



# AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIO COLAVITO

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CLGBTH Non-Residential Fellowship

## Can you give us an overview of your main focus of research?

My research traces the history of trans masculinity in Canada and the US, looking at mutual aid activism, organising and community formation from the 1960s to the early 2000s.

I ask questions about how did trans men find each other? How did they get each other the resources that they need to live in a survivable and liveable trans world? And how that snowballs into questions about identity formation and community subculture formation and things of that nature.

## What prompted you to apply for the CLGBTH Non-Residential Fellowship?

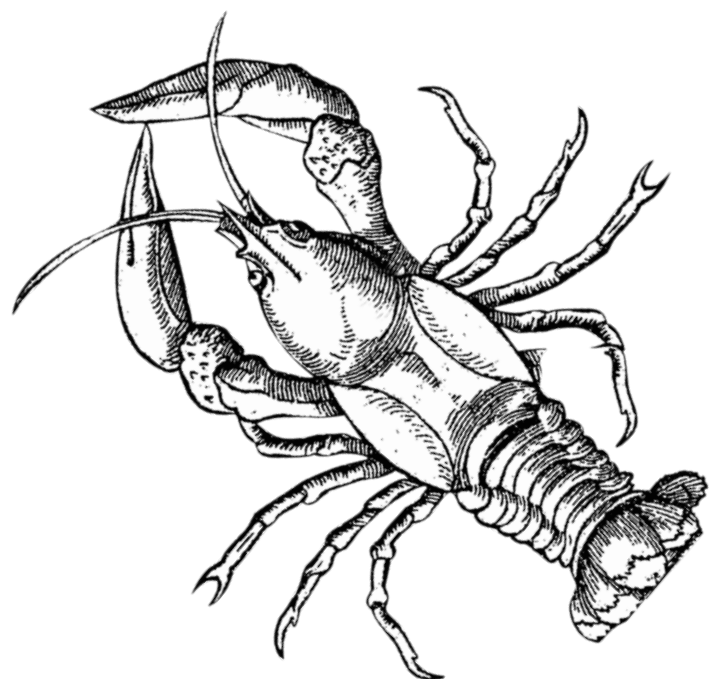
The idea for this part of the project was that - what I'm doing is creating a digital map contextualised by narrative panels and writing text and that kind of stuff. The idea being, that other trans people, other people within the community, can have access to their community histories. I applied for the fellowship because I wanted the funding to support this as well as writing a dissertation as part of my studies at University of Toronto.

## Had you used any Gale resources before your time as a Fellow?

Prior to the fellowship, I had used the *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* archive to write my master's thesis at the beginning of COVID, when all of the in-house archives were closed. And so I was somewhat familiar with what Gale had to offer, but I hadn't used *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* until embarking on the fellowship, and I used that quite generously.

## What did you really see as the main benefits for yourself in using Gale's resources, whether it be *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* or the *Lab* or both?

The main benefit of using the *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* archive, is certainly that I did not have to spend a lot of time and money going on research trips to various archives. I was able to complete some part of my dissertation and my digital map from my bedroom. But I think the real benefit comes in with *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* and creating content sets including 1500 documents just bound by a few key words. The *Lab* kind of does that work for you where you can play around with how to organise different content, how to group things together in a way that makes sense for the questions that you're trying to ask of your materials.



## What were some of the challenges that using the tools, particularly in the *Lab*, helped to overcome with your project?

*Gale Digital Scholar Lab* helped me overcome several challenges with the research. I think, one chiefly being that it helps organise some of the materials for you in a way that makes sense to you as a human person. But also, the computer kind of does some work that you wouldn't think to do for yourself.

“What the *Lab* did was help me look beyond my own assumptions and biases and towards a more holistic and robust picture of what the materials were actually saying.”

One favourite concrete example, I suppose, of what that did when I was looking at the materials, is that I was expecting to find a lot about community care and support and, you know, a lot of positive community building type sentiments around the documentation. Not that that *wasn't* there – it certainly was in certain areas, just not necessarily in the ways that I had imagined.

What the *Lab* helped me do is pull that apart, find out where those things were present. But more importantly, it pointed me to a completely other direction in the research where I got to look at the politics of visibility and how just simply saying in queer and trans publications “we exist and we live all across Canada and the US” was a fundamental political project that these guys were undertaking and something that I hadn't really been interested in thinking about or I hadn't been thinking about before. Simply just how powerful of a statement “we exist” was, particularly in the 80s and the 90s.

## Using the Topic Modelling Tool

The other place that I was able to come to that conclusion was through the topic modelling. Again, looking at the kinds of lists of words that are coming back through the software and seeing multiple classified ads, seeing the names of publications – dwindling those out using the cleaning tools – and then coming back with not much of anything other than a few keywords that I had already expected to find and that I knew that was where I was going with the research.

And so, again, when one of the biggest topics that comes out is a multiple classified ad, you're thinking, “what's that all about?” You go look into the documentation and it's simply trans men saying, “I exist here. I need this resource.” There's nothing to it other than “I need this thing and I'm trying to get it.” And this is a space where I can communicate my needs to other people in the community. And that's the story, you know?

## What were some of the surprises or kind of the discoveries that you made?

I think that a lot of the surprises that came to me through using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* were about combating my own flaws as a researcher. I'm not the most detail-oriented scholar on the planet, and so what the *Lab* helped me do is pick up things that I knew I was going to miss.

For example using the Name Entity Recognition tool was really critical to the work that I was doing, trying to locate different activists in different places and times across Canada and the US through the 60s to the early 2000s. And I know for a fact that I would have missed this one guy, Andy.

He didn't have a last name. He had just written two columns in *Transgender Tapestry* in '96 and '97, some FTM passing tips. Again, trying to help guys in his community get good information that they need to help them live in a hostile world for trans people. And so I probably wouldn't have paid it any mind. But through the computer communicating back to me that this Andy person exists, I got to look at those two articles.

It freed up time to do other things because all of this grouping was being done for me really neatly. I didn't have to go through it all by hand. And one of the other things that I ended up finding through the *Lab* somehow, was this really old website still being maintained and in operation.

The interface was like as old as I was for sure. I was like, “I haven't seen a website like this since I was in the second grade.” And at the top it was like, “If you have any questions, contact Andy at... you know, insert email” ...and I had been using the *Lab* for a while and thinking about what the kind of long duration story of this history was, how it goes from interpersonal connections to some support group organising, and then how those support groups largely move online in the late 90s and early 2000s.

And so naturally my thought was, “what are the odds that this Andy, who was writing in the physical publication in the late 90s, moved that same type of work into the online sphere the way that I know so many other trans men did.” And so, I sent Andy an email and was like, “Hey, what are the odds

you're the same Andy?" And he was delighted to be found. He was like, "Yep, I'm the same guy." And we've been in contact. And when I'm allowed to interview people, once I get my ethics approval, I will be having an oral history interview with him and getting his story recorded to use in in the map in the dissertation, and kind of give Andy his flowers, so to speak.

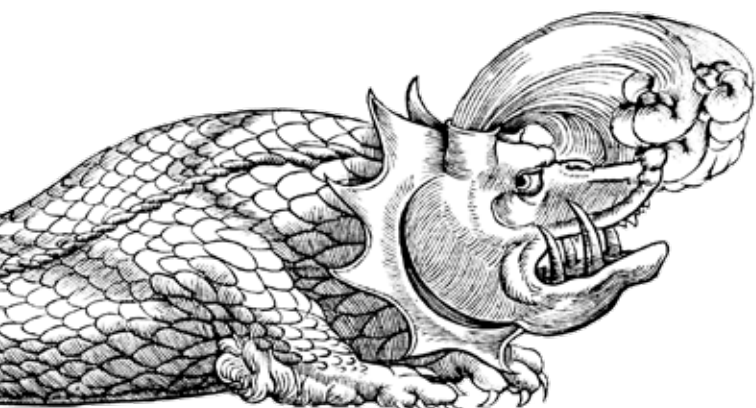
### **Tell us about the map. what the purpose of it is, and what you're hoping to achieve with it?**

The idea behind the map is that it's a 'public history' exhibition so anybody can access the map, click around, play around with what's interesting to them, go to their particular geography and if they want to see if there are any hits there, go to geographies around Canada and the US and click on those hits.

There are political stakes to the work that trans studies scholars and trans historians do in particular. The map shows that in a sense we're proving that we've always been here, and that these identity categories and these experiences don't exist in a post Tumblr vacuum - that trans people have existed long before people on the right in recent years have started yelling about it.

So, on one hand, it's this evidence that we've been here for a very long time, but also that we have been incredible organisers... community members. We have created conditions for a more survivable and liveable world. There's a history of resilience and a nurturing and a care that exists. And documenting those positive trans histories is just as, if not more important in some cases, than documenting histories of violence against trans people.

What I hope the map does, is kind of give other people within my community allies, and really anyone who wants to learn a little bit more about this history the information through presenting our public history.



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“ My suggestion to anybody who's interested in using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* is just to play with it. The amount of time that you save, not having to go through things the old school way frees up some other time for you to be playful and to go in different directions that you might not naturally feel comfortable going in.

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### **What types of materials are people going to find to discover on the map?**

The map includes a lot of different kinds of materials. I've got photographs, letters, news articles, snippets of oral history interviews, both from prior collections, but then also from the ones that I'm going to be conducting and adding to the map. So it's incredibly multimedia focused.

Usually from the traditional academic article, you usually got a lot of text. You're lucky if you have a map or one image or two or something like that, but this is really bringing the history, the actual sources to the table in a way where I still get to do some writing and make sense of it, make meaning for a general public audience, but also let people read things or look at things and decide for themselves what they think is important and what's jumping out at them from the history.

### **What were some of the collections within *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* that you used?**

I used materials from so many of the collections that the *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* have to offer; the *Lesbian Herstory* archives, the *Jim Kepner Papers*. Anything that had access to a lot of queer press periodicals became incredibly useful.

I was shocked at the sheer volume of hits that came back just typing in "FTM" or "female to male" or "trans man" because in the late 80s or early 90s, all of the queer publications, not all of them, that's a stretch... some queer publications out there, that primarily focused on the experiences of white gay men, were open to hosting short articles written by

trans men about their experiences.

Again, simply saying, “We exist.” And so, I think I definitely borrowed from a little bit of everything in the *Lab*.

### You’ve talked a lot about using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* in your own research. Can you see its applications in teaching?

I’ve used the *Lab* in my own teaching. I taught a course in the fall about LGBTQ history and activism. Part of my teaching was kind of exposing the students to the names of different activists and groups and different key figures and themes that they might be interested in that tell some kind of a story about queer and trans history in Canada and the US.

They used the *Lab* to search for keywords that they were interested in. Maybe the name of an activist they had already learned about in a lecture for example and then identify, using the *Lab* and *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*, what kinds of documentation was interesting to them.

They were then able to run some scans and analyses with the tools if they want to. By no means that they had to, if they were kind of done at the collection phase and they felt confident to consolidate three documents that they found in the archive and write something – a 1-to-2 page response – about what those documents mean in conversation with each other.

It wasn’t enough to just summarise, but to really tell a story when looking at these three documents together. Students these days, they’re really open to using digital tools. A lot of them have been using computers most of their lives, and they’re very comfortable using this kind of software.

What using the *Archives of Sexuality and Gender* and *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* really do in this instance is give undergraduates who otherwise wouldn’t have the opportunity to be a historian, become a historian. To really give students the opportunity to be historians themselves, looking at primary sources on topics that they’re interested in, not just the ten selected primary sources from the textbook that’s, you know, perhaps 50 years old already.

As an instructor, I learned a lot from the documents that they chose and that they wrote back to me about and things like that. So it was a useful teaching tool as much as it was a useful research tool.

### What kind of help and support have you received from librarians, and archivists in the field?

The saying “it takes a village,” writing a dissertation, creating a digital map, undertaking this kind of year-long project, it does take a village and I have a village of librarians and archivists around me supporting the work and pointing me to new better resources and connecting me to other people who are like minded and giving me opportunities to speak to scholars and community members that ultimately I know are going to make the work better work.

And so, yeah, libraries and librarians and archivists are a great bunch for sure.

### What was the best thing about the DH Fellowships, and would you recommend them?

The best thing about the fellowships for me was that it helped me expand my digital humanities portfolio and really kind of pushed me out of my comfort zone. I’m a very tech averse person so, I think even when I won the Fellowship, I wasn’t necessarily planning on using *Gale Digital Scholar Lab*. I thought I was going to kind of collect my documents from the *Archives of Sexuality and Gender*, and go through that in the old school way.

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“ Access to *Gale Digital Scholar Lab* really pushed me to use new methods to think differently about the materials that I was using.”

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The access to the *Lab* really pushed me to use new methods to think differently about the materials that I was using, how I was making the selections I was using around curating the exhibit, things like that. So I would totally recommend the fellowship to anyone, like: go! Go get money to do a cool project!

