

## Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories

Edited by Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell. Albany: SUNY Press, SUNY Series in *Queer Politics and Cultures*, 2015. 372 pp. Hardcover and EPUB. \$95.00. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-4384-5903-5; EPUB ISBN 978-1-4384-5905-9.

As an archivist of women's and LGBTQ history at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, I was greatly anticipating the publication of *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives*. One of the editors, Jaime Cantrell, is a recipient of a Mary Lily Research Grant from the Bingham Center, and several other contributors are past grant recipients, including Agatha Beins, Julie Enszer, and Whitney Strub. In the chapter "Secrets in Boxes," Craig Loftin notes that researchers filter primary sources through their own life experiences; this review is filtered through my own experiences working with researchers and LGBTQ archival materials as a curator, reference archivist, instructor, and occasional processor.

Amy L. Stone, associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Trinity University, researches LGBT history with a particular interest in LGBT activism as a social and political movement. Jaime Cantrell is visiting assistant professor of English at the University of Mississippi and is currently writing a book about lesbian sexuality in southern literature. They share an interest in applying feminist and queer lenses to interdisciplinary historical research on LGBTQ lives. The editors were deliberate and thoughtful in their selections, intentionally including pieces by new scholars or "amateur" researchers who might not be considered professional historians (p. 10). As someone who works with graduate students conducting research for their dissertations and with undergraduates working on a much smaller scale, I appreciate the variety of perspectives and approaches to primary sources and to archives themselves as institutions.

The editors frame this volume by asserting there is "something undeniably queer about LGBT archival research" and that such research is "part of a process of recovery and justice for a queer past and present" (p. 3). They also explain their concept of embodied research and the convergence of the intellectual and scholarly with the "emotional, erotic, and embodied" (p. 9). Archivists are increasingly interested in understanding the significance of affect, as evidenced by the growing body of literature on this topic. Stone and Cantrell note that "the historical emotion of the past and the present is intertwined in the body of the scholar reading and handling documents from the queer past" (p. 6). By reading these ethnographic

accounts of “how it feels to do queer archival research,” archivists can learn much about how different people perceive and experience our spaces and interpret our work, regardless of whether they work with LGBTQ collections (p. 11).

The anthology is divided into four parts, addressing materiality, nontextual archives, marginalization, and cataloging of queer lives. The essays in this volume take the embodied, affective, and personal experiences of archival research and overlay them on the scholarly and intellectual experiences, while also using them to inform knowledge creation beyond the traditional usage of manuscripts and objects. In the foreword, Ann Cvetkovich acknowledges the shifts in the landscape over the twelve years since the publication of her influential book *An Archive of Feelings* (Duke, 2003), which addresses “the traumatic loss of history” for LGBTQ people not represented in conventional archives (p. xvii). Cvetkovich asserts that these essays “affirm the importance of the archive as a site of practice—that archives are not static collections to be judged by what they include or exclude but places where we do things with objects” (p. xvii). The volume does not ignore archival omissions, but it is a relief to at least temporarily move beyond critiques of archival failures and absences to understand what scholars can do with the materials archivists preserve. Even though many archives have a long way to go in improving accessibility on a number of levels, researchers nonetheless do find a way to make spaces for themselves in our reading rooms.

Part 1, “Archival Materiality,” presents archival materials as artifacts and objects (beyond their content), the archival institution as a place, and archivists as human beings who can influence research. In this section, Agatha Beins contrasts her experience of working in the volunteer-run Lesbian Herstory Archives with the more formal settings of the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College and the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute. In “Secrets in Boxes: The Historian as Archivist,” Craig M. Loftin explores another counterarchive,<sup>1</sup> the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives at the University of Southern California, through his experience of being both a researcher and a volunteer processor. The profiles of two well-established queer community archives thus provide history and context to LGBTQ lives, while also describing how the spaces themselves often influence the research process.

Some community archives have been professionalized to varying degrees or have become allied with academic institutions; for example, the recent partnership between the June Mazer Lesbian Archive and UCLA, although tensions still remain as the relationship between community and institutional archives evolves. In another chapter, Maryanne Dever details her quest to seek evidence for an intimate relationship between actress Greta Garbo and Mercedes de Acosta, and the necessity of reading beyond the page and past the finding aid to find traces of such relationships. She writes, “[o]ur indifference to the embodied nature of archived documents is matched by practices of formal archival

description that traditionally focus on the scope, scale, and significance of a collection, while giving only the most perfunctory account of its physical state: meters of shelf space, numbers of boxes or folders, numbers of pages” (p. 66). As a whole, this section raises questions about the lines between history creators, archivists, and historians, and the relationships among them, even questioning the neutrality of paper itself as a container for transmission of text (p. 67).

Part 2, “Beyond the Text,” explores nontextual archives including objects (aka realia), audiovisual recordings, posters, art, and even plants. Greg Youmans’s chapter, “Elsa Gidlow’s Garden,” demonstrates that some of the pieces of community cannot be captured by a traditional archives. Despite my initial skepticism about plants as archival objects, I was moved by his idea that “the exuberant remains of Gidlow’s garden call on us to become gardeners ourselves, tilling the soil and planting seeds for new, queer forms of generational connection and remembrance” (p. 103). After Julie Enszer conducted research at the Bingham Center for her chapter, “Feverishly Lesbian-Feminist,” she wrote an article for the Bingham Center’s newsletter about her experience discovering the lavender batik outfit Minnie Bruce Pratt wore to accept the 1989 Lamont Prize given by the Academy of American Poets for her book *Crime Against Nature*. I am one of the people who helped pack up Pratt’s papers, including this outfit, and previously had been doubtful of the research value of such items. Most archives have their share of objects that past owners held and valued but that seem to hold little scholarly significance beyond this physical association or potential for exhibits. By describing how carefully Pratt must have selected this particular outfit, feminine, yet distinctly lesbian, to accept an award for her book of poetry about the pain of losing custody of her two children for the crime of openly loving women after leaving her husband, Enszer transformed my understanding of how this material object could be read as text and subtext. I also find great value in her account of the emotions she experienced in the reading room at a table just outside my office. Many of my colleagues have felt the prick of tears or laughed aloud in delight, moved by the materials in our archives, yet we rarely reflect on how researchers are also having these feelings as they discover connections with the people whose lives are recorded in the archives.

Part 3, “Archival Marginalizations,” interrogates representations of marginalized queer populations and “how to do justice to archival representations of racial, ethnic, and gender marginalizations in the archives” (p. 12). This section is relevant for archives seeking to increase and diversify their LGBTQ holdings as well as to better describe existing collections in finding aids and catalog records. Robb Hernández’s chapter exposes the heteronormativity of oral histories documenting the Chicano art movement and his process of excavating queer stories despite the illusion of “sexual neutrality” (p. 177). Two chapters focus on transgender identities in the archives, noting that archival practice often glosses over the complexities and evolution of trans terminology, and

pointing out the distinctiveness of trans history from lesbian and gay history. Despite the widespread use of the queer-inclusive acronym LGBTQ across many U.S. and Canadian archives, these archives are usually weighted either toward gay men or lesbians, with trans people, bisexuals, and LGBTQ people of color at the margins. These chapters also address the complexities of privacy for potentially sensitive materials and access challenges for researchers.

The final section, “Cataloging Queer Lives,” explores “autobiography, agency and the ways LGBT lives are cataloged in the archive,” defining “cataloging” and the self-documentation and self-naming of the archives creators themselves rather than how processors describe their papers (p. 12). Despite this difference in usage and understanding of the term “cataloging,” this section offers useful explorations of how queer individuals and communities value recording and preserving their own histories as an essential part of their identities. The closing chapter by Cantrell focuses on southern lesbian feminist print culture, analyzing the North Carolina-based publication and collective, *Feminary*. Cantrell completed this chapter before researching the papers of Minnie Bruce Pratt and Mab Segrest at the Bingham Center; however, the members of the *Feminary* collective were deliberate in documenting and communicating the labor of their process in the journal itself. This demonstrates how much scholars can excavate from the resources they access, and I can only envision how much more this piece will evolve as she incorporates the rich materials she encountered at the Bingham Center.

Although useful to many scholars working in different disciplines with an interest in queer histories and LGBTQ archives, archivists can read this volume as a series of user case studies and explorations on affect and embodied research, a concept that transcends LGBTQ archives. This book also serves as a call for diversifying the historical record on LGBTQ lives and a revisiting of descriptive practices of queer collections and underdocumented areas more broadly. Some archivists may critique the lack of the voices of archivists themselves, both as contributors and as authors whose works are cited throughout the volume, but it is useful to reflect on our profession, our institutions, and ourselves as perceived from outside.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this volume and in other literature, “counterarchive” is used interchangeably with “community archives” created outside of government and academic institutions, particularly in connection with LGBTQ community archives. Counterarchives reimagine and create alternatives to traditional representations of marginalized populations in conventional archives by creating community-based collections of materials in less formal spaces, often staffed by volunteers, activists, and historians (pp. xxvi, 7–8).