Review of Bessette, Jean. *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives: Composing Past and Futures.* Southern Illinois UP, 2017. 202 pages.

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Arguing for the rhetoricity of the archives and culling from a variety of primary sources, particularly those crafted and curated by and for lesbians, Jean Besette's *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archive: Composing Past and Futures*, traces the process of historicizing lesbian identity. She calls such a process retroactivism, defined as the displacement of singular, often exclusionary, histories with newer versions in an attempt to effect change in the present. Retroactivism enables the writing of new, more inclusive, more queered histories, which in turn foster in the present a collective identity of and for lesbians. In effect, we broaden history in order to re-articulate the present. Further, she argues that histories of lesbianism have been composed "not merely to collect and record the figures, acts, and accomplishments of women with same-sex desire, but also to *forge* a sense of shared identity across time and difference....these historiographic acts actually helped mobilize lesbian identity" (7, emphasis in original). The archives are built both to preserve the past, but also to help understand and delineate a sense of what it meant and what it means to be lesbian. Throughout the book, in emphasizing the constructed nature of the archives, she reminds her readers that archives are not infallible and that the process of retroactivism can and perhaps should be applied toward other mis- or underrepresented groups.

As Bessette lays out in the introduction, her project of recovery and re-reading of lesbian archives brings together feminist, queer, and rhetorical historiographical methodologies. Taken together, these three methodologies productively challenge more traditional histories that excluded and silenced women, as well as pathologized lesbianism, to show how lesbian archives worked against these gaps and mis-identifications. She looks at non-traditional archival materials and archival spaces, as well as documentary films of lesbian history. Her argument that these types of materials are important to consider when dealing with non-mainstream groups, organizations, or peoples, is a valuable reminder for researchers to look beyond standard archival documents and ways of organizing materials to find other forms of historical

evidence and other classificatory systems that these groups used to historicize and legitimize themselves. Each of her chapters focuses on a different medium of production to explore the "technological contexts" of the queered lesbian archive. In overlaying different methodologies and different archives, Bessette is, in many ways, reflecting the very expansive associations she notes in the archives. Her book is therefore not just a history of lesbian collective identity, not just a treatise on archival research, not just a rhetorical reading, but all three woven together.

Chapter one traces the development and reception of the text *Lesbian/Woman*, a collection of self-reported, written anecdotes from lesbian women. Bessette examines how *Lesbian/Woman* itself is an archive, one that helped to create both identification and disidentification among lesbians in the 1970s. This text-based archive began in the 1950s with the Daughters of Billitis (DOB), a lesbian group formed by Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon in response to the "pathologization and criminalization of same-sex desire" (28). Such villianizing marked women who liked other women as "variants" who were bar-hopping, over-sexed, drug-using deviants. In response, DOB started publishing a monthly magazine, *The Ladder*. As the DOB started dissolving in 1970, Martin and Lyon began composing *Lesbian/Woman* based on the earlier published anecdotes from *The Ladder*. The selected anecdotes where chosen to convey a lesbian identity that conformed to "mainstream expectations" (29) of womanhood (monogamy, respectability, moderation). In positioning *Lesbian/Woman* as an archive, Bessette argues for the inclusion of anecdotes as a form of historical evidence: "anecdotes are ephemeral because they are experiences articulated secondhand and retold in absentia of the subject whose experience is divulged, with no material record to authenticate it" (39). Taken together, the anecdotes grouped within *Lesbian/Woman* are rhetorical in that they showcase a strategically curated collection of lesbian experiences that "had specific, *interventionist* effects on its readers' understanding of themselves as lesbians" (41, emphasis in original) because they directly undermined the pathologizing, yet "official," narratives. Bessette also examines the limits of this archive. The anecdotes created a "homonormative" archive that not every lesbian could identify with. For instance, Bessette discusses Virginia, whose experience as a lesbian was markedly different than those showcased in *Lesbian/Woman*. Further, the text ignored the roles of bars in the forging of lesbian identity. Thus, *Lesbian/Woman* showcases the rhetoricity of archives in what it includes and excludes, and in which experiences are validated and which remain marginalized. In talking about the omissions, Bessette reinforces the idea that even archives "with expansive and ephemeral notions of evidence risk exclusivity" (57). This idea of exclusion/inclusion is further explored in chapter two.

The Lesbian Herstory Archive (LHA) in New York City and the June L. Mazer Archives (JLMA) in Los Angeles are the focus of chapter two, "Classifying Collections." Relying on Carolyn Miller's definition of *topoi* as "conceptual shapes or realms," Bessette argues that classification as used in these archives is a rhetorical *topos* that encourages identification, not division. The flexible classification systems used by LHA and JLMA created radically inclusive spaces that responded to the needs of their imagined audiences—women who are looking for artifacts that reaffirm their own stories and experiences. Yet, both places deliberately maintain their identities as archives because of the power and authority given to archives to make "official" histories, even as they create spaces for non-academic researchers. While both LHA and JLMA are archives, they do not seem to follow basic archival tenets. For instance, once the LHA acquired materials they did not always archive them in the traditional sense (e.g. relying on original order, provenance). Instead, as researcher Kate Davy recounts: "[i]nto these boxes had been tossed, in no particular order, press releases, programs, scripts…" and so forth" (73). Or, sometimes disparate items were deliberately placed next to each other, such as a pair of boots worn by the ten-time marshal of the Dyke March next to a collection of 1940 and 50s pulp fiction paperbacks. Bessette argues that while quite distinct in their queer identities, their placement encourages an "associative analogy" wherein the different, but nonetheless valid, histories help create a fuller lesbian herstory.

The next *topos* she looks at is synecdoche and repetition, using the so-called "Gutter Letter," written by Eleanor Coit, and held at LHA. This love-letter was thrown in the trash by Coit's family after her death and then literally retrieved from the gutter by a friend of the archive (hence the name). The letter synecdochically represents lesbian identity—the expelling of lesbian experience from society and then the finding of home at the LHA. The original letter is housed in the Coit special collection, but it was reprinted in the newsletter and appears in the archive's travelling slide show. The letter exists in different categories and in doing so, breaks down strict classification systems. The letter is about Coit, about lesbian herstories, and about the archive's mission simultaneously. Finally, Bessette looks at the function of photographs in each of the archives. One notable photo exhibit at the JLMA is a photo collage screen (think room divider) on which are plastered hundreds of photographs. The screen, titled "Celebrating the Women in my Life, 1915-200?" was created by Ester Bentley. Most of the images are not clearly labeled, but researchers are starting to identify some of the women when they appear in other connections. The ability for collections to share a "connective tissue" across time and place demonstrates another moment of retroactivism. They depict lesbians having long, fulfilling, multi-dimensional lives full of diverse relationships. In seeing the rhetoricity of the archives in their *topos*, we also see what is missing

or elided in histories (in the case of the LHA, it is the histories of women of color), and we see places where new histories might be found to add to lesbian histories.

Perhaps the most non-traditional archives are examined in chapter three wherein Bessette looks at documentary films of lesbian history. She identities six films and pairs each film with the multimodal rhetorical strategy it uses in pursuit of retroactivism. The five strategies and films are: 1. Unstable identity categories using Hammer's *The Female Closet;* 2. Achronological memory using Hammer's *Tender Fictions*; 3. Unapologetic imaging of taboos using Hammer's *Nitrate Kisses*; 4. Fictitious archives using both Hammer's *History Lessons* and Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman*; and 5. Camp historiography using Carlomusto et al.'s *Not Just Passing Through*. These films are more than recovery projects: they are challenges to such action. They use the archives, sometimes even creating archives—as is the case with *The Watermelon Woman* where director Dunye actually makes an archive to historicize her fictional main character—to help write lesbian histories. At the same time, the films recognize that such histories are necessarily incomplete, biased, and not always pretty. Indeed, the films do not shy away from "taboo" subjects and from making the audience uncomfortable. For instance, Hammer's *Tender Fictions* tells a series of non-linear stories, none of which are figured as the Truth. In playing with the reliability of the past, Hammer's film allows each story, each past, to be equally plausible and possible. Another of her films, *Nitrate Kisses*, depicts an older lesbian couple engaged in explicit sexual acts, overlayed with narration from other lesbians sharing memories of growing up gay. Taken together, the images and voiceover "expose the fractures within lesbian communities" (117) and force viewers to consider exclusions in their own depictions of lesbian identity and in the process of historical recovery. Bessette argues that these films demonstrate "*historiographic* retroactivism," a queer approach to the often oversimplified process of recovery.

Finally, Bessette asks "what happens when retroactivism goes digital" (130)? In chapter four, "A History of Discontinuities," she finds both "reverence and remediation in the ways subsequent generations frame the archives of prior retroactivists, demonstrating the endurance *and* malleability of the fruits of their historiographic labor" (135, emphasis in original). For example, the LHA sought to create a DOB documentary video in 1987. While the video was not made, the oral histories done for the film were preserved by the LHA and are now available online. As Bessette points out, the oral histories were conducted through the lens of the LHA (whose approach to lesbian identity was quite different than that of the DOB). Thus, her reminder that archives shape the evidence they hold is one that should be well-heeded by archival researchers. We must "attend critically to the circumstances of the production and

preservation of historical evidence" (135) as much as we heed our own expectations and constructions of (lesbian) identity and of archival documentation.

Bessette ends the book examining queer digital archives, noting that because archives are kairotic, and because we are in a different moment—one where identities like lesbian, gay, queer, transsexual are more readily understood and discussed—than when the earlier archives were constructed, the circumstances of archiving have likewise changed. She looks at samples from three distinct categories of online videos: selections from the "It Gets Better" Archive, a huge, participatory archive of the recent past (stories are told by the video submitters); coming-out videos on YouTube; and ongoing, long-distance relationship videos also on YouTube. She finds that all three sets of videos continue the project of retroactivism started by previous LGBTQ+ archives. She writes: "these [videos] are historiographical compositional acts; through them, experience is recorded and archived, there to be *used* to shape a sense of collectivity—as long as the sites are live and the webmasters allow it" (146, emphasis in original). They help document what it is to grow up and to build and foster relationships as a homosexual in the twenty-first century. A key difference, however, is the organic, networked, non-hierarchical nature of these archives. There are no organizers acting as gatekeepers. That said, earlier videos do influence the types of videos that are submitted (so the archive seems to encourage of its users the same kinds of videos it already includes). The rules of YouTube also limit the kinds of images that can be shared. Ultimately, this final chapter is a call for more attention to "amateur historiography in digital media" (147) and to think specifically about how race, gender, and class are included (or not) in these digital collections. We must ask ourselves: what is the past that is created online? Who speaks? When? Who is silenced? How is the past informing the present and vice versa? And once again, we must think about looking for answers in non-traditional archives and with non-traditional archival evidence.

Though primarily focused on the relationships between archives and the shaping of lesbian identities, Bessette's *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archive* is an important reminder for scholars to expand our definitions of archives and to remain attuned to the ways that the past and present mingle and interact to challenge definitions, communities, and identities.

About the Author

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