

IJIDI: Book Review

Sheffield, R. T. (2020). *Documenting rebellions: A study of four lesbian and gay archives in queer times*. Litwin Books. ISBN 9781634000918. 282 pp. \$35.00 US.

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During an exhibit on the diversity of queer history in Canada with special emphasis on the history of the ArQuives and *The Body Politic*, a Toronto-based queer publication, guests voiced disappointment and upset over the lack of representation for people of color in the exhibit. During a meeting held on the matter, someone suggested that “the queer archive is a failed project” (p. 2-5). Rebecca Taves Sheffield’s *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times* begins with an attempt to grapple with issues related to representation in archives, citing this 2013 incident at the ArQuives.

Published in early 2020, *Documenting Rebellions* sets out to provide a study of four major North American archives: the ArQuives: Canada’s LGBTQ2+ Archives, The Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, and The ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives. These archives were chosen due to their long history within the queer community, and for their exceptionalness in remaining open so much longer than other large-scale queer archives. Devoting one full chapter to the history of each archive, Sheffield also takes two chapters to discuss sustainability and institutionalization, as well as a chapter dedicated to the contributions of individuals within.

While aiming to talk about all four archives in an equitable manner, Sheffield does spend a significant amount of time discussing the ArQuives, which does not necessarily hurt the book. Sheffield worked at the Canadian archives for many years in a variety of capacities, from volunteer to executive director. Discussing other archives, she often calls back to her own, in some cases to reaffirm observations, and other places to illustrate the differences between the history of archives and their management.

The histories of these archives are illuminating, but do not serve much in the way of guidance for present day workers in queer archives, big or small. Part of this is because so many of these stories rely upon individual personalities, people who either founded or almost single-handedly carried the archives for extended periods of time. Certain points of the book, therefore, read less like a history of queer movements in archives and more like a project to give acknowledgement to key players who had previously gone overlooked, which is not inherently problematic. Sheffield never claims to have made a working guide for this community. Additionally, these individuals do deserve credit for preserving a history that may have otherwise been left to rot, leaving generations of queer folks without a connection to their own history. Nevertheless, this history does not necessarily aid in current discussions for growth, problematic

provenance, or narrative gaps. In this sense, those coming to the book looking for information more relevant to their own work will find more luck in the second section of the book with the chapters on sustainability, institutionalization, and the importance of contributors.

For those interested in the sustainability of large-scale queer archives, Sheffield has little good news for you. As she bluntly points out, it often came down to well-timed luck. In the aptly titled chapter “Luck is Not a Sustainability Strategy”, Sheffield stresses how often these archives were left with no working sustainability plan at all, and only survived due to unexpected benefactors (p. 140). Sheffield also touches on the harsh reality that many monetary donations came from bequeathals, left behind in the wills of members of the community who died as result of the AIDS crisis (p. 159). The only other method given the same amount of space is “strategic neutrality,” which is offered with caution, as conceiving the archive as a neutral space is hardly possible and can often lead to the further marginalization of minoritized groups (p. 151).

The chapter on contributors, “Flocking Together,” sets out to focus on three categories of archives contributors: founders, champions, and volunteers. The second category (champions) refers to those workers who, although not present at its conception, played a fundamental role in the development or sustainment of an archive. Unfortunately, this chapter reads like a continuation of section one’s history of the four archives, with slightly more focus on individuals. In addition, organizationally this chapter is not strong. Founders and champions are grouped together for this discussion, and this works for the purposes of pointing out individuals who played significant roles in archives. But the third group category set out for discussion, volunteers, does not receive equitable space or content within the pages of the chapter. Here, volunteers’ ability to create and utilize the archive as a community space is discussed in terms of how the archive serves them, instead of vice versa. While an important view on the archive in the life of the individual, its posturing is discordant with the rest of the chapter.

The final chapter and conclusion are really where this book works best for readers seeking working guidance. Here the book gives an in-depth analysis of different archives’ decisions to either join or remain separate from larger institutional archives. More than just a pros-and-cons explanation, Sheffield goes deep here with the expectations these archives had going in, as well as the realities they faced afterward. Institutionalization for many can be the answer to the much-needed sustainability plan. Larger institutions usually have the budget, the staff, and the training to properly preserve and house archives, and possibly even more opportunities for dissemination and instruction.

Institutionalization also represents a loss of archival autonomy, however. Narrative goals could be altered, as well as accessibility. Sheffield speaks repeatedly on anecdotes shared with her, of queer women suddenly discovering their own historical existence in hallways outside of the LHA, housed in an apartment where many queer women have sat over tea to discuss who and what they have found. Will this access to self-discovery remain once an archive becomes part of, say, a university library and archives system? Can a larger institution realistically include this self-discovery as part of its mission, or will the focus necessarily and almost exclusively move on to larger conversation on history and the LGBTQ+ community?

The conclusion of this book also highlighted interesting discussions that mirror conversational trends important in archives today, but these topics could have been more prevalent throughout. To help answer the earlier question, whether these historically significant archives are failed, Sheffield argues that the act of understanding the history behind these institutions and

appreciating the contributions of our queer archival predecessors proves their success. This rationale focuses the conversation on the role of the individual in the life of an archive, but what about the role of the archive in the life of the individual? The book does address this, as mentioned earlier, but not within the context as a point of value in the argument for the archives' success. The original argument also poses success or failure as a lasting fact, rather than an ongoing mission in any archive. It is a more actionable goal with room for improvement for an institution to work towards succeeding, versus being a success.

The basis behind some critical readings here originates in my trouble pinpointing the book's audience. Older generations of queer archivists may be interested in more of the historical aspects, and Sheffield's light criticism may be helpful in achieving a willful transfer to newer generations. The argument of the book, however, to prove the queer archive as succeeding, feels aimed at those outside of the project, or perhaps expresses a desire to appeal to newer generations of archivists. An effective conversation with this group, however, would have focused more on the available models for reform in queer archives. Conversations on strategic acquisition are available from the GLBT History Museum in San Francisco and its work on oral histories with Asian American and Pacific Islander queer communities. Examples of reimagining archival missions are available from Sheffield's own former home. In 2017, the ArQuives (at the time called the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives) established a five-year plan to meaningfully diversify their collections and workers, and reflectively changed the institutions name to its current title.

While Sheffield does fulfill her own goals as set out at the beginning of the book to share the history and meaningful conversations behind the development and sustainment of these four queer archives, one wishes she had set her goals higher to facilitate the book's opening conversation. Her discussions on bringing in narratives previously left out of the mainstream are critical and thoughtfully presented, but they remain on the peripheral of the book's larger discussion and are largely isolated from her main body of text. Still, *Documenting Rebellions* is insightful, incredibly descriptive, and has the potential for facilitating some of the harder conversations we are quickly approaching in archival studies today.

Haley McGuyre (she/they) (hmcguyre@fsu.edu) is a queer archivist in North Florida. With a background in history, gender studies, and information science, they are currently working on building skillsets to bring to future work in community archives. She received two bachelor's degrees in 2017 and is projected to finish their master's degree in 2022. Haley previously worked on projects for the Invisible Histories Project and the Institute on World War II and the Human Experience at FSU, and currently works as a reference librarian at Tallahassee Community College, and as a graduate assistant in the Special Collections and Archives at Florida State University.