

Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times

By Rebecka Taves Sheffield. Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2020.
282 pp. Softcover. \$35.00. ISBN 978-1-63400-091-8.

Many queer researchers tell stories about deeply moving archival encounters—experiences of profound connection, validation, and self-identification that occur as researchers discover themselves in documentations of the past. Rebecka Taves Sheffield's monograph, *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times*, pays fitting homage to the transformational power of such encounters with this meticulously researched and thoughtfully composed consideration of four gay and lesbian archives. This book exudes the author's deep love and reverence for queer archives, despite (and often because of) their circuitous histories, quirky casts of characters, and shifting cultural locations.

Rebecka Taves Sheffield brings her intimate knowledge of queer archives to bear on this well-written book. Currently a senior policy advisor for the Archives of Ontario, Sheffield has a PhD in information studies and sexual diversity studies from the University of Toronto. Prior to her work at the Archives of Ontario, Sheffield served as the executive director of the ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives. This experience provides Sheffield with tremendous insights into lesbian and gay archives; she has not only conducted extensive research in and on these archives, but she has served as an administrator who has firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced by independent, nonprofit archives. This insider knowledge presents a methodological challenge, of sorts, given that the ArQuives is one of four case studies considered in the book. Rather than downplaying her involvement or attempting to treat all four archives precisely the same, Sheffield handles her insider knowledge with a critical perspective and regularly reflects on it overtly and insightfully.

The four case studies at the heart of this book are all prominent gay and lesbian archives: the Lesbian Herstory Archives (Brooklyn, New York), the ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (Los Angeles, California), the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives (West Hollywood, California), and the ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives (Toronto, Ontario). Notably, Sheffield refers to these as "gay and lesbian" archives, despite the fact that many now have a wider collecting scope, because they "grew out of gay and lesbian social movements" (p. 16). This insistence on accurate naming is a hallmark of this text, and it is one of many examples of Sheffield's bold observations about the differences between how these archives imagine themselves to be and how they actually are.

The first section of the book, "Origins," includes four chapters, one for each of the four collections that are the case studies in this project. In each of these chapters, Sheffield provides a detailed and thorough history of each archives and the conditions that led to its creation. She discusses myriad factors that led to the establishment and sustained functioning of the four archives, including key figures, local and national politics, related organizations, and financial landscapes. Even without the remainder of the book, these four chapters offer an incredible contribution to our understandings of queer archives (and grassroots archives more broadly), and each chapter offers a rich history of the archives themselves (histories that are, ironically, too often untold). For example, in the case of the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives, Sheffield reflects on the importance of her own research process: "helping to reunite the Mazer with its origin story has been a fulfilling part of my own research into this history" (p. 89). Clearly, Sheffield's project is motivated by the same activist archival impulse that inspires the archives that are the subject of her study, and she presents a compelling case for why these archives themselves are important parts of queer history.

In the second section of the book, "Keeping On," three chapters focus on three thematic strains that cut across the four archives in the case study—continued survival (chapter 5), people power (chapter 6), and institutionalization (chapter 7). These chapters each contribute an important perspective on the complex landscape that gay and lesbian archives have navigated together (while mostly apart, physically and operationally). Though they faced many of the same (or similar) challenges, these four archives often made divergent decisions, which then set into motion differing trajectories for their futures.

This becomes particularly apparent in Sheffield's extended discussion of the relationships between community-based gay and lesbian archives and their nearby academic institutions in the seventh chapter, "From Radical Archiving to Special Collections." The four archives offer insightful juxtapositions among the two that remain independent, one that was donated to a university, and the fourth that donated most of its collections to a university while continuing to collect as a community-run archives. Sheffield is careful in her refusal to say which pathway is more or less successful; instead, she investigates the relationships built at each site and documents the power that academic institutions have held to influence the ethos and community-based spirit of these gay and lesbian archives. Overall, the set of chapters in the second section of the book offers a rare and insightful synthesis of the shared considerations of gay and lesbian archives that otherwise exist separately.

Each chapter in this book shares a similar approach and writing style as Sheffield takes a deep dive into the cultural terrains and complex human histories that enable her to tell rich stories about these important archival collections. Sheffield manages to juggle the huge roster of people involved in these archives (founders, champions, and volunteers, as she refers to them), four

different geographic sites and cultural contexts, and varying political and social movements in two different countries, all while writing in a clear and engaging style. This is hard work, and she has done it remarkably well. The underlying message of this approach is that archives, particularly community-based archives tied to particular identities, cannot be extracted from the people who shaped them, the places where they are located, and the broader contexts in which they exist.

In addition to the two main sections of the book, Sheffield includes an introduction and conclusion, which not only help to frame the project but also introduce several significant theoretical considerations that bear on this study. As an academic researcher and the director of the Digital Transgender Archive, I found these chapters to be particularly insightful in discussing the interventions that gay and lesbian archives make and how we should understand “Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times,” as the introduction is titled. Sheffield does not shy away from calling out academics who are quick to abstract “the archive” or offer a queer critique without recognizing the ways that these archives “. . . have made possible the critiques offered against [them]” (p. 7).

In the conclusion, this theoretical and academic intervention is further nuanced and extended as Sheffield addresses the strategic essentialism that has both enabled and undermined gay and lesbian archival impulses. In reference to the Mazer and the Lesbian Herstory Archives, she writes, “the archives will operate only as long as they are needed for a community of people who identify as lesbian, a category that these two archives have, in part, helped to define. Their survival strategy is, in fact, their imagined end” (p. 232). Sheffield also explores the limits of uncritical inclusion efforts in these spaces, not only for lesbians who were eclipsed by gay men in many organizations, but for the systematic neglect of QTBIPOC (queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) histories. This type of critical positioning of the work of gay and lesbian archival projects is perhaps the most significant accomplishment of this book and one that I will continue to return to in my own thinking and in my scholarship.

Archival professionals and researchers will all find a great deal to appreciate in this book, whether or not they are directly involved in queer archival work. As she describes it, Sheffield explains that “this study is an archive of sorts, capturing, processing, and preserving a record of the organizational histories of these four organizations” (p. 228). Readers will benefit from Sheffield’s nuanced exploration of community-based archives because these archives shed light into archival work as inextricably tied to the material considerations of people, space, time, and resources, as well as abstract concerns related to identity, community, representation, documentation, and cultural memory.

© K.J. Rawson

Northeastern University