Aché: a publication by and for Black Lesbians

Tuesday, June 25, 2024 by Catherine Cassels and Rebecka Sheffield

Special Collections & Archives (SCA) is thrilled to announce that we have acquired several issues of *Aché: A Journal for Lesbians of African Descent*. This groundbreaking magazine ran from 1989 to 1993 and was a space where Black lesbians in the Bay Area of San Fransisco could share perspectives and information about their community. Alongside co-founders Liset Tellefsen and Pippa Flemming, many readers of *Aché* also contributed to the magazine, sharing their stories and experiences with a broader audience. The journal was distributed in 12 countries and shared the work of over 200 contributors.

With sections on health, spirituality, current issues, fiction, poetry, art, and erotica, *Aché* became a conduit for a community just finding its voice in the early 1990s. It was also a place where readers could find out information about upcoming events, or services that were community owned. The magazine included a calendar of events and a bulletin board that highlighted resources and opportunities to bring the community together.

Aché was distributed as a free publication in and around the Bay Area. To support the magazine, organizers held film screenings, erotica readings, dance parties, and other fundraising activities. These events maintained a politic of equity and inclusion, always ensuring that they were hosted in wheelchair accessible venues. The organizers also advertised "no one was ever turned away for lack of funds," suggesting that inclusion was more important than money while recognizing the experiences of poverty that impact those with intersectional identities.

Similar to *Turnabout*, profiled in a previous blog post, *Aché* helped many in the Black Lesbian community overcome feelings of isolation, as founders worked to "replace isolation with connection and invisibility with power." *Aché* made a commitment to publishing previously unpublished writers and elevating voices and stories that had been left out of the mainstream press.

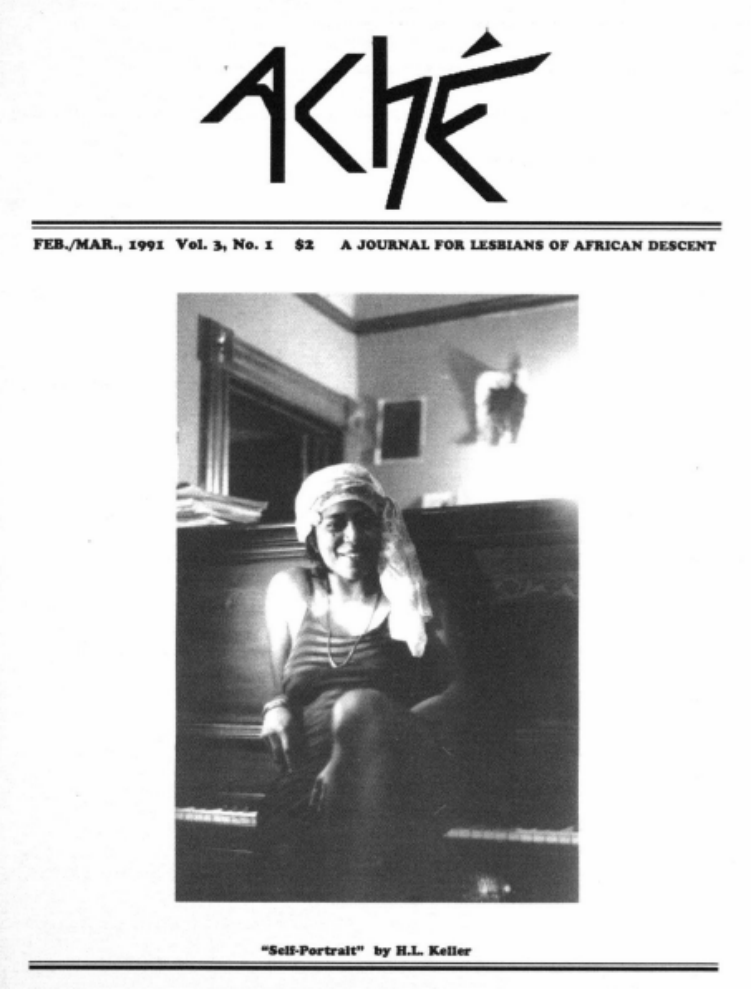
Co-founder Liset Tellefsen's papers, including documentation about the creation, distribution, and impact of *Aché,* are now part of the collections at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Careful

preservation has sparked a renewed interest in the magazine, its founders, and the community it served.

Issues Available at SCA

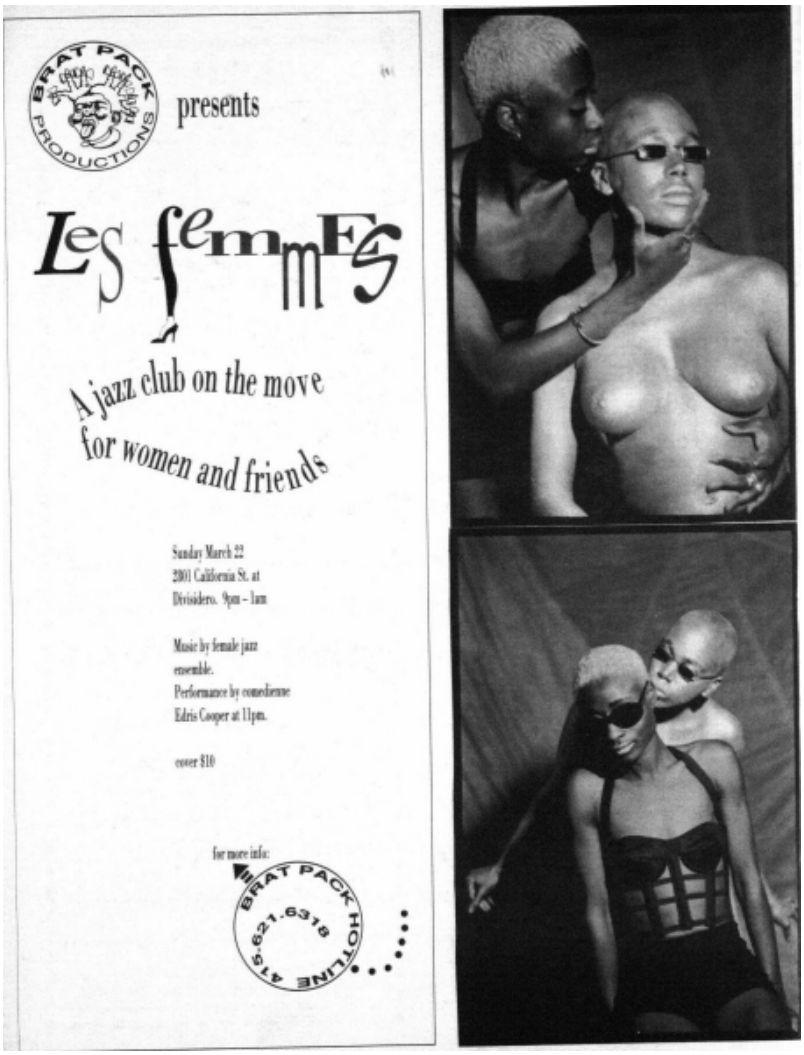
SCA has acquired 5 issues of *Aché* published between February 1991 and Spring 1993. Below is a description of each issue in our collection with some highlights from the contents. We welcome anyone from the Waterloo community and beyond to book an appointment with SCA to come see these in person!

Feb./Mar. 1991, Vol. 3, No. 1 begins with open letters, emphasizing the importance of amplifying readers' voices and creating community in the publication. Articles are a balance of covering more significant issues affecting the community, in addition to more lighthearted stories of an uplifting and empowering nature. One article reports on the first National Conference on Women and HIV Infection, intending to fight "against the racist, sexist, and classists health care system," with representation of women across the country arguing for better access and treatment in health care settings. Another celebrates the tenth anniversary of the percussion and dance group Sistah Boom, highlighting the growth and achievements of the troupe throughout the years and inviting readers to join the ensemble. The issue also contains a large section of erotica, from short stories to poems, offering readers a variety of perspectives on relationships and intimacy. Another article, not categorized as erotica, discusses Afra-Sapphism and "sex as a sacred act" or "spiritual implement." The bulletin board offers a variety of community connections, such as "roommate wanted" ads, calls for submissions for publications, and support groups. A further calendar page in this issue highlights community events such as dances, exhibits, films, music events, and more, sharing events that may interest readers, as well as advertising to help support fellow members of their community.



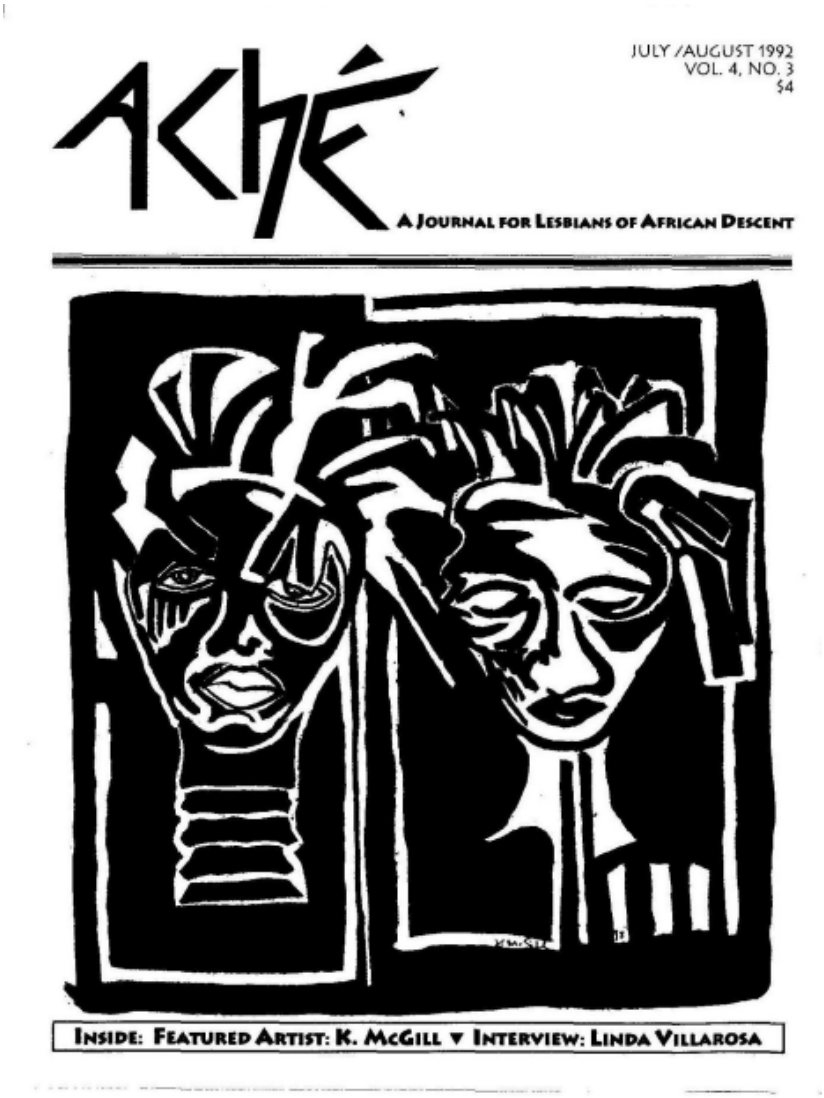
February/March 1992, Vol. 4, No. 1 includes a cover feature for "Les femmes," a female jazz ensemble "for women and friends," promoting a music and comedy night in March 1992. This edition writes about a variety of international issues, from subscribers looking to get the publication in South Africa to a few stories from Berlin, highlighting *Aché* Lesbian Week in the city, in addition to a call to action for support of Afro-German lesbians living in berlin, who were facing racism and attack in the city one year after the unification of East and West Germany, with many incidents occurring after the anniversary of the unification. This issue introduces a health section, with its initial installment being more of a Q&A column about LGBTQ+ issues. The volume is also heavy on creative writing, with a section of five poems and two short fiction stories. Regarding reader engagement, the issue also features the results of a Diversity of Sexual Expression Questionnaire by *Aché* in an earlier issue. The results of the questionnaire highlight the similarities and differences between the members of the Black lesbian

community and aim to create a sense of belonging and healing for those who otherwise felt alone in their sexuality. The calendar emphasizes the *Aché* series, an event on the last Wednesday of every month. This month's event is a screening of the movie "Sisters in the Struggle," a film about the contemporary Black women's movement in Canada, despite the event being hosted in California. The bulletin board contains ads for various groups, including a multi-ethnic lesbian soccer team, clothing stores, and hairdressers.



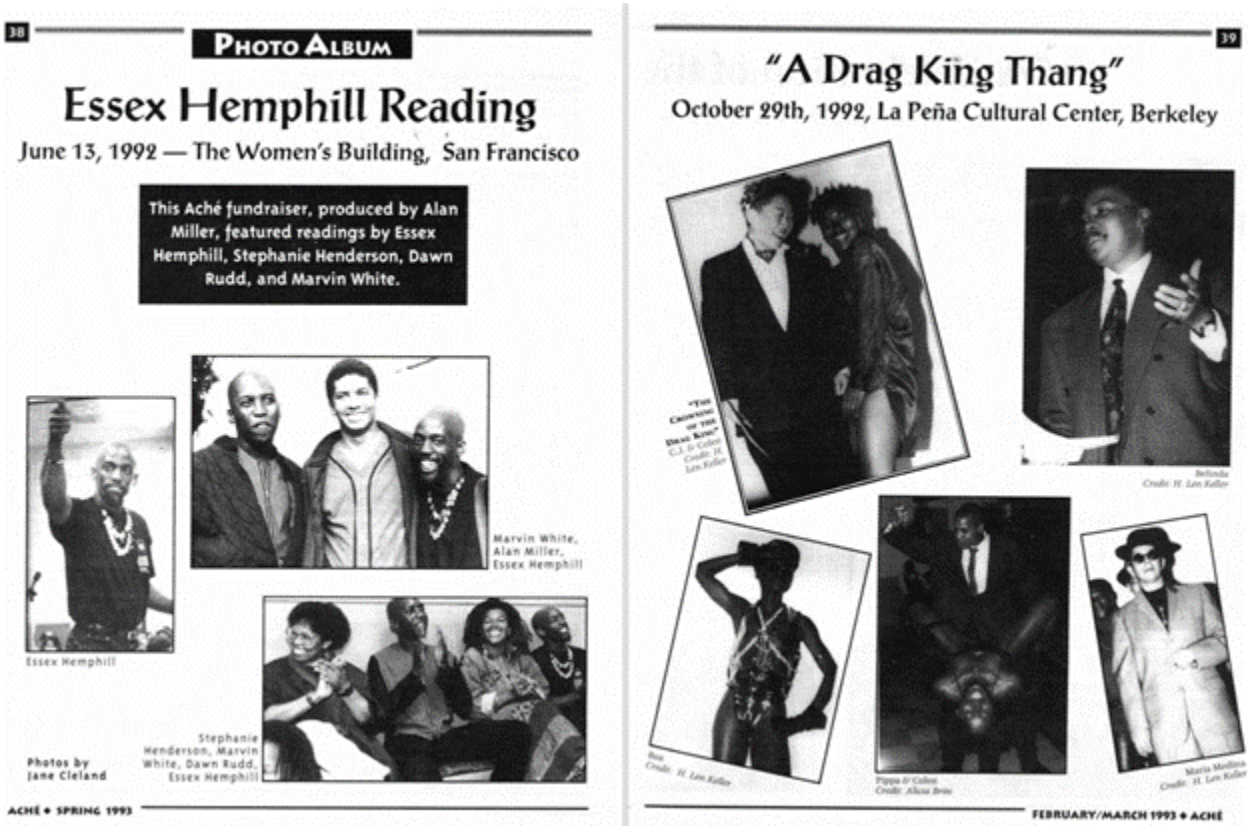
July/August 1992, Vol. 4. No 3 contains less fiction and poetry than the previous issue. It focuses on hard-hitting lifestyle pieces, including an opinion about the importance of voting George Bush out of office in the

upcoming 1992 election. Many pieces in this issue express anger and grief regarding issues in the community, including the presidential race, police brutality, and the death of a community member who was seeking help and support. On a brighter note, the magazine welcomed a new health editor, reflected in her first column about wheatgrass and other naturopathic healing methods and an interview with a fellow health editor for *Essence Magazine*, Linda Villarosa. This issue also sports a new layout with more art from the featured artist of the month after switching publishers, allowing for a livelier layout. The calendar feature of the last two issues has been replaced with an insert containing more events, but the bulletin board remains at the back of the issue. Unfortunately, SCA does not have the accompanying calendar insert for any of the later issues, making it hard to keep up with the community events that may have occurred at this time. However, the bulletin board still shows what kind of support and groups existed in the community.



Spring 1993 Vol. 5, No. 1 is the fourth-anniversary issue of *Aché*, and the Letter from the Editor reiterates the publication's goal to publish the work of the readers and be "a strong and powerful voice for lesbians of African descent worldwide." This issue contains a large section in memorial of the author and poet Audre Lorde, whose work deeply involved her identity as a Black lesbian and feminist. Lorde's work was one of the most visible representations of Black lesbian identity, making it influential and touching to many of the readers of *Aché*. She was also an active supporter of the publication, even writing a letter to the readers in 1991, published in this issue. This issue also continues to focus on health, expanding on the benefits of wheatgrass from the previous issue, differentiating between a cold and flu, and offering natural remedies for flu and viral infection, including food and herbal therapy, vitamins and minerals to take, and bodywork to do to

feel better and clear the infection. This issue includes photo albums from recent events, including from the Essex Hemphill Reading, "A Drag King Thang," and "A Celebration of the Spirit of Audre Lorde." The pictures give life to the community and encourage readers to attend events which look like wonderful and joyous celebrations. Also new to this issue are graphic ads beyond the bulletin board for local businesses in San Fransisco, adding a bit of visual interest and an eye-catching touch.



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PHOTO ALBUM

Essex Hemphill Reading

June 13, 1992 — The Women's Building, San Francisco

This Aché fundraiser, produced by Alan Miller, featured readings by Essex Hemphill, Stephanie Henderson, Dawn Rudd, and Marvin White.

Marvin White, Alan Miller, Essex Hemphill

Essex Hemphill

Photos by Jane Cleland

Stephanie Henderson, Marvin White, Dawn Rudd, Essex Hemphill

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"A Drag King Thang"

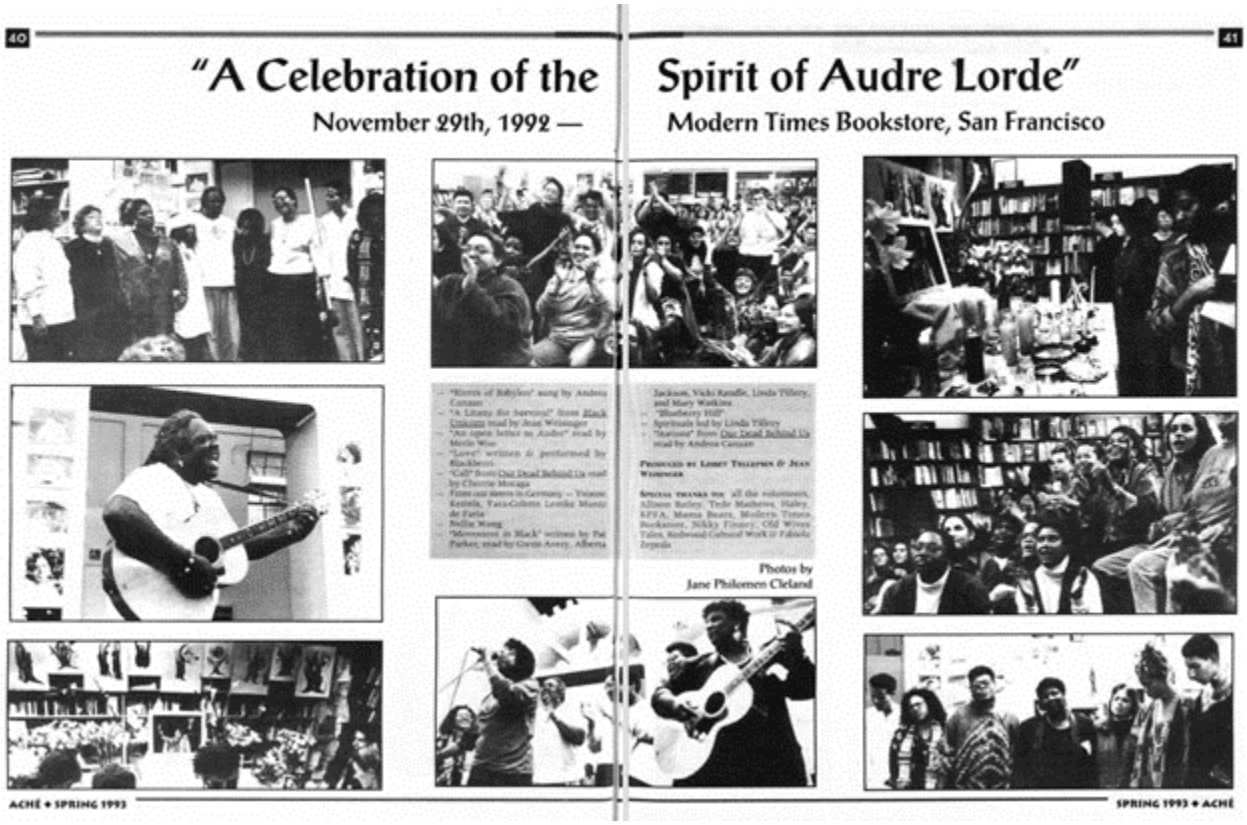
October 29th, 1992, La Peña Cultural Center, Berkeley

Belinda
Credit: H. Lee Keller

Pippa & Cobra
Credit: Alissa Brito

Maria Medina
Credit: H. Lee Keller

FEBRUARY/MARCH 1993 • ACHÉ



Spring 1993 Vol. 5, No 2 features a guest editor, Blake Aarens, who is involved in the sadomasochism community, with many articles in the issue focusing on this topic, particularly from a Black lesbian standpoint, as this perspective was largely lacking in the SM community at the time, with the predominant perspectives being from white gay men. A new addition is a book review of *Race Matters* by Cornel West. The health article in this issue focuses on the issues of HIV and AIDS, providing readers with information about the symptoms and transmission of the virus, as cases were still rising in the US during the 1990s. While lesbians were at a lower risk of transmission, AIDS disproportionately affected the Black population in the US, and this information was important to the *Aché* community. This issue also announces the formation of the Aché Archive Project, led by Lisbet Tellefsen, which documents the history and activities of Black lesbians. As mentioned earlier in this post, some of this archive is preserved at Yale University in the Lisbet Tellefsen papers. A final exciting piece about this specific issue is that the SCA copy contains a misprint, with one of the pages bound upside down, which is a fun quirk!



Read more about Aché and its community here:

- *The Aché Project Virtual Exhibit* by The Black Lesbian Archives
- *'ONE WITH THE EARTH': Mapping Solidarities for the (Un)Queering of Space in the Black Lesbian Journal Aché, 1989–1993* by Alesia Montgomery
- *#ACHÉ* by Adérónkẹ́ Adéjàre

Complete publication issues can be found online at the Lesbian Poetry Archive.

Stay tuned for our final installment in the Pride series, and as always, happy Pride Month!