

Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives: Composing Pasts and Futures, by Jean Bessette. Southern Illinois UP, 2018. 186 pp.

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When I was five years old, I got my first library card. That card was a vehicle through which I explored my identity in the many novels and stories I encountered. I found answers for the questions I had about life and myself. As a cisgender white female, I was and am privileged to hear my own voice repeated back to me in many books I encounter. What was a joyride for me—wandering the stacks and finding numerous books to suit my interests—can be a deeply unsettling experience for others who do not find information on or representation of their identities. When, in the 1950s and earlier, women with same-sex desire took to the library in search of information on their identities, what they encountered was a catalogue system reflecting the society in which they lived—a system that believed same-sex desire was connected to deviance, criminality, and neurological disorder.

Jean Bessette's *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives: Composing Pasts and Futures* responds to the need for representation by curating and circulating archival material evidence of lesbian identities: from books to boots to clothing to pamphlets. Responding to this exigence, Bessette explores the lives and work of the women who formed the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the Lesbian History Archives (LHA), the June L. Mazer Archives (JLMA), and historiographic queer filmmakers of the 1990s. These women developed grassroots archives—non-academic archives—in order to create community for the women who found themselves under- or mis-represented in other archival forms. Bessette's study, comprised of four sections that cover how retroactivism allowed queer archivists and groups to respond to contextual exigencies, relies upon an expanded conceptualization of Burkean identification to understand the importance of representation. Expanding Lucas Hildebrand's definition of retroactivism—a generative methodology that shapes or re-shapes the past in order to guide "present identity formation and future politics" (11)—Bessette posits retroactivism as a twentieth century mode of activism and identity-building for both queer cultures and other marginalized groups.

Bessette begins her study with an analysis of identification in grassroots archives. The first chapter, "The Daughters of Bilitis Archive: Clearing Historical Space for Clustered Anecdotes," focuses on a rhetorical analysis of the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB) newsletter, *The Ladder*, and *Lesbian/Woman*, a collection of archived anecdotes from the years of responses to their newsletters. One of the main arguments in this chapter is that archives can prompt "archival consciousness raising" (27). DOB's *Lesbian/Woman* archival text served a

validating function for women with same-sex desire, validating their identities and promoting self-acceptance, but the archives also excluded many voices. Although compiled through self-selected participation, the DOB archive was curated for a specific audience: middle-class women who adhered to middle-class values. Despite being exclusionary to most differently identifying women, Bessette's research on the DOB explores the use of anecdotes as generative. Through sharing anecdotes, women were able to see themselves like they had never seen themselves before.

In the second chapter, "Classifying Collections: Subversive Schemas as *Topoi* in Place-Based Archives," Bessette links classification to *topoi*, arguing that "reconceiving classification as a *topos* accentuates the inextricability of the *pattern* (the system of classification) and the *material* (the artifacts and records themselves) and illuminates how archival classification in certain kinds of material space can encourage certain kinds of unanticipated patterns and connections for visitors" (70). The focus of this chapter is on the Lesbian History Archives (LHA) and the June L. Mazer Archives (JLMA). These two place-based, grassroots archives both collected objects as well as texts, including clothing, boots, photographs, and home goods. *Topoi*, according to Bessette, guided visitors to make identity connections across the many artifacts within the archives.

Along the lines of classification, Bessette makes an interesting move, connecting Kenneth Burke's identification and *topoi*. The discussion of identification posits one of the more interesting takeaways from this chapter: Materializing Burke helps "to demonstrate how classificatory patterns interact with archival materials to generate identifications, and ultimately, to reconsider the boundaries of identity" (70). Throughout the text, Bessette uses the concept of Burkean identification to understand the roles these archives played in shaping and creating communities. However, in the second chapter, these archives take a more materialist bent by juxtaposing certain material objects to others. Materializing identification through identifying with material objects and making connections between objects highlights how rhetorical theories can be remixed for changing technologies.

Moving through the history of grassroots lesbian archives, Bessette focuses on multimodality and documentary filmmaking in her third chapter, "Remediating the Archive: Documentary Compositions of Lesbian Pasts." Bessette focuses on the emergence of New Queer Cinema, documentary films created in the 1990s that focused on both real and fictive queer people. Defining multimodal strategies used in the films, Bessette argues that the documentaries are meta-archival approaches to activism. This chapter rhetorically analyzes five multimodal strategies that are used in the New Queer Cinema documentaries: gainsaying, nonlinearity, affective impact of taboo images, manipulation/invention of archival materials, and camp historiography (130). These multimodal

rhetorical strategies “demonstrate a kind of *historiographic* retroactivism,” calling into question the simple strategy of recovery and “transhistoric accounts of sexual identity” (130). Gainsaying is represented in dialogues in which the subject argues with the historian on issues of identity classification. This is a call to avoid problematic scholarship that forces historical or contemporary people into categories and identities that they would not choose for themselves.

Nonlinearity highlights the nuances of collecting histories in correlation with memory. The affective effect of using taboo images, Bessette suggests, can serve to break down stereotypes within lesbian communities themselves. A particularly interesting multimodal strategy is the manipulation and/or invention of archival materials for these projects. Manipulation and invention not only work to fill in the gaps within historical archives, but also serve as commentary on what might have been if the archives were not exclusionary, while also critiquing the curation of straight archives (130). The final multimodal strategy, camp historiography, highlights the role of performativity to exaggerate cultural artifacts to both honor and critique nostalgia. Through these multimodal strategies, Bessette argues, the documentary filmmakers critique traditional archives as exclusionary spaces that leave out the possibility of the existence of different people or identities.

In Bessette’s fourth chapter, “‘A History of Discontinuities’: On the Past and Future of Retroactivism,” she examines the role of queer archives in creating community in the twenty-first century. This chapter examines a few YouTube genres as emerging archives: It Gets Better Project (IGBP), coming out videos, and long-distance same-sex relationship videos. As technologies change and grow, so does the role of technology in shaping archives. Online videos, while usurping the role of place-based archives for this age, function as community-building tools across time, space, and geographic location. YouTube, in particular, highlights the rhetoricity of archives: material both shapes and is shaped by the medium available to the archivist. Within this new medium, Bessette highlights the role of the genre in forming acceptable additions to the archive. Online media allows for more horizontal, democratic participation. At least, that is what Bessette argues in this final chapter. However, as Bessette notes, more white, homosexual men are represented in YouTube archives. Does that diminish the utopic democratic idea—that more voices can and will be heard—of the internet? According to Bessette’s research, the IGBP videos created by white homosexual men get the most views. Apart from that, what about the lack of sufficient online materials for people living in rural areas? These are just a few questions that are not addressed, but Bessette does implicate the need for further research at the end of the text.

Overall, the changing technology highlighted by Bessette’s case studies explores the effects that changing modes of production—YouTube Videos in

particular—have on the circulation of narratives and voices. From the DOB’s newsletter and subsequent anecdotal textual archive, to the use of YouTube to share experiences and give hope, grassroots archives work to give voice to those people who are under- or mis-represented in existing archives. Besette’s work is indicative of the move toward digital work in the field of composition more generally. One takeaway from Besette’s scholarship is that the means of composing has always been influenced by and has always influenced the medium available to the composer. Ultimately, her reworking of Burkean identification, examination of multimodal strategies and of current queer archival practices expands the conversation on archives in rhetoric and composition by pushing boundaries and guiding the reader to understand the role of archives in community construction and activism.

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