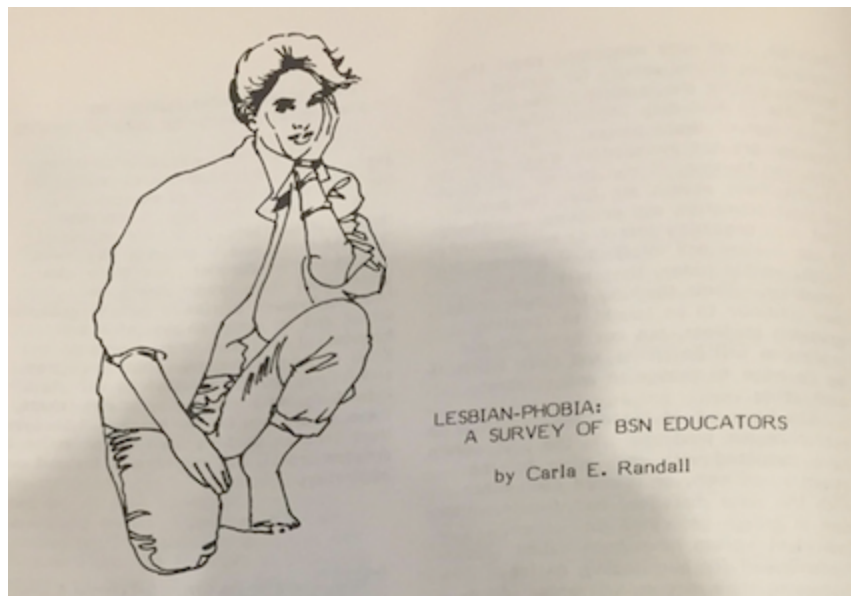


John A. Carranza // Being a historian comes with no better rite of passage than to enter the archive. Regardless of the time period or topic chosen by the researcher, sorting through the documents is exciting for me because I am able to engage in an imaginative and interpretative exercise where I consider why a document was created and why it ended up in the archive that it did. Occasionally, some archival collections hold documents unrelated to the larger research question at hand. It is in these small discoveries that I believe the archive can teach us about the history of medicine, empathy, and the opening up of the critical imagination.

My first research trip outside of Austin began at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas. Since my interests are in the history of sex education throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the United States, I believed the Resource Center LGBT Collection would hold a vast amount of documents for me to collect. With over six hundred boxes in the collection, I was not let down. I found materials relating to my research, but also some that I found to be intriguing in general. Buried in the boxes labeled "Periodicals" I found a small cache of *Cassandra: Radical Feminist Nurses Newsjournal* from the late 1980s.

*Cassandra* was an effort to challenge patriarchal control over medicine that the women of the women's movement had critiqued the previous decade. In context, Ronald Reagan's presidency had ushered in a conservative social and cultural response to the 1960s and 1970s, which sought to curb inroads made in reproductive and gay rights. Feminist women fought to protect *Roe v. Wade* and held out hope that the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) would be ratified. AIDS ravaged the gay community and spread to other stigmatized groups (heroin, later injecting drug users; Haitians; and hemophiliacs).

Against the backdrop of the 1980s, feminist nurses used *Cassandra* to communicate shared values and disagreements in their profession. By committing to having "no editors or review board members" the creators ensured that the forum remained open to all women provided that contributors not submit material "that is harmful to women because of color, sexuality, religious or cultural background, physical ability or economic situation." In a profession considered to be coded as strictly woman-oriented, the nurses who published, contributed to, read, and discussed with one another the contents participated in a shared network of information.



Article in *Cassandra: Radical Feminist Nurses Newsjournal*, Vol. 5, No. 3, *Resource Center LGBT Collection of the UNT Libraries*, University of North Texas Special Collections, Series 3: Publications, Subseries 1: Periodicals, Box 235, 12.

Choosing an article from this document, we can examine why it might be useful for a student to read and examine it in its historical context. One article that sticks out to me is “Lesbian-Phobia: A Survey of BSN Educators,” by Carla E. Randall. To start, students might consider why lesbians would be the focus of the article. In doing so, the reader can think critically about the extent to which lesbians were included in the women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Viewing the results of the survey, the reader can also pull quotes from the article that indicate how respondents felt toward lesbians in nursing in the 1980s. One that I chose: “Probably the most startling response, given that this is 1987, is the fact that over half of the BSN educators who responded...indicated that lesbianism is not a natural expression of human sexuality.” In retrospect, we know that 1987 was hardly a time for progressive politics, and yet the author felt as though the women surveyed should have been more forward thinking. How do we interpret her interpretation of the survey? We might take into account how the survey was undertaken, and we may also consider that since it was administered “to all BSN faculty members in a midwestern state” that perhaps the conservatism of the Reagan era had taken root and changed thinking about the women’s liberation and gay rights movements in that geographic region.

What’s more, the document provides the reader insight into popular misconceptions of homosexuality. “Seventeen percent of the respondents indicated that lesbians would molest children and an almost equal number indicated that they would verbally object to a nurse who is a lesbian caring for a friend’s child.” These comments about gays and lesbians became one of the central arguments for denying rights to marriage, adoption, and employment from the 1980s and into the beginning of the new millennium by conservatives. However, a reader today learns from the article that such ideas were considered to be ludicrous at the time, based on the author’s comments. Since the article cites other studies, we also see that other scholars discredited accusations of molestation by homosexuals in the 1970s and 1980s. Lesbians’ inclusion in the gay community also translated to the AIDS epidemic where many nurse educators who completed the survey believed lesbians to be a danger in spreading the disease, despite their low transmission rates at the time.

g When asked about what may be the most publicized disease of our time, AIDS, a startling and disappointing number, one-fifth, thought that lesbians were a common source of transmitting the AIDS virus. AIDS has only been documented as transmittable through blood and semen (although present in other body fluids). Unless lesbians have received blood from a contaminated individual (blood transfusion, contact with contaminated needles) or engaged in sex with men, there are rather limited possibilities of transmitting the AIDS virus into the blood stream. In addition to this low risk of transmitting the AIDS virus, sexually active lesbians have the lowest transmission rate of sexually communicable diseases. Although lesbians are at low risk for AIDS, by sharing the label "homosexual" with gay men, they are potentially at high risk for discrimination. This is one reason to stop using the term "homosexual" and refer instead to "lesbians" and "gay men."

The results from this survey indicate that many misconceptions regarding lesbians and lesbianism exist among this sample of

*Cassandra: Radical Feminist Nurses Newsjournal*, Vol. 5, No. 3, Resource Center LGBT Collection of the UNT Libraries, University of North Texas Special Collections, Series 3: Publications, Subseries 1: Periodicals, Box 235, 13.

What does this have to do with the medical humanities? Teaching students to work with firsthand documents in the archive can be invaluable for prompting them to exercise their critical thinking skills. By encouraging them to place themselves in the given time period, they could make attempts to understand why people made the decisions that they did based on the knowledge they had available. For many of the women included in the survey, deep-seated misconceptions about lesbians showed and would have shaped how nursing students obtained their education. Discrimination in education would have had an adverse effect on their patients. These misconceptions were fostered by political and cultural discourse, which sought groups to stigmatize throughout the 1980s seen as hindering the growth of prosperity in the country at the time. Furthermore, *Cassandra* showed the persistence of women in nursing to share information, educate one another, and have meaningful conversations about gender, sexuality, and race. Using historical documents can also shape how students critically evaluate the world that they live in today.

Suggested Reading:

Kruse, Kevin M. and Julian E. Zelizer. *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2019.

Malka, Susan Gelfand. *Daring to Care: American Nursing and Second-Wave Feminism*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007.

McGarrahan, Peggy. *Transcending AIDS: Nurses and HIV Patients in New York City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994.

Rossinow, Doug. *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

