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Nuanced Archival Triangulation (NAT): An Interdisciplinary Approach for Studying Quotidian Photography

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Abstract

This article presents an innovative method for researching quotidian photography, particularly Real Photo Postcards (RPPC), by combining performance studies and archival sciences with oral narrative. The Nuanced Archival Triangulation (NAT) method culminates evidence from public records, newspapers, and local and non-traditional archival repositories with living family stories, resulting in a more nuanced approach to understanding people featured in visual archives. The NAT method extends and adapts Hulme's methodology for researching textual archives of queer defendants in the United Kingdom in the early 20th century while also including Pennavaria's genealogical methods that involve the family in historical research. The NAT methodology is comprised of four steps. Step one begins with examining traditional genealogical records of the person studied from the RPPC via Ancestry.com. Next, newspaper archives are accessed to uncover information about the individual's social life to contextualize the biographical information found in step one. Then, guerilla research is used to locate non-traditional, undigitized evidence related to the studied person. And finally, that person's family is contacted to solicit personal artifacts and family stories that illuminate the person's lived story to share agency with the living relatives of the primary RPPC subject. This paper employs the NAT method in a case study centering on an RPPC of Dale Smith and Alvin Ruddick, two Navy sailors who served in WWII. By locating relevant biographical evidence, speculation about the subjects' sexual identities is investigated in the RPPC. This paper concludes by discussing how the NAT methodology can amplify marginalized communities' visual archives.

Keywords: genealogy; methodology; queer archives; real photo postcards (RPPC); United States

Paper type: Special Section – Innovative Methodologies

Introduction

The market for found photography[1] promotes a unique circulation of archival materials. Often bought and sold in online auctions, ephemera tradeshows, and disparate antique stores or estate sales, these photos pass from their original owners along a line of strangers. During this process, their original visual intent or meaning becomes obscured, and tracking the image's origin becomes almost impossible. As time further removes found photos from their original contexts, the people featured in the pictures become anonymized, leaving their lived stories unknown to modern researchers. Collectors scour found photography markets for specific images based on genre or subject. Photos of the "paper moon"[2] background are highly sought after in ephemera markets, as well as pictures of pets, historical figures, and local photography for collectors. There is also a rising market for queer culture vintage photography (Barnett, 2024; Prichard Art Gallery, 2018).

Corey and Nakayama (1997) and Morris (2006) have described the process of image discovery and examination as a type of cruising,[3] implying that the image selection process reflects the embodied practice in which queer people identify one another and engage in intimacy. As a gay man, I have developed a repertoire for reading signs of queerness in my everyday life. That same repertoire allows me to 'cruise' archival material, too. While cruising may be considered an intimate social practice, it can also be considered a literacy practice for reading photographs.

In the same way that one may imagine the presence and physicality of another, we can imagine similar possibilities in archival photographs that provide snapshot glimpses into lives already lived or experiences already embodied,

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particularly the marginalized narratives of members of the queer community. Indeed, Morgan (2023) suggested that "[p]hotography and desire are homologous insofar as both depend on the mutual imbrication of fantasy and reality" (Morgan, p. 36). Cruising images of queer people is about the potential of taking those persons home, even if just in the imagination. Furthermore, I argue that this image-based relationship is reciprocal because as the viewer gleans satisfaction when researching quotidian photos, the practice memorializes and honors the people in the photos.

Permissions

The images used for this case study date from 1942 to 2013. Five images from this case study were retrieved from Newspapers.com, which is owned by the US-based genealogy company, Ancestry.com[4]. The terms and conditions of Ancestry.com's website specify that written permission is only necessary if one uses "more than a small number of photos and documents that are Public Domain Content" ("Terms and Conditions," para. 2.2, 2022). Additionally, these images can be considered orphan works because the original creators could not or cannot be located (the subjects are deceased; the content creators/photographers could not be located). Borgman (2007) explains that collections and artifacts become orphan works when

> the owner neither cannot be identified (e.g., there is no name on the document, the author is deceased and the heirs are unknown, or the business has ceased and the current rights are unknown, or if identified, cannot be contacted (no details other than the name can be found), or if contacted, has never responded (as cited by the Library Copyright Alliance, 2005; Selected Resources on Orphan Works, 2005). (p. 108)

Minelli (2009) conveys that scholars and students can use orphan works "in a limited manner permitted by 'fair use' or the 'first sale' doctrine of U.S. Copyright law" (p. 219).

The photo from Dale Smith's obituary (2013) meets the standard for Fair Use. The U.S. Copyright Office (2023) specifies that "if the use employs only a small amount of copyrighted material, fair use is more likely." Moreover, photos used for scholarly communication and educational purposes support the position that "nonprofit educational and noncommercial uses are fair" (U.S. Copyright Office, 2023). All of the images in this article are from the U.S. and are used within the confines of U.S. Copyright Law.

The Real Photo Postcard (RPPC)[5] was purchased on eBay. As evidenced in this paper, the postcard does not carry a copyright symbol. Bogden and Weseloh (2006) note that "[a]ccording to copyright law at the time [*a postcard is created*], in order for a postcard to be protected, it had to carry in the caption or on the address side the copyright symbol or the word copyright" (p. 40, *italics mine*). Also, because the RPPC includes no publisher or photographer markings, it is presented within the realm of Fair Use. Although I expand on my communication with the family below, I will acknowledge that permission was granted from Dale Smith's family to use the information they shared with me for this article. When I initially reached out, I specified that I was researching Dale for an archival project and asked if they had any information I could use. Once the article was submitted, I contacted the family a second time to tell them where the article would be published, what information I was including, and a commitment not to share their information out of respect for privacy. The family has agreed to allow me to use this information and is looking forward to reading the finished article. My university's Internal Review Board (IRB) assured me that approval is not required for this study, as it is categorically classified as an oral history.

Narrative of the RPPC

The photo discussed in this study is a Real Photo Postcard Card (RPPC), taken during World War II. Confirmed to be in the public domain (see Methodology section), the photo of study in this research depicts two WWII-era Navy sailors seated together for a portrait postcard (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Alvin Ruddick and Dale Smith,
postcard, image side, circa 1944-1945

The men are named on the image side of the postcard: Alvin's first and surname, "Alvin Ruddick," is written, and Dale Smith is identified as "me," which presumes two things: 1) Dale wrote Alvin's name and self-identified in the photo, and 2) Dale is the original owner of said photo. Alvin is seated in the forefront, while Dale leans into Alvin slightly. Dale wears clear, round eyeglasses, his hair is slightly disheveled, and he wears a small watch on his left wrist that, when zoomed in at 300% magnification, reads around 8:30, suggesting this photo was taken either in the early morning or late evening. In front of Dale, Alvin sits with a broad smile, with what appears to be a writing pen tucked in his shirt pocket, and his hands are enfolded in his lap. Alvin's hair appears carefully and intentionally styled with perhaps a men's hair product. Both men are dressed in what appears to be a casual Naval uniform of matching shirts and caps. Both men appear to be young adults between 18 and 25 years of age.

The verso of the image side confirms that the entire photo package (front and back) is a postcard with text stating "POST CARD" (Figure 2). The postcard's correspondence is (presumably Dale's) handwritten text of the following:

1) A return address from "Dale L. Smith S/1c AATTC Va Beach, Va" which affirms that Dale and Alvin were stationed near or in Virginia Beach, Virginia, sometime between 1944 and 1945, due to the U.S. Navy postmark date of January 5, 1945.

2) Dale's assignation of S/1c means "Seaman First Class" (U.S. Navy Office of Information, 2024).

3) The acronym "AATTC" likely stands for the "Advanced Airlift Tactical Training Center," which was located just five miles south of Virginia Beach, Virginia, during World War II (Dam Neck FCTCA, 2024; Naval History & Heritage Command, 2024).

4) The image's format is confirmed to be a postcard as labeled and addressed to "Miss Bernice Black of White Cloud, Michigan."

5) There are two indeterminable texts: the handwritten word "Vaco" (or some variation thereof) across the stamp box and the assignation of "34 A" at the bottom right corner of the address side of the card.

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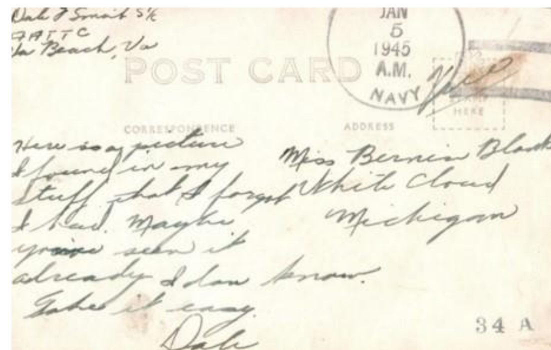

Figure 2. Alvin Ruddick and Dale Smith,
postcard, address side, circa 1944-1945

The correspondence of the postcard reads:

> *Here's a picture I found in my stuff that I forgot I had.*
> *Maybe you've seen it already, I don't know. Take it easy, Dale.*

The suggestion that Bernice may have seen the photo is curious. We immediately wonder, who is Bernice? When would she have seen this postcard? What is Bernice's relation to Dale? Is there more than one copy of this postcard? Saliently, Dale's message hints that Bernice knows about Alvin. We can study the postcard's details clearly: Dale's message and the US postmark survive provenance markings due to its medium as a Real Photo Postcard (RPPC).

Dale and Alvin's image in the RPPC format renders it as more than just a portrait; the travails of time allow us to peer into the life of the picture to perceive that it is a snapshot of a personal relationship between the men. Also, Dale's message to Bernice is more than casual; it denotes an enduring social or familial connection. Although we cannot know the precise nature of either relationship, the photograph nevertheless documents that some relationship existed between these two young men, and the message records a kinship connection between Dale and Bernice.

My investigation in this study seeks to understand the sexuality of Dale and Alvin; however, the value of the RPPC to the archive extends beyond their sexuality. The portrait captures an intimate moment between two young men removed from their homes to fight in World War II. The prevalence of homosocial, if not homosexual, relationships was paramount to the wartime experience of many men (Kühne, 2020). Regardless of what my archival research uncovers, this RPPC is an important piece of American history precisely because it documents a moment when men shared more intimate relationships between eras of intense scrutiny and persecution. In order to uncover the history behind Dale's RPPC, it is necessary to employ archival and performance methodologies to gather evidence before hypothesizing what sort of relationship Dale and Alvin shared. Snow (2002) and Katanic (2002) comment on their experiences finding and researching photographs in similar markets. Like me, Katanic "approached the image like a sleuth" to elevate the subjects "as forgotten heroes that could be written back into history as notable" (para. 3). Snow (2002) described her experience with found photography as "peering through a keyhole into a secret world shared only by the subjects" (para. 5).

This research exemplifies how web-based genealogical methods for archival research can provide valuable insight into photographic archives (Long, 2016). More specifically, this work shows how researchers can study LGBTQ quotidian portraiture using the methodology I outline to make everyday, queer histories more legible. Although this method is suitable for any visual archive, researching marginalized communities in the archive requires a more robust methodology precisely because those communities' histories are underrepresented or hidden in the existing archive. Although this methodology is unique insofar as it is tailored to quotidian photography, other researchers have completed similarly in-depth research on historical figures. Notable examples of such projects include Cleves's

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(2014) *Charity and Silvia*, or Spring's (2010) *Secret Historian*, both of which include intimate archival research to uncover lesser-known queer histories. Although historians have used methods like mine, this paper offers an enumerated methodology that includes performance, genealogical, and archival methods for budding historians or grassroots archivists who wish to study vintage photography. This methodology is particularly useful for queer-coded photographs, for which no method is currently available to novice researchers. Moreover, this case study would generate provocative class discussions for instructors teaching queer archives, visual archives, or genealogical methods.

I begin with a literature review that focuses specifically on photographic history, queer history, existing genealogical methods, and the role of performance in evaluating these images. The methodology introduced is an adaptation and extension of existing methods for studying textual materials or personal family histories. Next, I analyze the photograph of Dale and Alvin using genealogical research. I conclude with a discussion about potentially queer subjects in portraits as well as implications for future research.

Literature Review

In the following sections, I outline the historical context wherein the photograph of Dale and Alvin was taken. First, I narrate the history of photography at the turn of the 20th century, including the advent of personal cameras and quotidian photography. Next, I place the history of photography alongside the history of sexuality in the same period, focusing on moments of progress and regression surrounding LGBTQ acceptability. Particularly, I examine specific historical events that shifted American views of homosexuality, namely prohibition and the Second World Wars. Then I transition to a theoretical lens in the following subsection, where I lay the groundwork for my methodology using queer archival scholarship, archival sciences, and performance studies.

History of photography

When photography emerged in the mid to late 19th century, few individuals could afford the equipment to develop portraits at home (Familytree.com, 2014). Therefore, professional photographers were responsible for developing most images in portrait studios until the beginning of the 20th century (Rudd, 2024). For this reason, portraits featuring marginalized communities, such as racial minorities or those transgressing sexual norms, are rare in that era (Deitcher, 2005; Rogerson, 2008). However, new technologies emerged in the early 1900s, allowing private individuals to develop snapshots from film negatives without needing access to a photography studio or a darkroom (Eastman Kodak Company, 1906). In 1906, Kodak released the No. 3 Folding Pocket Kodak. This camera was accessible to many Americans because of its ease of use and relatively affordable price – about $20 (Lothrop, 1978). Subsequently, amateur photography became a commonplace hobby for individuals across the country.

Moreover, in the camera's user manual, the Eastman Kodak Company (1906) included step-by-step instructions for developing negatives at home using a Kodak Film Tank. This new method afforded users privacy, allowing citizens to photograph their cultures on their own terms. As Stephanie Rogerson (2008) inquired, “If creating images of oneself has the power to self-actualize a moment, is there not an implied agency?” (p. 10). This agency allowed individuals who previously could not access or afford studio portraiture to engage with the medium without risk of exposure. That is, while queer couples would have felt pressured to perform heterosexuality in the studio, that inclination was obviated by the advent and affordability of private photography. As Morris (2002) reminds us, “The stakes in this game of hide and seek, it must be remembered, are high” (p. 241). Escape from this ‘game of hide and seek’ portraiture allowed queer lives to be documented authentically rather than under the surveillance of community members in the public sphere.

Personal photography became more popular not only because of emergent film technology but also because of a new medium for printing and sharing photos. By 1903, postcards were a well-established part of American culture (Bogden & Weseloh, 2006). Individuals regularly shared depictions of their daily lives, such as local architecture and landscape photography, with friends through this medium. However, it was not until 1907 that the US Postal Service allowed senders to include personal messages on the back of postcards rather than solely an address (Smithsonian Institution Archives, 2013). Kodak, understanding the impact this change would have on the market, began mass-producing their line of RPPCs (Bogden & Weseloh, 2006). With this new product, users could develop their images on one side

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of the photographic paper, and on the back, a template for the postcard was already printed. In their book, *Real Photo Postcard Guide* authors Bogdan and Weseloh (2006) tracked when specific postcard designs were manufactured, generally via the markings around the stamp box. This allowed archivists to establish the earliest possible production date for the RPPCs they study. The Bogdan and Weseloh Guide identifies each design's earliest and latest production date, giving researchers a rough estimate of when snapshots were developed. With that contextual information, researchers can more accurately determine the photograph's context within the original production period, which enhances the potential for accurate archival research.

20th-century American sexuality

To consider the possibility that any archival materials are queer-coded requires at least a casual understanding of queer history. The complex evolution, and sometimes obfuscation, of male sexuality in the 20th century was contextualized by national and local movements. For example, in larger cities like New York, homosexuality was commonplace in film, theatre, and nightlife. Chauncy (1994) suggested that these public displays of homosexual behavior "had always been determined as much by the audience as by the performer on stage," later noting that the cultural meanings of such showings were "obscure to the class that nominally dominated them" (Chauncy, p. 351). In this way, the 1920s were a time when queer people enjoyed a thinly veiled openness in the U.S. public sphere. However, gay life was ushered back into the shadows in the early 1930s for at least a few reasons. First, the cultural instability catalyzed by the Great Depression prompted authorities to "restore moral order by mobilizing against 'degenerates'" (Morris, 2002, p. 232). The resulting sex panic pressured men, heterosexual or otherwise, to carefully arbitrate their own gender performance to avoid any suspicion surrounding their sexuality. Second, repealing the 18th amendment of the U.S. Constitution[6] "served to draw new boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable, and to impose new sanctions against the latter" (Chauncey, 1994, p. 337). Foundational to both regressions is the insistence on tradition and morals. As with other instances of cultural unrest, the persecution of the Other operated as an attempt on behalf of the majority to regain their sense of self and community. For this reason, the 1930s were a time when "passing implies peril" (Morris, 2002, p. 240).

When the United States entered WWII, the strict moralism of the 1930s dissolved into a nationalistic drive to send men overseas. As Hugh Ryan (2019) noted, "In peacetime, the dismissal rate for homosexuals would be nearly three times what it was during WWII" (p. 228). The inclusion of perceived homosexuals in the military was made possible, in part, by the fact that "war – indeed a crisis of any kind – has a way of suspending stereotypes" (Sadownick, 1997, p. 31). The moral flexibility inherent in wartime returned some queer liberties to soldiers on base and overseas. Although it was not uncommon for servicemen to be discharged for homosexual behavior, such relationships still flourished during World War II (Kühne, 2020). The war herded "young adults who would have gone from their parents' homes into youthful marriages" from their hometowns "into an all-male military culture that was supposed to stand for heterosexual values but that teemed with homosexual subtext" (Sadownick, 1997, p. 24). Among servicemen, sexual or romantic engagement with other soldiers was commonplace, although not all of them would consider themselves homosexual during or after the war. Indeed, "During the war, enforced intimacy with the same sex sometimes led to sex whether both men were 'gay' or not" (Sadownick, 1997, p. 28). The presence of reportedly heterosexual men engaging in homosexual behavior while serving in the military would be an example of what renowned social scientist Evelyn Hooker (1957) termed 'situational homosexuality.'

After the war, intense social pressure reminiscent of the 1930s returned to U.S. discourse. Many servicemen realized upon returning home that "Gays and lesbians were good enough to die as soldiers, but not good enough to live as veterans" (Ryan, 2019, p. 228). The subsequent Cold War drew intense suspicion of the Other, including homosexuals and communists, which motivated a witch hunt now known as the Lavender Scare (National Archives Foundation, 2023). The prevailing ideology, forwarded by then-U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy and long-time director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, "theorized that both Communists and homosexuals had 'peculiar mental twists' that caused their deviant behavior" (National Archives Foundation, 2023, para. 5). In the decades that followed WWII, federal employees and military personnel were systematically weeded out of public service. The purge simultaneously drove some homosexuals into the closet while also galvanizing gay rights movements, such as the Mattachine Society[7] (Marcus, 2019).

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The pendulum of prejudice that swung over the 20th century may have been perplexing for men like Dale and Alvin, who came of age during the post-WWII sex panic, came into adulthood overseas in an environment teeming with homosexuality, only to return home to find the same sexual repression they experienced in youth (Baur & Cook, 2012; Miller, 2009; Morris, 2002). Both internal and external pressures motivated many returning soldiers to take wives and have children (Sadownick, 1997). The intense scrutiny after the war correlated with intense secrecy regarding sexuality. Such secrecy presents modern researchers with a challenge to understanding the sexuality of individuals and, more broadly, in society (Bauer & Cook, 2012). As Halperin (2000) contended, “Our modern definitions of homosexuality dissolve as we attempt to trace them backward in time” (p. 90). Modern researchers, including myself, struggle to identify the transgression of sexual norms in historical subjects because modern scholars use different terminology, experience different pressures, and communicate with others in ways that differ drastically from the subjects. This does not mean, however, that such studies are frivolous. Instead, studies on past sexuality must conduct this research with a nuanced understanding of sexuality that recognizes possibilities of difference rather than assigning difference outright.

Queer archives and genealogical methods

In this work, I focus on quotidian photography, which refers to images created for personal use. Quotidian photography differs from what Harriman and Lucaites (2003) referred to as “iconic photography,” which are images that generate “public appeal and normative power as it provides embodied depictions of important abstractions (such as ‘human rights’) operative within the public discourse of a historical period” (p. 49). While iconic photography offers similar opportunities for researchers to expand their understanding of the past, current scholarship on visual media is saturated with these images. The utility of quotidian photography is that it offers novel, everyday insight into the lives of the past. This research is urgently needed concerning queer subjects as it has the potential to offer rare and unique accounts of local, and sometimes banal, queer representation that have mainly remained unstoried. Moreover, quotidian photography invites more varied readings of photographic content, intentionality, and implications.

The conversation about analyzing photographs is currently preoccupied with that ambiguity. Archival scientists refer to photographic analysis as a material's ‘aboutness.’ Robert Fairthorne (1969), who coined this term, differentiated between ‘intentional aboutness’ and ‘extensional aboutness.’ Intentional aboutness refers to the creator's original intent, while the viewer determines extensional aboutness. For example, a snapshot of a man with his dog may have been a cherished memento to the original owner, while an archivist may find the photo useful to track the evolution of the specific dog breed. While intentional aboutness is more objective, it is also more challenging to identify. Extensional aboutness is easier to postulate precisely because of its subjectivity. Of course, the latter is more speculative and subjective precisely because it relies on the intuition of the archivist without consultation with the subject.

In previous studies related to found photography, researchers such as Snow (2002) and Katanic (2002) could only make claims about an image's extensional aboutness. However, as digital archives expand and genealogical methods improve, scholars can begin to narrow, though never define, the intentional aboutness of a photograph. Narrowing aboutness can be accomplished by uncovering additional materials related to the subject(s), including their identity, geographic location, and time.

The subjectivity of aboutness is contentious for many scholars. Finnegan (2017) asks, “What is this a picture *of*?” (p. 118). In her research, Finnegan described combing through archives looking for a specific snapshot of a sharecropper, eventually finding it cataloged under the subject heading “shack,” showcasing the inherent polysemy of archival materials. Extensional aboutness is more multifaceted. The polysemy of extensional aboutness is especially prevalent when the viewer is removed from the subject of the photograph because of the curatorial method. Schlak (2008) described how “viewing photographs becomes a political activity in which the archivist-as-commentator inscribes an agenda into the broken and contested space that the photographic record occupies” (p. 96). Each researcher or user of an image relies on their background, knowledge, and agenda to determine its aboutness, which will invariably differ from another archivist’s interpretation.

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Wagner (2021) cautioned that catalogers cannot assume someone's sexuality or gender identity. Instead, Wagner suggested that "a cataloger might benefit from simply allowing both identities to exist in conversation" (p. 30). That uncertainty can be productive because dichotomy gives researchers the flexibility to understand the other in relationship to the self. That flexibility is inherent to the style of queer worldmaking central to my argument. Yep (2003) contended that "queer worldmaking is the opening and creation of spaces without a map…and the individual freedom and collective possibilities without the constraints of suffocating identities and restrictive membership" (p. 35). While it may be easy to decry a lack of definitive conclusions in this research, the goal of queer historiography is never rigidity. That is, assigning definitive identities or roles to a subject for the sake of simplicity or familiarity contrasts with the uncertainty and non-binary qualities of queer people.

The possibility of intersecting narratives is an obstacle to historians making definitive claims about their subject. Philosophers have considered how subjectivity influences the creation of historical claims. Kant "makes objectivity dependent on subjectivity," necessitating "a transformation of epistemology into a historical process requiring an explanation of the emergence of objectivity from subjectivity" (as cited in Rockmore, 1991, sec. VII). Heidegger (1962) asserted that knowledge springs forth from human beings' angles of observation. In his theory of *Dasein*, Heidegger explains how "being-in-the-world" and "being-with" the world produce meaning through the dialogic relationship between the self and the other. Heidegger posits that *Dasein* relies on temporality—always looking towards the future, informed by the past, and grounded in the present. Allison (1994) suggested that this "focus allows [Heidegger] to avoid the excesses of both extreme objectivity and extreme subjectivity" (p. 112). This theoretical grounding demonstrates how all interpretations of the past are multifaceted or subjective insofar as they rely on the relationship between the other and the researcher in temporality. No experienced historian should assume absolute authority over a historical narrative. Scholars should not avoid subjectivity but acknowledge it as an inescapable part of archival research.

In this way, the assertion that Kant and Heidegger may have been queer can stand alongside and enter into dialogue with the notion that these men may have been straight. This dialogue is particularly productive when the subjects can be traced through genealogical research because the possibility of queerness is punctuated by historical evidence. This consideration circumvents the heteronormativity associated with most traditional archives. I contend that all certainty in archives serves an illusion of neutrality. Indeed, queer scholars *must* take advantage of ambiguity in the archives to make space for queer histories. Schlak (2008) contended that "To confront photographic archives and inscribe onto them new narratives that challenge post/colonial interpretations is a moment of empowerment" (p. 97). Investigations that consider queer history, such as this study herein, are not frivolous, even though they seldom arrive at definitive conclusions. The point of this research is not to arrive at conclusions but rather to find meaning in the process of discovery and championing of queer people. Moreover, even if this research concludes with no evidence of queerness, the research is still a worthwhile addition to the archive discourse as it serves future users, theorists, and practitioners. Subsequently, genealogists realized that "Genealogy is not about the past alone—it is about the past, the present, and the future" (Pennaveria, 2011a, p. 5). Understanding the utility and importance of these records and the advent of greater access to them has prompted a proliferation of novel research methods.

The most influential change in genealogical research has been the advent of the Internet. Francis (2004) began writing about the utility of the Internet in genealogical information seeking in its early years. Francis wrote, "We have replaced the typewriter with the computer, and our library access has become international through the use of the Internet" (p. 14). However, because the Internet was in its infancy at the time of publication, resources were less commonplace than they are today. The digitization of archived materials continues, which provides more, but never complete, access to public records.

Francis (2004) developed the first model for genealogical research, which she terms "the Genealogy Search Process" [GSP]. Building on Kuhlthau's (1991) Information Search Process model, Francis described users' steps to seek genealogical information. The GSP is not a step-by-step guide to conducting research but rather an account of the user experience during the research process. This model illustrated the feelings of frustration and overwhelmingness, as well as satisfaction during the research journey. The first step is the desire to seek ancestors, followed by the initial search, narrowing focus, data collection, and finally, satisfaction with the completed project

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(Francis, 2004). Utilizing the GSP, users develop skills that streamline their research. However, Francis did not describe those skills in detail. Instead, she used their development as punctuation throughout the project writ large.

Pennavaria (2011a) explained these skills in more detail. First, Pennavaria suggested that researchers write down everything they already know about the researched subject. Then, “it is time for the real work of genealogy to begin interviewing relatives and searching for records” (p. 4). Pennavaria contended that “the most valuable resource a genealogist has is living people, especially the older ones” (p. 4). Her utilization of family stories and insider knowledge is useful because many elders have met the researched subject or know somebody who has, and therefore can deliver more details about the subject, which exceeds the information available in the public record. However, Pennavaria’s method is used almost exclusively to research one’s own family history rather than the strangers one would find in the found photography market. Moreover, approaching families to inquire about the sexuality of a relative is fraught with social and ethical complications. Even so, these methods are critical for uncovering queer histories.

Although genealogical methods are commonly used in archival sciences, these methods are not commonplace in queer archives or photographic research. Generally, images complement rather than catalyze this style of research. Blackman (2011) stressed that “genealogical research has been important to queer projects which have sought to make such historical processes visible, producing new cartographies of queer possibilities which destabilize normative distinctions” (p. 184). While Blackman affirmed the viability of this methodology, she did not provide a methodology or case study demonstrating it. Some scholars have started to use genealogical methods to research LGBTQ subjects. Hulme (2024) used such methods to research criminal records for men who had sex with men in Ireland in the early 20th century. He refined his method through several case studies, and, in his most recent article, he posited a two-step process for generating context for historical figures. First, Hulme used biographical details to find “records such as the census, birth/marriage/death registrations, or military service” (p. 64) before transitioning to newspaper archives that had become more accessible since digitization. Hulme’s method successfully harnessed technological advancements in genealogical databases along with an evolving understanding of queer history to make more grounded claims about queer historical figures.

However, Hulme applied this methodology to texts, not RPPCs. I find the prospect of genealogical methods particularly promising for photography scholarship because the research complements images' emotional and aesthetic impact. Although textual materials, such as criminal records or newspaper archives, are compelling, they pale in comparison to the moving nature of photographic art. My methodology has the potential to yield compelling narratives about the past through the curation of textual and photographic historical evidence. Additionally, this method compiles images and stories from newspapers, families, and other places to create an album or scrapbook that provides visual and textual snapshots of the subjects’ lives. These snapshots go beyond inviting imagination regarding the portrait's subject by telling a story about the subject punctuated with myriad photographic and biographical evidence. While modern audiences may never be able to tell the whole story, it is easier to connect the dots when more of them are available to the researcher.

Performance as method

Compiling biographical information requires storytelling, for which performance studies are uniquely equipped. If one thinks of the portrait as a sort of stage, then the photographed subject's embodiment informs the stories one can imagine about them. For example, Hall (2006) used “photographs as points of access into the uneven, intimate, and demanding process of the subject’s formation into and out of the image archive – a performance that is never finished” (p. 350). As film and photographs evolve over time through (dis)use, so does our understanding of the subjects. Elsewhere, Guzman and Ramos (2022) noted that “the medium of photography necessarily relies on the performance of the photographed object” (p. 26). Performance as a method for reading portraits is essential because performance studies are chiefly concerned with embodied practice. Portraits are performances of embodiment, performing today through an ephemeral medium, which must be analyzed through the embodiment of the viewer.

Abbas et al. (2005) broadly theorize performance as a lens to understand the past, therefore modifying our understanding of the present and giving way to alternative futures where queerness is more legible. This definition

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resonates because it acknowledges the interplay across time and space in which these photos perform and are viewed. Performance as method carefully articulates the codependent relationship between the past, present, and future that Heidegger theorizes about historical narratives more broadly. In Snow's (2002) reading of the portrait she found of a mother and child, she remarked how the subject "speaks in many tenses – past, present, and future…like the photograph itself" (para. 3). The depiction of the subjects reflects their past while in the present, looking towards the future. The snapshot, too, relies on the conventions of photography's past, the presentness of the photographer, and the futurity in circulation.

The communicative exchange across time affirms the discursive nature of these materials. Biographical images perform for the viewer to reveal meaning while the viewer performs a meaning-making process. In his study of a collection of snapshots depicting Stormé DeLarverie, a drag king from New Orleans, Schares (2020) described how "vernacular photographic moments" allowed Stormé "to become temporally mobile, effectively talking with and back to us" (p. 264). As these photographs enter circulation through markets and archives, their performance is informed by and informs the variety of audiences they encounter, including the original user, a string of collectors, and, potentially, users of archives where the photograph may eventually be maintained.

Just as a photograph resonates with the person pictured for the original recipient of the image, it also resonates with modern audiences. Nini and Treadwell (2020) recounted their experience curating vintage images of men loving men:

> Holding one of these photos in the palm of your hand as they once did, feeling its age, and seeing how they look at one another, or back to us, their emotions are palpable even today, so many years later. (p. 22)

Elsewhere, Morris (2006) described how queer archival materials "affect [him] viscerally, evoking deep yearning and defiant purpose" (p. 145). As these curators hold a photo of men in love, they are moved by that love in ways that may be like the pictured couple's. The blurring of lines between intentional and extensional aboutness seems productive here, as in both instances, the viewer is moved by the depiction of romance that transgresses social norms. Researchers can learn about a photograph by embodying what the image may have meant to the original user.

Methodology

The discovery method presented in this study begins with genealogical methods. The field has evolved significantly since genealogical methods were formalized in the American University's First Institute on Genealogical Research. Indeed, Colkert (1951) confirms that from the beginning, dating back at least five decades, archivists aimed to create more than "a bleak series of name charts, fortified merely with dates" and strove, instead, to generate "a rich cultural experience in which an interest in the lives of persons, local customs, and community life [would] serve as steppingstones toward a better understanding of the American past" (p. 142).

Nuanced Archival Triangulation (NAT) combines Hulme's method for researching queer textual archives with Panaveria's suggestion to communicate with family to create a novel archival method for researching visual archives. The first two steps in the NAT method are almost identical to Hulme's – cruising public records and newspaper archives. Additionally, NAT employs a third step that includes scouring alternative spaces where biographical information beyond the public record may be located.

To further operationalize NAT, I expand Pannaveria's methodology to detail how to contact living relatives with queer queries. This procedure allows researchers to contextualize and galvanize historical photographs, especially RPPCs, that contain identifiable subjects. The more information in the image, the easier it is to locate the subject by triangulating the subject's surname and location, as well as an estimation of the date using the RPPC's unique data. This method is limited by access to public records, particularly in relation to time. That is, census data and other public records are not available past 1950, so this methodology is less practical when researching subjects who came into adulthood in the late 1940s or after.

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Moreover, the Pannaveria method offers only one approach to studying quotidian photography. Rather than being employed as a prescriptive, universal method, this approach may serve as a starting point for researchers that can be amended or tailored for their specific project. Many studies in vernacular photography would benefit from a partial application of Pannaveria's method or the employment of a different method altogether. Nevertheless, this proposed methodology may be helpful to those studying vintage photography for the first time.

The nuanced archival triangulation methodology I am introducing here is a specific method for studying RPPCs. NAT identifies subjects in a real photo postcard (RPPC) using traditional genealogy, including census data and birth/marriage/death records. (This step is the same as Hulme's method. However, step one only includes textual information such as criminal records.) The first step also includes considering the stamp box on the back of the RPPC because the date provides goalposts for when the portrait was likely taken. For example, Bogden and Weseloh's identification chart shows that if the stamp box contains the letters "AZO" with an upward-facing triangle in each corner, the photo was likely taken between 1904 and 1918. This estimation is not exact, as the markings denote when Kodak produced the photograph paper. Even though these materials have a two-year shelf-life, photographers may have continued using them to develop RPPCs beyond the expiration date. This concern is less pertinent regarding studio photographers, who would likely use stock paper more quickly than a personal photographer. This estimation is less critical when the RPPC has a postmarked date or one written by the user, as with Dale and Alvin's portrait.

Knowing an estimated date range allows archivists to search on established genealogical resources like Ancestry.com in broad strokes. For example, if a photo was taken in 1914, and the named subjects appear to be about 20 years old, then one could search for named individuals born around 1884. Ancestry allows for a +/- five-year margin of error in its field limiter, so it is best practice to set the margin of error in the initial search. Researchers can also search broadly across the country or by state, county, or city. Once an individual has been identified, Ancestry suggests pertinent records. Using those public records, one can potentially build a timeline of that person's life from birth to death. Ancestry's archive contains images and documents that are in the public domain. Their terms of service allow for republishing of "a small portion of images or documents," with the requirement to "credit the relevant Ancestry Website as the source of the digital image" (Ancestry.com, 2014, Section 2, para. 4).

The second step is to fill in the gaps using newspaper archives. Humle (2024) described this step as "[adding] flesh to the bones of this skeleton" (p. 64). Newspapers.com, which Ancestry.com also owns, is a prominent digital archive for newspapers. However, the archive is hit or miss, depending on where an individual lived and their community involvement. Although Newspapers.com has compiled over 25,000 newspapers, the database is still incomplete (Newspapers.com, 2024). When searching for people from cities, a common name may make it nearly impossible to find a specific person. However, rural communities would be more viable if the local paper had been digitized because they have smaller populations. Newspaper clippings can effectively provide more qualitative data about a subject. Their participation in social organizations, attendance at events or church, and travel are often documented in newspapers. Furthermore, clippings may also include depictions of the subject, complementing the original photograph.

In the third step of the process, I depart from Hulme's methodology. With this phase, I begin what I call *guerilla research,* a phase in which archivists exhaust any available avenues for more materials. I call this guerilla research because this step includes a series of small inquiries involving disparate parties to accomplish an overall goal, which often departs from normative research methodologies that follow established practices developed to research hegemonic subjects and materials. That is, guerilla research requires the archivist to develop new strategies to uncover underrepresented narratives in the archives, often by advancing past existing methodologies that only serve majority populations.

Marshall (2022) suggested that "the study of queer ephemeral specificity requires a methodology which privileges nongeneralized critical vantage points" (p. 226). Thus, it is critical to be specific when looking for materials related to a subject's life. Paramount among these avenues is contacting the court annex to inquire about non-digitized records. The necessary contact for obtaining these records differs across states, although county and state directories often indicate which person oversees court archives. While census data and birth/marriage/death records are often included in digital databases, court records are not. These supplementary materials include divorce hearings, lawsuits, and estate documents. Such materials can provide even more detailed information about an

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individual than other public records because the subject often creates them and includes testimony in their own voices. Another option is to contact organizations to which the individual belonged in search of records. A scholar may consider reaching out to nursing homes where residents may have encountered a subject in their youth, organizations to which they belonged, or schools they attended. Schools often maintain yearbook archives detailing club membership, academic performance, or other social components of a subject's early life.

The fourth step in this process involves reaching out to living relatives. While this step is an extension of the guerilla research conducted in step three, contacting the families is a separate and final step because it requires different strategies, produces different evidence, and relies on completing the previous step to capitalize on the conversations with the living relatives fully. The information uncovered in the third step becomes an incentive for the families to assist in the research. The symbiotic relationship between the researcher and the relatives is founded on the exchange of information. By conducting all the previous steps before contacting the families, the researcher can offer the family additional materials. The sharing of materials increases the researcher's ethos by demonstrating to the family that the archivist cares about their relative. Researchers can find these relatives directly through Ancestry, as there is a function to locate other users researching the same individual. Almost always, if someone else is researching the subject, they have some shared ancestry. One can also locate family members using obituaries that list living relatives, who can be located through Internet or social media searches. Much like step three, this step is about leaving no stone unturned.

Before beginning this methodology, one must gather contextual information from the photograph to use in the initial queries. For example, portrait cues, stamp boxes on RPPCs, acronyms and abbreviations, handwritten correspondence data, postal codes, etc. all serve to provide information for the research. Locating and evaluating this information is made possible via performance, both the performance of the subject in the photograph and the performance of the viewer, both of whom are implicated in a dialogic performance informing and being informed by the other. Knowing these dates, names, landmarks, and other contextual information will allow for more specific searches and improve the outcome of the research model. Thus, summarily, the Nuanced Archival Triangulation (NAT) Method as applied to RPPCs entails the following steps:

Step One: Accessing and documenting public genealogical records (per Hulme)

a. Locate census records
b. Locate birth/marriage/death records
c. Begin to develop a family tree for the subjects

Step Two: Incorporating public domain narratives and stories (per Pannevaria)

a. newspaper archives

Step Three: Decoding and contextualizing RPPC data *(guerilla research)*

a. Court records
b. Community organizations
c. Yearbooks

Step Four: Knowledge sharing undigitized, community-based data

a. Contact living family members

Reaching out to family about queer history research can be fraught. Before reaching out, a researcher should evaluate each contact for signs of potential acceptance or rejection of the queer community. For example, a relative whose social media is filled with far-right rhetoric may be less cooperative than someone posting about supporting libraries. However, this rule is not hard-and-fast, as political ideologies and acceptance of queer people are not inseparable. A researcher should probably choose not to initiate the conversation by implying that their relative may have been queer. Instead, it is safe to open with broad statements, such as explaining that the scholar is doing an archival project that includes their ancestors. Requesting additional information and materials about their relative carries little risk. However, researchers must be explicit about their hypotheses before publishing the information gleaned from families.

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While transparency is key, so is timing. A scholar could identify themselves as queer before suggesting that their subject is queer to evaluate the reaction of the relative. If their response is negative, a researcher may end the conversation. Suppose the conversation ends before the relative is informed about the intention of the research. In that case, it is most ethical to discard the information learned from that relative because their consent can no longer be obtained. Pennavaria (2011a) suggested locating "the person in the family network who is most 'plugged in' and who tends to know everyone and everything" (p. 4-5). This person is more likely to be active on Ancestry.com and, therefore, could be the first person located through the website. However, because the "plugged-in" person may be less receptive to queer researchers, researchers may be better served by finding a relative who is accepting *and* has access to the researched ancestor. Often, one can find accepting family members who can provide information or serve as a go-between for more reluctant family members. This exchange is more ethical because the family maintains agency over their relative's story.

Ultimately, some families will resist the possibility that their relative was queer even if they suspect or know that information themselves. Pennavaria (2011b) acknowledged that researchers often find family secrets during their genealogical research. She contemplated, "Perhaps these family secrets should stay buried, perhaps not" (p. 13). The tension animating this consideration is the purpose hiding these secrets serves. If hiding these stories is motivated by shame, disgust, or fear, does that not reinforce the heteronormativity already present in the archives? If one of the objects of this research is to make space for queer people in archives, then the urge to maintain secrecy is antithetical to the project. The issue is alleviated, at least in part, by the avoidance of certitude in the final product. Families may be assuaged to know that their relative is not being named queer outright but instead honored through an appreciation of that ambiguity.

Despite these potential pitfalls, families often have additional materials or memories that researchers will find helpful. These may include additional photos, family stories, or outright confirmation of the subject's sexuality. These families often know more about their relatives' lives than a researcher could ever glean from a search of public records. Sometimes it can be difficult to find living relives who remember the subject, as queer people did not always have children, which can make the search for personal information more difficult or fraught.

Having outlined the NAT methodology, the following section applies it to the RPPC of Dale and Alvin introduced earlier in this research. Understanding that reading images is a literacy practice subject to the researcher's interests and research focus, I evaluate photographs alongside archival materials using my methodology without making definitive claims. The portfolio of archival materials used to read the Dale and Alvin RPPC may not provide an "objective" reading. However, it does strive towards the dialogic interplay of evidence for which Wagner (2021) advocated.

Operationalizing Nuanced Archival Triangulation

In this section, I employ nuanced archival triangulation (NAT) to research the RPPC portrait of Dale and Alvin that I curated online. Rather than demarcating the NAT method step by step, this section presents the biographical information yielded chronologically. This presentation is more comprehensible and belies the back-and-forth process associated with genealogical research, which often includes reviewing and revising previous breakthroughs as researchers uncover more information that may contradict what they previously found. Therefore, this section reflects Francis' (2004) genealogical search process' "closure" or "presentation" stage.

I discovered the Dale and Alvin RPPC on eBay, where the seller indicated the photo was "gay interest," a subject heading in the market that denotes an image the seller or viewer may find queer-coded. Depending on the seller, this label can be more or less accurate. Queer people are often more adept at spotting queer subjects than straight folks, mainly because the latter are unfamiliar with queer signals. Wagner (2021) reminded researchers that "cataloger's judgment stands in as a framing device for the positionality of the cataloger in describing a piece of information" (p. 25). Therefore, the accuracy of such labels in the market is questionable. I purchased the RPPC because it provided the data I needed to research the image – names, locations, and a date.

Once I felt the photo had queer possibilities, I began researching with genealogical methods. Finding biographical details about each subject allows for a more nuanced approach to understanding the relationship captured in the

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image. I started with my search for Dale Smith because of his writing on the back, which was an indicator of his hometown, White Cloud, Michigan. I estimated that Dale was about 20 years old in the photo, and since it was taken in 1944, I searched for “Dale Smith,” born within five years of 1924 in Michigan. Fortunately, there was only one match. Dale Smith was born on March 17, 1926, in Muskegon, Michigan, about 40 miles from White Cloud. By 1935, his family had moved to White Cloud, where his father, Ralph, worked as a civil engineer (U.S. Census Bureau, 1940, p. 6A). While studying at White Cloud High School, Dale sang baritone, ran for student council, and was active in the Glee Club (Figure 3).

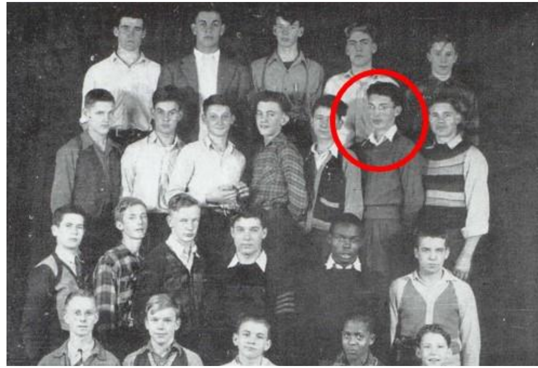

Figure 3. Dale Smith and Glee Club
(Chieftain Yearbook, 1942, p. 34)

As a component of the *guerilla research* step of the NAT methodology, I emailed White Cloud High School to request a copy of Dale’s senior year yearbook. Unfortunately, they did not have one in their archives. However, I know Dale did graduate because he would have been drafted earlier than the Summer of 1944 if he had not been enrolled in school due to his Spring birthdate. Upon high school graduation in May 1944, Dale was drafted into the Navy and left for Virginia Beach for specialization at the Advanced Airlift Tactical Training Center.

Miss Bernice Black, to whom Dale’s postcard is addressed, was a friend of his in Muskegon. Born in 1889, Bernice Black was a drill press operator at an auto factory (U.S. Census Bureau, 1940, p. 19B). By the time Dale was born, Bernice had married Adolph Mickelson. However, Adolph died fighting overseas in April 1944 (Mickelson, 1890-1944). Therefore, when Dale addressed the postcard to Miss Bernice Black, he likely acknowledged her husband’s passing in the same war in which he was about to participate.

I still needed to find Alvin, which proved more difficult since no physical location was associated with him on the RPPC. Given what I knew about Dale, I conducted a narrower national search for Alvin. For example, I searched for “Alvin Ruddick,” born within a year of 1926, based on the assumption that they were close in age. Because Ruddick is not a common last name, I was able to locate Alvin in Hale County, Texas. Alvin “Roger” Ruddick was born on June 26, 1926, on a farm in the Texas Panhandle (U.S. Census Bureau, 1930, p. 10B). I speculate he raised sheep because The Fort Worth Star-Telegram recounts how Alvin’s father, “Floyd Ruddick, furnished the 175 lambs [at auction], which brought up to 6 ½ cents a pound” (Texas Livestock News, 1934, p. 1).

Based on the Borger High School yearbook of 1943, it is not evident that Alvin participated in any school clubs; his absence from school social life may be due to farmwork. However, he was listed in the 1943 Borger school yearbook for his junior year. When asked about his ambitions in the 1943 yearbook, Alvin’s response was recorded as: “Tramp” (Borger High School Yearbook, 1943, p. 37) (Figure 4).

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Figure 4. Alvin Ruddick.
Borger High School Yearbook,
Junior year, 1943, p. 32.

A digital copy of the 1944 Borger High School yearbook is available online, but Alvin's senior portrait is not listed. I speculate that he did not graduate, but conceivably, he could have chosen not to sit for the senior year photo. Alvin was drafted into the Navy in 1944, regardless of whether he graduated. That summer, he turned 18 and reported to Virginia Beach for training, where he met Dale.

Situating the RPPC portrait in context required a survey of photography studios in the Virginia Beach area. While there are no digitally archived newspapers from Virginia Beach, the nearby city of Norfolk has a plethora of archived newspapers. For the time period of Alvin and Dale's time in Virginia, *The Ledger-Star* was the largest newspaper, hosting a series of studio photography advertisements from Rice's Photo Studio. Evidence suggests Navy sailors frequented the Rice studio – it was only a 20-minute drive from Virginia Beach, and they advertised to military personnel. In December 1944, their advertisements were romantic: "Bring him in today, while he's home, for the PhotoReflex picture that you'll cherish until he comes home again" (Social Life, 1945, December 18, p. 5).

Figure 5 (below) depicts a Rice Studio advertisement in the *Ledger-Star*. The photo is strikingly similar to the RPPC portrait of Alvin and Dale.

Figure 5. Sample of Rice's Photography (Ledger-Star 1944, p. 5)
in comparison with the Alvin and Dale RPPC

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Because the photo printed in the newspaper is greyscale, comparing the image's background to the RPPC is difficult. However, the pose and style of the advert image closely correlates with Dale and Alvin's RPPC portrait. In the Rice advert, a couple is seated before the camera, with the man dressed in military attire and the woman closely posed in front of him. In the RPPC, the men are dressed in military attire, and Alvin is closely posed in front of Dale. In both images, the couples look into the camera and smile. Still, there are a few differences between the Rice advert and Dale and Alvin's portrait. First, the Rice couple is leaning in closer to each other, their faces almost touching, whereas Alvin and Dale's faces aren't as close to one another. Second, in the Rice advert, the woman is in the foreground, angled more directly at the camera. In the RPPC, Dale and Alvin are looking at the camera from the same angle. Finally, we noticed that both couples' facial expressions are almost identical - with the person seated in the foreground smiling widely while the person in the back looks more stoically at the camera.

Photographers and studios operate with a consistent style dependent on available space, settings, and personal taste (Rosenblum & Grundberg, 2024). Therefore, it is possible that the photographer instructed each couple to smile in a particular way to achieve the desired aesthetic in the photo. The similarities between these photos strongly suggest that Dale and Alvin's photo was taken at the same studio.

Alvin's military history has been digitized, while Dale's military history has yet to be discovered. Based on the data from the RPPC, it is evidentiary that the men were stationed in the same unit, given the similarity in their uniforms and the shared time and location in which they served. Alvin's Muster Roll places him in the 7th Fleet of the Motor Torpedo Boat Squadron (U.S. Navy, 1945, November, p. 72). He had two specific duties while deployed. First, he was a Gunner's Mate, responsible for maintaining weapons on the ship. Second, he was on Patrol Torpedo duty, where he would execute fast attacks with smaller boats. During his service, Alvin sailed on the USS Salt Lake City, which was active in the Pacific Theatre.

Dale and Alvin both survived the war and returned home. To contact the Smith family, I looked for other users on Ancestry.com who had Dale in their family tree, almost all of whom have shared DNA with Dale. I used the messaging function in Ancestry to contact various relatives and began to build rapport with a single relative. In other projects, I have contacted family through Facebook, email, and phone. Family members can be identified through obituaries, constructed family trees, or word of mouth with other users on the platform. Although I contacted direct descendants, some of whom are named in Dale's obituary, none of those relatives responded to my inquiries.

The conversations that were able to happen with Dale's family informed me that after his military discharge, his immediate family agreed to finance him for a year in New York City, where he intended to sing on Broadway. However, he was unsuccessful and returned to Michigan to study at Albion College, a small liberal arts school about 100 miles south of White Cloud. Interestingly, when he returned from New York City, his immediate family left the church they had been part of for generations in favor of a more progressive congregation.

While at Albion College, Dale was the president of three honors societies and fraternities, the treasurer for the Choir, and joined the Madrigal Singers (Albion College, 1950, p. 37). He married Phyllis Chisholm, also of Albion College, on December 20, 1949 (Smith & Chisholm, 1949). His music career continued after graduation when he returned to his hometown to direct the choir at his alma mater. Three months after Phyllis passed away in 2013, Dale Smith passed away at the age of 87 (Figure 6, below). Dale's obituary notes that he was a member of the Battle Creek Community Chorus in the 1950s, the Grand Rapids Chamber Choir, and the Lenawee Community Chorus in the 1990s. He was a member or director of the church choirs in Battle Creek, Royal Oak, Columbiaville, White Cloud, and Adrian, Michigan (Eagle Funeral Homes, 2013).

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Figure 6. Dale Smith's obituary photo
(Eagle Funeral Homes, Jonesville, Michigan, 2013)

As of the publication of Dale's obituary in 2013, he is survived by two children, three grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren.

When Alvin returned home from the war, he enrolled at Wayland Baptist University in Plainview, TX. Again, he was not active in school clubs or organizations. However, as part of the guerilla research approach, the front and back pages of all the digitized yearbooks from his time at Wayland Baptist were scoured, looking for Alvin's signatures. Signatures were not indexed; they were searched manually. One handwritten signature, penned by Alvin, was found in front of A. Glenn Sage's 1947 yearbook (Figure 7).

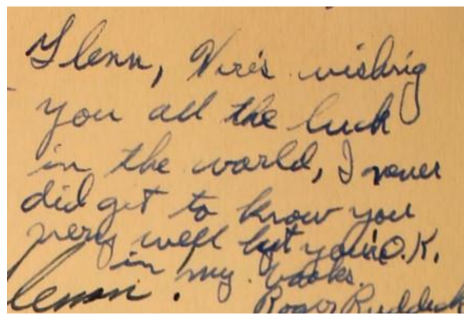
Glenn, Here's wishing
you all the luck
in the world, I never
did get to know you
very well but you're O.K.
in my books.
Roger Ruddick

Figure 7. Alvin Ruddick's signature in Wayland
Baptist University Yearbook, 1947, p. ii.

The signature reads,"Glenn, Here's wishing you all the luck in the world, I never did get to know you very well but you're O.K. in my books. - Roger Ruddick" (Wayland Baptist University, 1947, p. ii).

This signature is valuable for two reasons. First, by matching the signature with Alvin's military draft card, I can confirm that my research tracks the same person because the signature on the draft card matches the yearbook signature. Second, the signature does not match the writing on the front of the RPPC, meaning that Dale wrote the names on the image side of the RPPC and the message on the address side.

After graduating from Wayland Baptist, Alvin moved to Los Angeles to begin a career as a firefighter. Two years later, in 1950, Alvin married Charlotte Ritter in her mother's backyard. Despite a lifelong marriage, the two never had any children. Meanwhile, Alvin's career progressed, and he was promoted to Fire Captain in 1967 (Alvin R. Ruddick wins promotion to fire captain, 1967, November 30, p. 51). In 2012, at the age of 86, Alvin passed away in Los Angeles (Ruddick, 1926-2012). Nobody wrote him an obituary. He is buried next to his wife in San Fernando Mission Cemetery. I located this site through Ancestry.com, which makes suggestions based on previous research on

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the subject and AI triangulation. One could also find this information by searching on FindaGrave.com using the birth and death year of a subject alongside their legal name (Colibrí, 2022).

Analysis: Centering and Honoring the Lives of Dale Smith and Alvin Ruddick

The presentation of historical records as actualized by the NAT method arms analysis of Dale and Alvin's sexuality. If archivists can only comment on the photo alone, such commentary relies more heavily on feeling than evidence. However, the inclusion of biographical evidence in the analysis warrants more informed claims of sexuality. Although no definitive conclusions are possible, the aim of the queer archivist is not to locate homosexuals but rather to identify instances where sexual norms are transgressed and to place them in conversation with overarching social movements.

To synthesize the RPPC with the associated archival findings is to understand how Dale and Alvin exemplify and depart from the patterns of homosexuality in the mid-1940s. There are a few key moments in Dale and Alvin's biographies that indicate that they may have been homosexual or at least engaged in homosexual relations during the war. First, Alvin's hyper-sexualization, as documented in the yearbook, suggests that he was comfortable talking about sex or being perceived as sexually deviant before going to war. Later, Alvin's departure from Texas is possibly a sort of queer exodus, one which was commonplace amongst rural queers who flocked to larger cities. Further, Alvin's decision to move to Los Angeles instead of other big cities, such as Dallas or Austin, may have been an attempt to find a city with certain queer qualities. His chosen firefighter occupation could have taken him almost anywhere, yet he chose California. Moreover, the fact that Alvin never had any children invites curiosity – did he choose not to have children, or was something obstructing the fertility of the marriage? Finally, nobody wrote Alvin an obituary – not his wife, friends, or immediate relatives living nearby – which hints at ostracism. This is not to suggest that these individuals were antagonistic to the research, as confirmation of their receipt of my messages was never attained. Alvin may be the source or subject of some family secrets.

Dale's biography contains similar hints at a non-normative sexuality, although there are fewer for Dale than for Alvin. First, Dale's lifelong singing career, both in school and in the churches he attended later in life, foreshadowed the prevalence of gay men who sang in choruses later in the century (Cates, 2020). Dale being a choral singer is not enough evidence to speculate that he was queer, but his departure to New York City to attempt a career singing on Broadway inches closer to evincing that assertion. Much like Alvin's departure to Los Angeles, Dale's stint in New York City may be read as an exploration of alternative lifestyles, if not an outright escape from the rural pressures of Michigan. In part, his family's decision to leave their church would have alleviated those pressures. As part of operationalizing the guerilla research approach of the NAT method, I interviewed one of Dale's relatives, who stressed to me how abnormal it was for someone in the Smith family to leave the church they had been going to for generations. Something must have prompted this change, and the proximity of the move with Dale's return from New York City invites consideration of their motives.

Although there is evidence to suggest that Dale and Alvin may have been queer, there is also ample evidence that they were not. For example, both men married women within a few years of returning from war, and those marriages lasted for the rest of their lives. In Dale's case, that union produced children. Although it was not unheard of for men to engage in homosexual conduct in the war and return home to marry and have children, it is also possible that Dale never engaged in such conduct and married a woman as he had planned his whole life. Notably, Zealand (2013) identified a series of accounts of sailors who engaged in homosexual behavior but maintained heterosexual relationships after the war. Dale could have been one such sailor, but this conclusion is strictly conjecture without confirmation from someone who knew him personally. In fact, in the case of both men, neither of their families confirmed any homosexuality. Although it could be a family secret that even my informants did not have access to, the absence of evidence in this case is not evidence itself.

Although the NAT methodology did not generate conclusive insight into Dale or Alvin's sexuality, the evidence gathered throughout the research textures their RPPC portrait in meaningful ways. Understanding their lives not as

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a timeline but as an impression of all the evidence found through this method allows for the development of another image altogether. Watts (2018) affirmed that “these fragments of personal lives can impact perspectives on historical lives as well as the lives of people today” (p. 106). The effect that this photograph has on modern audiences is multifaceted, especially when accompanied by a detailed biography of both men. Although audiences cannot know if these men were queer, they also cannot know that they were straight. Rather than proving anything, the evidence, in this case, gives depth to the practice of queer imagining inherent in working with queer-coded materials. Archivists who free themselves from the pressure to label these subjects and instead attempt to enter a dialogue with them will find that biographical information invites a more intimate imagining of a subject’s portrait itself.

Admittedly, when I first began researching this photo, I was optimistic that these two men were engaged in a homosexual relationship. I wanted them to be. As Halperin (2000) recounted, “it is difficult for us moderns…to avoid reading into such passionate expressions of male love a suggestion of ‘homoeroticism,’” formulations that he suggested, “often act as a cover for our own perplexity about how to interpret the evidence before us” (p. 101). As I began to delve into that evidence, I found that my desire was less important than their agency. Rather than emulate the same colonialism over my subjects that many archivists abuse on behalf of their institutions, I began to see the importance of letting these men tell their own stories. With the men’s stories in mind, the journey into their lives via the NAT method left me with lingering questions such as: Were Dale and Alvin ever in touch again after the war? Did they ever mention one another to their family members?

I argue that Alvin and Dale’s RPPC is an important historical document not because it portrays queer identity in the military, although that is possible, but because it documents a type of relationship that was commonplace in the military during WWII (Ibson, 2018). In this way, the artifact offers as much to queer scholars as it does to archivists in military history, American history, and family history. The NAT methodology sheds light on multiple narratives without privileging one over the others. The biographical data collected and considered as part of the NAT approach considers the experience of one’s sexuality alongside heroism, nationalism, and colonialism. The value of unpacking Dale and Alvin’s RPPC via a nuanced approach to archival triangulation is not grounded in conclusive outcomes but rather in the evidence the method uncovers during the research process.

Discussion

We can never be certain whether Alvin or Dale were queer. Perhaps they did not know themselves. Realistically, there is little value in looking for certainties in this kind of research. I am reminded of Ginzberg’s (2012) claim that “Historical narratives speak to us less about reality than they do about whoever has constructed them” (p. 3). I again lean on Heidegger (1962) and Kant (via Rockmore, 1991) to posit that understanding the past is always constituted by our own subjective and objective experiences of the present. This research allows scholars to solicit evidence from the historical record that identifies and valorizes queer subjects in the past. Like photography, this research lets us view the physical world through our experiential lens.

The NAT methodology allows researchers to expand, contextualize, and galvanize quotidian photography in the archives. Because most RPPCs depict everyday life, NAT offers an opportunity to research individuals and communities. These images often include marginalized communities that are underrepresented in the archive, such as queer couples, making the expansion of those archives more urgent. The benefit of this strategy for research is that scholars can uncover hidden histories in everyday materials with the participation of descendants of those subjects. In addition to Queer studies, future research in Black, Indigenous, and People of Color’s (BIPOC) archival materials will be incredibly potent because the descendants of those subjects can maintain agency in how those stories are told.

Another limitation of existing research on queer images is that it centers on subjects in large cities like New York or San Francisco. Therefore, research on quotidian photography in rural communities is especially critical because these stories are currently underrepresented in the archive. Killen (2017) contended that “quotidian LGBT lives might be transformed by inclusion within participatory and accessible archives” (p. 61). This method answers Killen’s call by inviting the participation of relatives and community members who can contribute to public-facing archives. These projects have the potential to increase queer legibility across the archive.

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Conclusion

Archival photographs can provide snapshot glimpses into lives already lived or experiences already embodied, particularly the marginalized narratives of members of the queer community. I argue that researchers must begin to investigate queer archives using emergent technologies and tools that were previously unavailable. More specifically, they must learn to synthesize interdisciplinary genealogical methods that offer nuanced insight into photographical portraits. The Nuanced Archival Triangulation (NAT) methodology combines Pennavaria's (2002) method of family contribution with Hulme's (2024) methodology for researching queer textual archives to retrieve the information we can uncover about quotidian queer identity and life. While genealogical research has been utilized in archives before and in queer archives more recently, an application of a synthesized approach to archival research, like the NAT method, has yet to be employed in the study of photography. Because of photography's rich polysemy, I argue that these methods allow for greater queer worldmaking based on the snapshots. Moreover, the existing literature on and methodology for studying textual materials can complement research on photography.

While this research is suited for almost all photographic materials, future researchers should champion RPPCs as fertile ground for archival research. Because their development mode rendered postcards, RPPCs are more likely to provide researchers with the information they need to initiate archival research. Despite the utility of RPPCs for researchers, Snow (2002) notes, "Historians of photography and art have nevertheless ignored real photo postcards partially because the discipline is not ready for their overwhelming specificity and proliferation, not to mention their frequent banality" (para. 7). The structure of RPPCs, which always includes a date range and often includes a named recipient or correspondence, offers archivists valuable context to locate and research the subjects in the photographs. Because RPPCs were the catalyst for amateur photographers throughout the United States (Bogdan & Weseloh, 2006), these images could reveal a plethora of underrepresented and under-researched communities through readily available but under-utilized archives.

Notably, the NAT method reflects existing historical, archival, and photographic research methodologies. These methodologies have not been widely applied to queer archives, however, as researchers have only recently begun employing genealogical methods for queer ephemera. This methodology is not directly applicable to archival arrangement or description, mainly because many archivists working with large collections would not have time for so much in-depth research. However, the resulting case studies are unique, provocative, and uncommon in their subject matter. These case studies are vital to queer worldmaking because "queer historical voices need to circulate, to speak, beyond limited disciplinary boundaries" (Morris, 2006, p. 149). Nuanced archival triangulation as a methodology strives to provide more case studies that uncover queer histories that have been hidden in our archives. These case studies are valuable for classroom instruction as they generate conversations about archival justice and subjectivity in description.

Dale and Alvin served as the case studies in this project and revealed several possible readings of their life stories as contextualized by their RPPC portrait. While the NAT method revealed some of the image's backstories, the methodology is versatile for visual archives across the field. Photographic archives of many marginalized communities may galvanize researchers to make these histories more legible and accessible. Moreover, nuanced archival triangulation will yield increasingly precise and productive research as more archival materials become digitally available. We are at the dawn of a new age of research capabilities, and, like Alvin and Dale when their photograph was taken, we can only guess what is on the horizon.

Endnotes

[1]Found photography refers to photographs removed from their original context and found by someone disconnected from the image's origins. Found photographs are generally curated in antique stores, online auctions, and estate sales.

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[2]Paper moon photographs were among the most popular images in the early 20th century. The name refers to a large paper moon that would be placed in a photography studio with which patrons could pose. Paper moon photographs often include a romantic element.

[3]Cruising refers to an embodied practice enacted by gay men to find casual sex in times and places where such conduct would be dangerous. Especially common in the 1960s through the 1990s, cruising often included men walking past each other, exchanging glances, and then negotiating where to go and have sex. These were often non-verbal performances. I argue that I cruise photographs similarly because my non-verbal performance of finding the photographs, evaluating them, and taking them home closely mirrors the practice of cruising. For more information, please reference Corey and Nakayama (1997).

[4]Ancestry.com is the world's largest genealogy site, serving as a hub for digitized public records, user-to-user communication, and organizational software to create and maintain family trees.

[5]Real Photo Postcards (RPPCs) were a medium for developing photos created by Kodak and used primarily between 1907 and the late 1940s. The photo was printed on the front, while the back had a pre-designed postcard format so users could share it with loved ones. Not all RPPCs were sent through the mail. For more information, please refer to Bogden and Weseloh (2006).

[6] In 1919, the US Congress ratified the 18th Amendment, which outlawed the sale of alcohol in the United States. Later, in 1933, congress repealed the 18th amendment which allowed alcohol sales to resume.

[7] The Mattachine Society was an early gay rights movement started in the early 1950s. The organization was catalyzed by disaffected queer veterans who rallied against the homophobia experienced upon returning to the United States from WWII. Unlike other LGBTQ rights organizations, The Mattachine Society sought to attain equal rights by appearing professional and polished in public protests, often insisting that men wear suits and women wear dresses.

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