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Review of Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times

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Cover Page Footnote

Andrew Flinn, "Archival Activism: Independent and Community-led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions," *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011): 2, accessed 10/18/2020, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9pt2490x>. K. J. Rawson & Cristan Williams, "Transgender*: The Rhetorical Landscape of a Term," *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* 3, no. 2, para. 8, accessed July 7, 2020, <https://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-3/transgender-the-rhetorical-landscape-of-a-term/>.

Rebecka Taves Sheffield. *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times*. Sacramento, Calif.: Litwin Books, 2020.

Rebecka Taves Sheffield's new book, *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times*, published by Litwin Books (<http://litwinbooks.com>), is a comparative case study that examines four prominent gay and lesbian repositories, contextualizing them within the history of the lesbian and gay rights movement. Sheffield, former executive director of the ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives (ArQuives), examines that repository, the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (ONE), the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives (Mazer), and the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). With one repository located in Toronto, two in California, and the fourth situated in New York City, Sheffield's study ensures that the different developments of the movement in each locale are represented. Sheffield was able to "draw comparisons across different institutions, to enrich the project with multiple perspectives, and to avoid making assumptions about a cohort of lesbian and gay archives without exploring the various socio-political and historical contexts that affect each organization differently" (18). Because all four organizations grew out of social movements, Sheffield had a theoretical base and common vocabulary on which to ground her study. By contextualizing the foundation of the four archives using the local history of LGBTQIA social movements, Sheffield effectively demonstrates the need for a deeper understanding of community archives and their foundational roots, as well as ways that they must continue to evolve.

Extensively researched, the author uses institutional records, oral histories, personal interviews, and informal conversations to document the histories of the repositories examined in her comparative study. Sheffield accessed the personal papers of founders of the individual repositories to examine the correspondence, journals, and personal collections that frequently made up the foundational collections of the four archives. These collections helped to contextualize the creation of the archives within the sociopolitical climate of the era.

Sheffield attended an event in 2013 at the ArQuives in Toronto, including an exhibition that highlighted photos taken of queer Canada, made up of "those who participated in the Gay Liberation Front and women's lib, feminists, socialists, activists, and writers" (3). As part of a critical conversation around the exhibit, one unnamed academic scholar declared, "The queer archives is a failed project" (5). This pronouncement led to the author's initial premise: "The queer archive is a failure because it can never fully represent the experiences of all queer people; someone or some group of people will always be left out" (7). As Sheffield considered the scholar's statement, she transitioned from contemplating queer theory to archival methodology, and realized that without contextualizing collections within shifting demographics and social and political climates, queer archives may indeed be considered failures.

Sheffield's approach incorporates archival and social movement theory into her analysis. Archival theory views the archivist as an activist in their efforts to ensure that the voices of marginalized peoples are removed from the shadows through new ways to process and describe materials, new subject headings and thesauri, and more mindful cataloging practices. According to Andrew Flinn, these efforts are "explicitly identified with a political agenda," one that Sheffield connects to

attempts to mainstream diverse sexual identities.¹ Social movement theory attempts to explain why social movements occur and what develops out of those movements.

Sheffield views the four archives she examines as bridges to a different type of queer archive that reflects the evolution of queer social movements, opening up new and greater understandings of sexuality and gender (14). The author defines the queer archive as “an abstract place where the evidence of non-normative sexualities and gender non-conformity has been preserved” (11). Social movements of the 1970s centered on gay liberation and lesbian feminist movements; however, the focus shifted to human rights and nondiscrimination, in part due to the impact of AIDS on gay and lesbian communities during the 1980s and 1990s (9). Gay and lesbian archives provide documentary evidence of social movements and their shifts, but they do not include all iterations of sexual identity and diversity.

Sheffield divides her study into two sections. For the first four chapters, the author devotes a chapter to the history of each institution. Using a narrative style, section 1 is fairly straightforward, with little theoretical analysis offered. In section 2, Sheffield comparatively analyzes the evolution of the repositories and their current states. Sheffield considers several strategies on which the institutions have depended for their respective survival and evaluates why a strategy that worked for one institution might not have been appropriate for another.

Chapter 1 examines the ArQuives, located in Toronto. According to the author, the concept for the ArQuives evolved out of the gay liberation movement and efforts to ensure that the voices of the gay community were not silenced. During the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ed Jackson, a member of the Toronto gay community, worked with historian James Steakley on a series of articles on homosexuality in the Third Reich. Steakley translated documents from German that described a vibrant gay life in Weimar Germany before 1934, when Nazi Germany began arresting men known to participate in homosexual activities. Government officials destroyed “any evidence of [gay men’s] social political activities” (32). The gay community of Toronto took the warning to heart, with the German experience becoming a key motivating factor in the initial collecting practices.

Sheffield examines the ONE in chapter 2. The author uses mostly secondary sources to narrate its history, unable to interview any of the original founders as they died before she started her project. The history of the ONE began with the early homophile movement in post-World War II Los Angeles (54–55). Initially founded by Jim Kepner as his personal collection, the archive grew out of research that Kepner did for his columns for *ONE* magazine. Even though other archives merged with the ONE Archives, Kepner’s papers still form the bulk of the collections. The entire repository is now part of the University of Southern California and is considered the “single largest collection of lesbian and gay materials in the world” (76).

In chapter 3, Sheffield explores the Mazer Lesbian Archives. The author places the foundation of this repository within the context of “socio-political environments that have privileged gay men’s voices over those of lesbian women,” which created obstacles to operations (79). This included access to money, location, and expertise. The difficulties the archives faced led to its move from

¹ Andrew Flinn, “Archival Activism: Independent and Community-Led Archives, Radical Public History and the Heritage Professions,” *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 7, no. 2 (2011): 1–21, 1 (quotation).

the Bay Area to Los Angeles. Cherrie Cox and Lynn Fonfa began collecting materials from local organizations and other relevant groups and events during the late 1970s. Cox and Fonfa formally established the West Coast Lesbian Collection in 1980, following the advice of lawyer Donna Hitchens, who urged that they apply for nonprofit status. Eventually outgrowing Cox's home, the repository's original location, Fonfa and Cox packed up the collections and moved them, transferring title to the Connexus Women's Center as a resource library and archives for the organization. Although the archives have received donations from prominent lesbians, including Margarethe Cammermeyer and the mother of Ellen DeGeneres, Sheffield makes clear that the Mazer remains predominantly a repository for materials from the daily lives of average lesbians.

Chapter 4 discusses the Lesbian Herstory Archives, located in Brooklyn, New York. According to Sheffield, "the LHA was one of the first public lesbian organizations in the United States and one of the first lesbian archives in the world" (109). The Women's Caucus of the Gay Academic Union began collecting materials related to lesbian presses and lesbian separatism in 1974. This collection became the foundation for the LHA. The organization set up a general foundation, the Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, and listed the archives as an information resource. This prevented the threat of confiscation of materials by the Regents of the State University of New York, since archives were considered educational institutions and subject to regulation by conservative regents (122). The LHA remains an independent community organization, staffed primarily with volunteers known as "archivettes," and continues to center its collecting policies on the lives of lesbians.

Section 2 explores strategies of survival; contributions made by founders, volunteers, and supporters to the archives; and the shift from independent community archives to LGBTQIA collections held by institutional repositories and the tensions that shift has engendered. Sheffield continues the discussion of the four archives begun in section 1, comparatively examining the findings from her research and incorporating more theory into her analysis.

Chapter 5 explores the ways that the four archives "have negotiated challenges, maintained momentum, and taken advantage of lucky breaks" (140). Sheffield acknowledges the unorthodox ways that the ArQuives and the other repositories examined in her study have managed to survive. This includes last-minute checks from donors, fundraisers held in local bars, and drag shows that split the profits between performers and the sponsoring organization. Sheffield cites "coherent, defensible, and inspiring mission statements" as key in fundraising efforts, because they encourage emotional investment in the goals of the organization (146).

As Sheffield points out, the fear of fascism weighed heavily in the establishment of the ArQuives, and it played a role in the establishment of the International Gay and Lesbian Archives, the precursor to the ONE. Both the LHA and the Mazer were established in response to erasure and neglect of lesbian lives, including by gay men's organizations. Each archive includes "a fear of erasure and a desire to place oneself in history" in its mission statement or mandate (145). This reflects the trend in archiving to ensure that the voices of marginalized peoples are no longer silenced through ways of describing and cataloging collections.

Although Sheffield views the establishment and survival of the four archives through the lens of social movement theory, she highlights contrasting views from people involved with each

repository. Several volunteers stated that they were “not really political,” surprising Sheffield who viewed the archives as part of each social movement and assumed the materials collected were “needed to build movement ideology” (148). The classification of each archive as a nonprofit organization allows them to remain neutral in a political climate, thus preventing them from offending anyone in their community and donor pools. It also allows the institutions to broaden their appeal for donations, helping to somewhat stabilize their financial situations.

Chapter 6 examines “the human dimensions of archives and how the people engaged in archival practices shape the collections in ways that reflect their own skills, capacities, and priorities” (169). All four archives are staffed mainly with volunteers, although there are a few paid staff members, and collections frequently manifest volunteers’ priorities. Sheffield views the archives as “political projects” that reflect the endeavors of those involved in the movements and ensure the social movements that birthed the repositories are legitimized (171).

In chapter 7, Sheffield explores the tensions that exist between community archives and academic archives. Citing Kate Eichorn’s *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (2013), Sheffield points out that “one of the primary ways in which institutions benefit from acquiring and keeping activist records is that these collections might serve as material evidence for the assertion and maintenance of human rights” (196). Eichorn questions if universities’ efforts to acquire specific special collections do not place those collections in opposition to the goals of queer social movements in challenging neoliberalism. Sheffield demonstrates the ambivalence faced by gay and lesbian archives when approached by academic institutions and the implications they must explore when deciding on maintaining their independence, partnering with a university archives, or allowing themselves to be absorbed by such a repository.

In her conclusion, Sheffield discusses some of the complex issues that the LGBTQIA community must confront. In readdressing her original question regarding the failure of the lesbian and gay archive, she points out that because of shifts in society’s understanding of sexuality and gender identity, lesbian and gay archives do not represent the entire queer experience, including that of intersectionality. Building on Tania Canas’s argument that “diversity . . . is almost always seen through a white lens,” Sheffield asserts that until predominately white organizations are willing to address structural inequalities, QTBIPOC (queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and people of color) will not commit to joining forces with such organizations (235–36).² Sheffield argues that “it is possible to undertake the work necessary to address inequalities while continuing to respect the radical interventions the archives has made over the years to recover, reclaim, and reimagine queer histories” (238). It is the tension between the success of the lesbian and gay archives and the silences of queers in the archives that Sheffield finds the most challenging issue as lesbian and gay archives move forward.

Sheffield’s voice is clearly heard in her study, almost to a fault. Standard practice in scholarly writing is to refer to people by their first and last name the first time they are introduced, then to use last names only. Sheffield refers to a number of women at the two lesbian archives by their first names throughout her narrative, clearly implying a personal relationship with the various

² Tania Canas, “Diversity Is a White Word,” ArtsHub, January 9, 2017, <https://www.artshub.com.au/education/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/professional-development/tania-canas/diversity-is-a-white-word-252910>, quoted in Sheffield.

people she is discussing. This habit is distracting to the reader, making one speculate as to the specifics of the relationship between Sheffield and the person to whom she is referring.

Sheffield discusses the destruction of a professional library left by sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, an early proponent of protections for “homosexuals and transgender people” (32). The author’s use of “transgender” is anachronistic. According to Professor K. J. Rawson, associate professor at the College of the Holy Cross and director of the Digital Transgender Archive, and Cristan Williams, a trans historian and the founder of the Transgender Center, the term was first coined in the 1965 edition of psychiatrist John F. Oliven’s book *Sexual Hygiene and Pathology*, originally published in 1955 (in which the term did not appear at all), but it did not gain popular use until the 1990s.³ Self-identity is a key component of gender, and it is only appropriate to use the correct terminology as understood by historical actors.

Although the LGBTQIA community has evolved over the ensuing period examined in Sheffield’s study, it is possible to support gay and lesbian archives and honor the social movements they have pioneered while at the same time advancing that work even further. Archives are not static spaces that stagnate as society advances. In the last thirty years, many archives and special collections have shifted their collection policies’ focus from dead white guys to those silenced by society and historical scholarship. Since the social revolutions that took place in the 1960s and 1970s, new ways of thinking about society have given way to new fields of study, including LGBTQIA history.

Other than the style issues discussed, the book is well-written and clearly fulfills the intention of the author to provide insightful analysis into the roles of gay and lesbian archives. Sheffield illustrates why lesbian and gay archives were essential after the social movements of the 1970s, and highlights the current need to create queer archival spaces to carry on the mission of providing a space for those who feel left out of mainstream lesbian and gay communities. *Documenting Rebellions* is a useful addition to the literature on archives, social movements, and today’s shifting politics.

³ K. J. Rawson and Cristan Williams, “Transgender*: The Rhetorical Landscape of a Term,” *Present Tense: A Journal of Rhetoric in Society* 3, no. 2 (2014), <https://www.presenttensejournal.org/volume-3/transgender-the-rhetorical-landscape-of-a-term/>.