

Jean Bessette, **Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives: Composing Pasts and Futures**, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2018, 186 pp., \$40.00 (paperback).

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"Sexuality," writes David Halperin (1989) in his now-canonic *Is There a History of Sexuality?*, "does have a history—though, not a very long one" (p. 257). The power implied in the writing of history and the role of archives in doing so has long persisted as a point of tension in the building of queer public cultures. For lesbians in particular, grassroots organizing centered around archival projects has served as a critical force of world-making across transhistorical registers of time. Historiographic work has figured often in the making of communities contoured by sexual identity, many of whom have plumbed for material traces of the trauma, banality, and vitality of queer life during moments when it remained embattled and near-invisible, preserving contemporary ephemera and experiences in turn. Over the past quarter century, interventions in cultural theory have drawn out the disruptive (Muñoz, 1999), evidentiary (Halberstam, 2005), and affective (Cvetkovich, 2003) possibilities inhered in the recording of queer activity, locating us squarely in the shadow of what Kate Eichhorn (2013) has referred to as the "archival turn" in queer and feminist theory and practice.



Born from these discussions surrounding the uses and effects of the archive is Jean Bessette's 2018 book **Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives: Composing Pasts and Futures**. Identifying what she sees as the key function of "grassroots historiography" in fluidly shaping, defining, and contesting lesbian identities in the United States over the 20th century, Bessette's work reconsiders the uses of archival praxes through a distinctly *rhetorical* lens. Constructing her analytical framework, Bessette adapts and extends Kenneth Burke's (1969) concept of "identification," the shared investment in rhetorical acts through which collective identities are formed. Burke is then introduced to Lucas Hilderbrand's (2006) felt theory of "retroactivism," the strategy of emotionally drawing from the past in the generation of future politics. To this end, her book proposes a contribution to the growing field of queer rhetoric, investigating how lesbian retroactivism coheres as "collectives impugn, deconstruct, and scavenge existing historical accounts and libraries, and compose new histories and archives out of the detritus to shape identification and political leverage" (p. 19). For Bessette, lesbian activism that seeks to challenge normative histories and discourses often manifests itself according to uniquely rhetorical tactics.

*Retroactivism* is structured through care-laden case studies of archival projects varying significantly in both their material format and their political provocations. These range from traditional place-based archives such as UCLA's June L. Mazer photo collection to the fabulatory cinema of director Cheryl Dunye; from the near-conservatism of the Daughters of Bilitis's 1972 compendium of anecdotal letters *Lesbian/Woman* to the radical documentary work of the late, great Barbara Hammer; and finally to the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), a now-hallowed institution in its own right. Activating all of these spaces,

argues Bessette, is an application of rhetorical strategies aiming to disrupt dominant narratives and undo pathologizing classificatory schemas of deviance applied to lesbian life from the mainstream. Included as part of this rhetorical toolbox are tactics of interventionist and cross-categorical forms of "classification," the recording of disagreements between historian and resistant historical subject known as "gainsaying," the documentary depiction of "fictitious" or "achronological" memories, and the cinematic performance of "camp historiography," among others.

Taken together, the critical outcome of such a materially broad-ranging inquiry is necessarily unwieldy, upsetting any desire to come to a stable categorical understanding of "lesbian" and "archive" as both historical object and political subject alike. This, of course, is precisely Bessette's point. Reflecting on the work of Dunye and Hammer, she writes, "viewers are not left with a canon of idealized lesbians but with the *slipperiness* of a canon" (p. 109), suggesting that perhaps the sole constant in these strategies for mobilizing sexual identity through historiographic ends is a redress to a monolithic sense of history itself. In these terms, *Retroactivism* is most successful where it seeks out "fissures in the plenitude" (p. 93), introducing evidence of disagreement and dissonance across recorded experiences and meanings of lesbian identity in its archival sources at hand.

There are, however, limitations to spending so much time hanging out in the discourse. Returning to the text's theoretical grounding in an expanded notion of Hilderbrand's "retroactivism," what Bessette glosses in her explication of his term is the distinct material context that brought about its initial coining. Beyond the description of retroactivism as a nostalgic and deeply felt desire for the past in the formation of sexual and political identities in the present, Bessette omits the specific historical configuration from which Hilderbrand builds his analysis. Namely, Hilderbrand writes of the generative experience of looking to the early 1990's prime of HIV/AIDS activist group ACT UP as a source of inspiration while organizing protests against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. A similar register of sociohistorical context is comparatively absent from Bessette's framing of *Retroactivism* within a "different moment with different circumstances" (p. 137), loosely demarcated postmarriage equality and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell. Such an absence causes the reader to consider the complex material experiences that haunt queer life at present—in particular, the threat of physical and legislative violence faced by trans women of color at the hands of the carceral state. In turn, we might ask: How might the historiographic strategies outlined by Bessette be operationalized by active lesbian publics beyond concerns for reparative discourse and media representation?

These questions of a contextual material grounding persist even when Bessette concludes with a note on lesbian retroactivism's encounter with digital space. Focusing on digital genres including the narratives of the popular "It Gets Better" series, coming-out videos on YouTube, and long-distance lesbian relationship vlogging, she argues that the persistence in these videos is a rhetorical purpose to "*archive*: to record, collect, arrange, and share past experience for present political and identificatory uses and effects" (p. 146). Barring well-rehearsed critiques of these first-person formats on grounds of their promotion of "queer neoliberalism and homonormativity" (Puar, 2017, p. 1) that Bessette herself brings to light, her analysis would have been rendered richer through a consideration of the contemporary media frames consistent with their circulation. Indeed, if young lesbians are actively engaging with archival video production, are these amateur projects best understood in terms of a continued investment in identity-building through historiographic means? Or, should these exercises in documentation simply be read as

constellated examples accounting for what Lee Humphreys (2018) has termed the “qualified self” created and represented through media in order to be consumed? Undoubtedly, they involve a little of both.

Ultimately, *Retroactivism* will be of use and interest to scholars of both rhetoric and queer studies, as well as the broader publics who actively follow the growing number of Instagram-based archives of queer history that have emerged over the past few years. Counted among these are @lgbt\_history, @h\_e\_r\_s\_t\_o\_r\_y, @blacklesbianarchives, @lavender\_archivist, and the digital homes of place-based archives including the LHA and the ONE Archives. Altogether, these examples point to the continued appeal and significance of historiography in projects of queer world building, embodying the major claims that drive Bessette’s book. Of all the rhetorical strategies discussed in *Retroactivism*, what compellingly endures within these different archival frames is the constancy of a desire for a knowable past that has animated lesbian identity and collectivity over the last century. Perhaps then, Andrea Long Chu (2018) was right all along: Identity is never a matter of mere political principal; rather, “the deposits of our desires run as deep and fine as any” (para. 33).

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