a series of questions that do not all match up, like a "dislocated" joint.

<sup>2</sup> This exhibit drew on materials held at a number of archives and documentation centers throughout Barcelona, most of them activist-run. We would especially like to thank Ca La Dona; Centro de Documentación Armand de Fluviá; Álex Brahim, for opening up his personal archive to us; MACBA Study Center; Fanzinoteca; and all the authors, artists and others who have shared their work with this project on an individual basis.

<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, various "other" terms that have been used to name these kinds of "dislocated" archives, such as the counter-archive (Kashmere 2010) or the anarchival ("Anarchival - Concise Definition" n. d.). However, we have chosen to maintain the term "archive" in order to test its limits, and also because we believe that sexual dissidence can make use of these often normative concepts, however deviant that use may be.

<sup>4</sup> We set the specific start date of 1977, the year that 4,000 demonstrators congregated along Las Ramblas to demand the repeal of the Franco-era Law on Social Dangers and Rehabilitation. An audiovisual record of this demonstration was shown in the *arxiu desencaixat*, courtesy of José Ramón Ahumada.

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<sup>5</sup> The PEI students were Julieta Obiols, Vatiu Nicolás Koralsky, Benzo, Diego Posada, Javiera Pizarro, Héctor Acuña, Juan David Galindo, Lina Sánchez, Lior Zisman Zalis, Itxaso Corral, Isamit Morales and Alexander Arilla, alongside external participant Camila González S. We also wish to thank everyone from MACBA who participated, and especially Aida Roger and Cristina Mercadé.

<sup>6</sup> Invasorix is a Mexico-based queer-feminist collective. A copy of the tarot deck is held at the MACBA archive, <https://www.macba.cat/es/a12181>

<sup>7</sup> It is worth recalling, as noted by Esteban Muñoz (2009), that evidence of sexual dissidence has historically been used against lesbians, gays, cross-dressers and trans people in order to punish, discipline and medicalize them; as such, attempts to document these people's experiences run the risk of adversely affecting their very lives. Because they are a form of evidence, the materials in these archives are preserved surreptitiously, practically hidden away. They contain not only the story of these struggles, but also, like a diary or family picture album, a record of the everyday life, bonds and relationships of the people they document, alongside their role as activists. As such, the ephemeral evidence, both historical and emotional, in these documents and archives of sexual dissidence are full of past utopias and latent revolutions.

<sup>8</sup> The different activations can be reviewed in greater detail at the following link: <https://www.macba.cat/en/activations-dislocated-archive>

<sup>9</sup> We proposed a total of three reading lists, which can be found at the following links: [https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20180216/2018\\_Arxiu\\_desencaixat\\_Espai\\_Lectura\\_publica\\_eng\\_1a.pdf](https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20180216/2018_Arxiu_desencaixat_Espai_Lectura_publica_eng_1a.pdf)  
[https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20180423/Bibliography\\_Queer\\_diasporas\\_and\\_colonialism\\_eng.pdf](https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20180423/Bibliography_Queer_diasporas_and_colonialism_eng.pdf)  
[https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20180605/Bibliography\\_Living\\_without\\_permission\\_web\\_eng.pdf](https://www.macba.cat/uploads/20180605/Bibliography_Living_without_permission_web_eng.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> We installed a large-scale collage with excerpts from laws, newspaper clippings and medical handbooks, representing the hegemonic discourses surrounding the stigmatizing production of deviancy and pathology. On top of this layer we arranged books containing dissident and activist discourses, deviant theory and "lowlife" literatures. In this way the books took over the visual space of the hegemonic discourses, revealing both their ineffectiveness and their tenacity.

<sup>11</sup> ACATHI is a Barcelona-based organization that has been working since 2002 on issues related to migration, asylum and LGTBI+ populations.

<sup>12</sup> The people interviewed were Muntsa and Mercé Otero Vidal (Ca La Dona); Jordi Samsó and Pierino (Casal Lambda); Álex Brahim; and Estel Fabregat and Marta Vega (MACBA). All of the interviews can be found at the following link: <https://archive.org/search.php?query=subject%3A%22arxiudesencaixat%22>

<sup>13</sup> For Monique Wittig straightness is a political regime and a social contract. This idea is developed at length in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992). Moreover, we can also approach straightness as a 500-year-old colonial invention, whereby the colonial discourse constructed itself in binary opposition to the "sodomites" of the Indies, as a means of affirming their "otherness" (Egaña 2017, 67-68).