

Inventory of the Martha Courtot Papers

(#2004-01)

***Note:** This document is a preliminary inventory, not a completed finding aid. The collection is surveyed but not processed, and its organization and composition are subject to change. This inventory is intended to help researchers better understand the general scope and content of the collection.*

Repository: Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society

Collection Title: Martha Courtot papers

Collection Number: 2004-01

Physical Description: 10 linear feet (4 cartons, 10 manuscript boxes)

Creator: Martha Courtot

Date (inclusive): 1960-2000, bulk 1975-2000

Language of Material: English

Abstract: Martha Courtot (1941-2000) was a working-class, lesbian feminist poet, essayist, intellectual and activist whose writings were published in over 40 journals and anthologies. Her writings largely centered around explorations of lesbian identity, classism, fatness, motherhood, sexism, and nature. The majority of the collection consists of Courtot's poetry, as well as other writing, including journals, essays, and novels.

Preferred Citation:

[Identification of item], Martha Courtot papers (#2004-01), The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society.

Conditions Governing Access:

Collection is open for research.

Publication Rights:

For the status of the rights to this material, please contact the GLBT Historical Society archives.

Acquisition Information:

For this material's acquisition information, please contact the GLBT Historical Society archives.

Processing Information:

Inventory created by Isaac Fellman in 2020, based on early processing by Christopher Scott in 2008, with updates by Marjorie Bryer in 2011. Updates to the inventory added by Ash Waltz in 2025.

This inventory uses terminology for LGBTQ people that was in current use at the time of its creation. Descriptive language for queer identities evolves quickly and some of these terms may now be dated or even offensive. Finding aids are themselves historical documents; they reflect the moment in which they were written and often reflect the terms that subjects used for themselves. Please contact the GLBT Historical Society Archivist with questions or comments.

Biographical/Organizational History Note:

Martha Courtot was a working-class, lesbian feminist poet, essayist, intellectual and activist whose writings were published in over 40 journals and anthologies. Courtot was born on August 18, 1941 in Cincinnati, OH to a working-class, Catholic family. Her mother operated a beauty shop and her father worked as a taxi cab driver before his passing when Courtot was 10 years old. She spent her childhood as an avid reader and learner, but by her high school years, Courtot realized she would not be able to afford college. Upon graduating, she saved up enough money to move to New York City, seeking to escape the limited work options and deep-seeded racism of her hometown.

In the early 1960's, Courtot met Bob Lawton and the pair began a serious relationship. Between 1964-1971, they welcomed three daughters, married, and purchased a house near Englewood, New Jersey. During this time, Courtot lived as a suburban housewife, caring for her daughters and experiencing middle-class comforts for the first time in her life, but feeling alienated from herself in the process. In attempts to mitigate her depression and feelings of disconnection, she began her associates degree at a local college and published her first poems in two small poetry magazines. The success she experienced in college coupled with her growing discontent in multiple areas of life led to Courtot's separation from Lawton in 1973.

The couple divorced in 1975 and Courtot began life as a full time student and working mother, periodically swapping custody with her ex-husband over the course of their daughters' childhoods. After graduating with a BA in Sociology from Seton Hall University in 1976, Courtot got involved in "A Woman's Place," a mountain retreat collective for women in life transitions located in the Catskill Mountains of New York. Immersed in the women's community, Courtot came out as a lesbian and began a short-lived relationship with a woman named Nancy. Courtot spent the next few years repeatedly moving throughout the US as she weathered bouts of poverty and depression. By the late 1970's, she settled in Sonoma County, which became her home for the following decades of her life.

From 1978-1988, Courtot worked providing services for seniors through the Council on

Aging of Sonoma County. She received her MA in English from Sonoma State University in 1987 with Presidential Scholar Award honors. She wrote a regular column for the Sonoma County Women's publication *Women's Voices* from 1986-2000, was a founder of Lesbian Voters Action Caucus (LVAC), and was a founding member of Fat Chance, a fat women's trapeze performance group. Continuously building upon the work she began in the early 1970's, Courtot had numerous works of poetry, prose, and essays published in journals, literary magazines, periodicals and anthologies. She additionally authored five of her own self-published and small press poetry collections, participated in multiple lesbian writers groups, and regularly read works at women's bookstores throughout the Bay Area. As evidenced in her published writings as well as her unpublished correspondence, notes and journal entries, Courtot spent decades of life deeply reflecting on the ways racism, classism, sexism, fat oppression, sexuality, religion, motherhood and colonialism shaped her life and the world around her.

In 1988, Courtot met Reverend Cathy Bohrman and the pair began a 12 year relationship that lasted until Courtot's death. Around this same time, Courtot became disabled due to diabetes and other chronic illnesses that greatly impacted her daily functioning. In January of 2000, Courtot was diagnosed with end-stage NASH (Nonalcoholic Steato-Hepatitis), leading to her death on April 25, 2000. After her passing, friends and family of Courtot published a retrospective collection of her writings titled, *The Bird Escapes*.

Scope and Content:

The majority of the collection consists of Courtot's poetry, as well as other writing, including journals, essays, and novels. The poetry collection includes poems published in journals, anthologies, newsletters, three published collections of Courtot's poetry, several binders of both published and unpublished poetry, manuscript drafts, notes, and edits. Other writing in the collection includes essays, critical writing, journalism, novels, and screenplays. The creative writing includes at least two novels and a screenplay. There are several essays written by Courtot during her time at Sonoma State University included in the collection. There are several personal journals that range from 1975 to 2000. The collection also includes a few photographs and personal/professional records.

Indexing Terms:

LGBTQ

Lesbians

Parents

Poetry

Fat activism

Aging

Feminism

Diaries

People with disabilities

Religion and spirituality
Catholics

Related Collections:

Gayle Reichert collection of Martha Courtot papers (2018-82), GLBT Historical Society

Container Listing

Series 1. Writing

Subseries 1.1: Poetry and Short Stories

Box 1:

1/1	I: "A-I"	Not Dated
1/2	I: "J-S"	1974-1984
1/3	I: "T-Z"	1960's – 1984
1/4	II: "1960 to 1976 Pre-Journey"	1960's – 1976
1/5	III: "Journey to Santa Rosa 1979"	1977-1979
1/6	III: "From Santa Rosa 1980"	1980-1984
1/7	"The Woman Moving Through The Dark"	Not Dated
1/8	"GLOE Women Writer Readings"	1978-1992
1/9	"The Drowned Girl Now Rises"	Not Dated
1/10	"Now All the Blood Is Outside Me & Other Poems" 1993	
1/11	"The Music of My Mother & Other Poems"	1998

Box 2:

2/	"II From Santa Rosa 1980"	1980-1984
2/	"II Journey to Santa Rosa 1979"	1974-1979
2/	III: "1960-1979"	1960-1979

2/	Notebook: "Carried to GLOE class to write during writing periods," circa 1979	
2/	Pilgrimage: A Season in Berkeley	Not Dated
2/	"Amnesia" & Other Poems	1997
2/	Copies – for binders	1993-1998
2/	"Writing Notes to Myself" & Other Poems	1995-1996
2/	Not for Book	1995-1998
2/	Possible Poems	1978-2000
2/	February 18, 1986 & Other Poems	Through 2000
2/	Poems Old	1974-1987
2/	Poems Old II	1974-1988
2/	Unfinished	1985-1988
2/	Novel Notes	1997
2/	Novel Notes	
2/	Novel Notes	
2/	Novel Notes	
2/	Novel Notes	
2/	Misc. GLOE Critiques & Poems With Corrections	1997-1998
2/	Everything Breaks (Manuscript & Correspondence)	2007

Box 3:

3/32	Manuscript Part 1	1992
3/33	Manuscript Part 2: <i>A Spiritual Biography & Light Flashes</i> , 1993, 1995	
3/34	Manuscript Part 3	1990-1995

3/35 Manuscript Part 4

3/36 Angels & Prophets—novel notes

Box 4:

4/37 “Rejects Disc 2” Poems from 1989-94 1989-1994

4/38 Poetry 1992-1993 1992-1993

4/39 Poetry 1997-1998 1997-1998

4/40 Manuscript Collection Part 1 1990-1993

4/41 Manuscript Collection Part 2 1992

“The Drowned Girl Now Rises”

4/42 Manuscript Collection Part 3 1990-1993

4/43 Manuscript Collection Part 4

4/44 Manuscript Collection Part 5 1995

Box 5:

Series 2: Correspondence

Subseries 2.1: Professional

5/45 Correspondence – Professional Circa 1997-1999

Subseries 2.2: Personal, Health, and Literary Fund

5/46 Correspondence – Personal, Health, and Literary Fund Circa 2000

5/47 My Life

5/48 Essays

5/49 Poems in Progress and Notes 1995-1998

5/50 *Tribe* (a collection of Courtot Poems)

5/51 Rituals, Prayers, and Chants

5/52 Short Stories

5/53 Miscellaneous Short Writing: “Betrayal” & “In Praise of Daughters”

5/54 *The Priest Killer* (Notes and Drafts)

Subseries: 1.3: Screenwriting

5/55 *Light Flashes*, a Screenplay

5/56 Screenwriting – Creative Writing & Professional Notes

Subseries 1.4: Journalism

5/57 Writing for *Women’s Voices Sonoma* 1986-2000

County & The Press Democrat

Box 6:

The Blood Gift, with comments from Adrienne Rich

Box 7

This carton contains all of the published poems by Courtot in the collection. There are several different journals and anthologies included that contain her work. A few of the titles include *Sinister Wisdom*, *Common Lives/Lesbian Lives*, *Logos*, *The American Voice*, *Manzanita Quarterly*, *Ruah*, and *Oasis*. Also, the box contains three published collections of Courtot’s work: *Night River* (1982), *Courtot Manuscript* (1983), *The Woman Moving Through the Dark* (1983). *Courtot Manuscript* and *The Woman Moving Through the Dark* were self published and featured cover designs/illustrations by Tee Corrine. *Tribe* (1977) is also a published collection of Courtot poems (in 5/50) as well as *Journey* (1977).

Box 8:

Subseries 1.5: Essays and Critical Writing

Subseries Note: These writings are from Courtot's graduate-level classes at Sonoma State University, where she pursued a Master's in English during the 1985 and 1986 school years.

8/59	The Waves (Research and Paper)	
8/60	Critical Writing: Yeats & Rule	1985
8/61	Rosario Castellanos & Ballad	
8/62	D.H. Lawrence Poetry	
8/63	Papers – SSU – Fall 1985	1985
8/64	Graduate School Work, Spring 1984	1984
8/65	Las Mujeres!	
8/66	Notes	
8/67	Spring 1985	1985
8/68	House of Secrets	1985
8/69	House of Secrets – Notes and Drafts	1985
8/70	House of Secrets – Research	1985
8/71	Mystics – Research & Writing	

Box 9:

Sonoma State University schoolwork

9/72	<i>Heart of Darkness</i> – Paper & Research	
9/73	Witness and Exile	1985
9/74	SSU Work – Spring 1986	
9/75	Master's Thesis – <i>There Is Something I Have to Tell You</i>	

Box 10:

Novel *Wilderness Prayer*

10/76 *Wilderness Prayer* Notes

10/77 *Wilderness Prayers* Chapters 13-19

10/78 *Wilderness Prayers* Draft 1995

10/79 *Wilderness Prayers* – 1995 – Folder 1 of 2 1995

10/80 *Wilderness Prayers* – 1995 – Folder 2 of 2 1995

10/81 *Wilderness Prayers* – 1997 – Folder 1 of 2 1997

10/82 *Wilderness Prayers* – 1997 – Folder 2 of 2 1997

Boxes 11, 12, and 13 are the journals of Martha Courtot. They are arranged chronologically, except for the journals in Box 13, which have no dates. The dates range from 1975-2000.

Box 14:

14/1 “Martha Memorial on KBBF Radio” Sonoma County

14/2 Sonoma State Papers 1976-1987

14/3 Job Records

14/4 Copyright Forms 1995

14/5 Obituary and Death Certificate 2000

14/6 Memorial Celebration Handouts & Speech 2000

14/7 Miscellaneous, including photocopied photo of Courtot at age 4, biography, letter to friends written at age 50

14/8 Martha Courtot Photograph 1999

14/9 Photographs and memorabilia

14/10 Sonoma State University Diploma & Presidential Scholar Award