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## Review of Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives

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**Jean Bessette. *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives: Composing Pasts and Futures*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018.**

Jean Bessette's *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives: Composing Pasts and Futures* examines materials documenting lesbian history to consider the power these items wield to shape perceptions of the past and hope for the future, influence identity, and build community. Bessette casts a wide net in her study of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century lesbian life and culture, which includes the midcentury organization the Daughters of Bilitis, early community archives, 1990s films, and YouTube videos. Borrowing a term coined by queer film scholar Lucas Hillebrand, she employs "retroactivism" to mean a "displacement—and replacing—of pejorative accounts of lesbianism with new versions of the past [as] an activist strategy to effect change in the present" (10).

Chapter 1 focuses on Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon's seminal *Lesbian/Woman*, published in 1972. Martin and Lyon were founding members of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first lesbian organization in the United States. Established in 1955 to provide a safer alternative to the bar scene, DOB quickly evolved from a social group into an activist organization, holding meetings and publishing *The Ladder*, the first American lesbian magazine nationally distributed. Although DOB dissolved in the early 1970s, Martin and Lyon continued their advocacy work—in particular, their goal to promote self-acceptance among lesbians—with *Lesbian/Woman*. The book was a deliberate effort to counter negative representations of lesbians and same-sex desire. Comprising anecdotes taken from correspondence sent to *The Ladder*, *Lesbian/Woman* featured personal accounts arranged by subject with minimal interpretation, prioritizing the writers' personal experiences while also revealing them to be part of something larger. For example, Bessette observes that by providing several consecutive accounts describing letter writers' searches for and failures to find useful information about lesbianism, the meaning of these narratives is changed, transforming isolated incidents into shared experiences. By recording the personal stories of lesbians in the United States, *Lesbian/Woman* proved to be the vital resource that the women featured in the book had desperately needed.

During this period, the rise of the gay liberation and second-wave feminist movements also helped spur the founding of the first gay and lesbian archives in the country. Because academic special collections had ignored gay and lesbian history, the effort these grassroots archives made to collect, preserve, and provide access to such materials was critical. Their collecting policies were thoroughly democratic: to obtain publications, photographs, journals, films, and ephemera documenting the daily lives of ordinary gay men and lesbian women who historically had been rendered invisible. According to Bessette, another motivation for the establishment of these archives was concern over what already had been lost or forgotten, particularly as gay history increasingly came to describe Stonewall as the beginning of the historical narrative. Chapter 2 highlights two of the first lesbian archives founded during this era, the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in New York in 1974 and the June L. Mazer Archives (JLMA) in Los Angeles in 1981. Here the author considers issues of cataloging and classification with an eye toward how these collectives created their own systems of categorization distinct from those of public or academic libraries, which, if they acknowledged homosexuality at all, relied on Dewey Decimal or Library of Congress terminology that stigmatized and pathologized it. The LHA and JLMA,

then, not only did the important work of collecting and making available these materials when other institutions failed to do so, but also challenged homophobia by resisting the discourse and standards that reinforced it. This is particularly significant given that many stories of quests for self-knowledge during this period centered around disappointing, often painful attempts to find information—as *Lesbian/Woman* underscored—with libraries playing a central role in this experience. The LHA and JLMA presented an alternative, recognizing that language has the capacity to perpetuate inequalities or offer new narratives.

During the 1990s, independent, LGBTQ-themed films—christened New Queer Cinema by scholar B. Ruby Rich—emerged alongside the rise of activist groups such as ACT-UP and Outrage and the growth of queer studies within the academy. Chapter 3 considers the work of lesbian filmmakers within this movement, and in particular movies that used the concept of the archive and archival material to reflect on, critique, and create lesbian history. Bessette’s close readings of Barbara Hammer’s *History Lessons* and Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* are particular highlights. *History Lessons* consists of historical film clips and still photographs—including filmed speeches, educational videos, and pornography—that Hammer manipulates to read as clearly, visibly lesbian. One notable example Bessette cites is a piece of footage featuring Eleanor Roosevelt at a women’s conference in the 1920s, her speech modified to include the word “lesbians.” In *The Watermelon Woman*, Dunye fabricates archival material that enables her protagonist, a young black lesbian filmmaker, to begin to piece together the life of a long forgotten African American actress. In doing so, “Dunye’s film is taking and granting a license to invent the histories concealed by racial, gender, and sexual biases in the historical record” (125). By altering or inventing archival material, both films address the shortcomings of the historical record and provide counternarratives of lesbian history.

Bessette contends that in the past twenty years, as LGBTQ issues have become more visible and new technologies have enabled novel opportunities for documenting and sharing stories, learning about lesbian identity has taken new forms and moved online. Chapter 4 examines lesbian stories within twenty-first-century video projects such as the It Gets Better Project (IGBP) and YouTube videos. Founded in 2010 by author and activist Dan Savage, IGBP was created to prevent LGBTQ teen suicide through first-person videos that feature LGBTQ adults relaying messages of perseverance and empowerment. The website, which encourages visitors to share their own stories, currently contains thousands of videos of individuals recounting difficult early experiences and overcoming struggles, collectively offering a powerful rebuttal to the still persistent and damaging idea that life for LGBTQ individuals is inevitably one of loneliness and hardship. Because of this chapter’s concentration on contemporary material available online, how it contributes to Bessette’s stated project of lesbian history and archives is not entirely convincing. For example, although she notes that YouTube is a proprietary website, she fails to acknowledge the vast difference between a video posted to this site and one housed at an archival institution, an important distinction to make in a work invested in reflecting on the consequences of preserving and providing access to information and historical materials for a marginalized group.

This treatment of archives runs throughout *Retroactivism* and is a serious shortcoming in an otherwise thoughtful work. An assistant professor of English at the University of Vermont, Bessette is well versed in critical theory about archives but too often imprecise or inaccurate

about archival material and work. For example, she refers to the book *Lesbian/Woman* as an archive, calls YouTube videos “digital archives,” and considers the process of uploading videos to such sites “archivization” (a frustrating word choice given that it privileges Jacques Derrida over professional terminology and because there is nothing archival about this process).

While Bessette clearly admires grassroots archives such as the LHA and JLMA, she seems skeptical of institutional archives. Perhaps because of this, she fails to recognize any potential overlap in the missions of these two kinds of repositories. She is overwhelmingly positive when describing her research trip to the LHA, but her account of a visit to the UCLA special collections to use JLMA materials is starkly negative and reads as either oblivious about or hostile to professional standards and their intent to safeguard materials: “This basement room is strictly monitored. When I visited . . . an administrator guarded the locked door and buzzed me in after I had locked all of my belongings outside in a locker and specified which two boxes I would be permitted to peruse that day. Inside the cold, silent room, another administrator would go to a concealed area and bring me one small box at a time” (92). This kind of writing not only perpetuates misunderstandings of archives and archival work but also ignores the field’s commitment to supporting research like Bessette’s (as evident in UCLA’s partnership with the JLMA).

The ways in which historical materials can enable marginalized people to make sense of who they are and their potential to transform individual and collective narratives is central to *Retroactivism*. As Bessette notes, “Collecting, composing, and revising the past . . . has been an important mode of activism and identity building in the twentieth century” (11). From *Lesbian/Woman* to the It Gets Better Project, these case studies stress the value of the recorded experience of the ordinary, unknown LGBTQ individual, and *Retroactivism* reflects on both the challenges of and need for preserving materials from this group. The volume will be of interest to readers of LGBTQ history, women’s history, and gender and sexuality studies. Bessette’s view of archives and archival work, however, makes *Retroactivism* a book that archivists may want to approach with caution.