

Producing the Archival Body

By Jamie A. Lee. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2020.

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Producing the Archival Body feels immediately contemporary: its final pages are given over to a coda where author Jamie A. Lee writes “this ending in the midst of a pandemic and what’s become of racial violence and protest after a Minneapolis, Minnesota, police officer murdered George Floyd,” about their adult children and their partners returning home to shelter in place, and about the “generative and liberatory potentials” of archives and bodies in the present moment (pp. 160–61). *Producing the Archival Body* also is an immediately contemporary work: by examining the historiographical “body” of the archival field, Lee grapples with (and proposes answers to) some of its urgent methodological and theoretical questions.

Lee, an assistant professor of digital culture, information, and society at the University of Arizona’s School of Information, is also the director of the Arizona Queer Archives (AQA), “a community-focused archives, [that] uses and pulls queer—as theory and practice—into the way we go about collecting, preserving, and making AQA collections accessible to develop an archives that is for, by, and about us.”¹ According to Lee, this second career as an archivist was mostly accidental; as recently as the mid-aughts, Lee worked as the director and producer of a small multimedia company and produced social justice documentary films in their free time. In 2008, they started the Arizona LGBTQ Storytelling Project in collaboration with Gregory Anderson (a technology specialist at the University of Arizona) to capture the oral histories of older LGBTQ individuals in Arizona. It went well until some “University higher-ups realized that I was not a part of the University. I was a community oral historian, archivist, and activist encroaching on their secured data and educational platform. Whoops,” and they returned to grad school “to learn how to ‘do’ archives the ‘right’ way” (p. x). As is likely already apparent, *Producing the Archival Body* is deeply tied up with Lee’s personal (hi)story and with questions about the right and wrong way to “do” archives.

To evaluate the significance of Lee’s book, it is necessary understand the Routledge Studies in Archives series to which it belongs. Edited by James Lowry (an assistant professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies at Queens College in the City University of New York), Studies in Archives serves as “a platform” for “archival work in support of memory, identity construction, social justice, accountability, legal rights and historical understanding” (p. ix).

The series “promotes the exploration of the intellectual history of archival science, the internationalisation of archival discourse and the building of new archival theory” (p. ix). By rhetorically positioning the series as the vehicle for a new wave of archival theory and scholarship, Lowry (and, by extension, the authors in the series) is declaring that academic concepts of “The Archives”/an archives as simple repositories and stereotypes of archivists as mere “hand-maidens of history” are dead.

In other words, a confident and secure archival studies is “increasingly intellectually in conversation with other fields”; brings a “unique expertise in records creation, management and sustainability to questions, problems and data challenges that lie at the heart of our knowledge”; and offers the “ability to tackle some of the most difficult dilemmas facing the world today, such as climate change, mass migration, and disinformation” (p. ix). This is a tall, broad, and bold mission statement, and its successes and failures will play out in these (and other) pages in the coming years. *Producing the Archival Body* is the second book in the series and its first single-author monograph. Archival studies students and scholars will be pleased to know that this series is proceeding at a rapid clip: the first book—*Archives, Recordkeeping and Social Justice*—preceded Lee’s text by only seven months, and the successor—Verne Harris’s *Ghosts of Archive: Deconstructive Intersectionality and Praxis*—was released on the very same day.

Excluding paratextual elements, *Producing the Archival Body* is about 125 pages (in both the PDF and hardcover formats), resulting in a slim, but dense, volume. It is divided into three different sections: a long introduction (~11k words); part 1: “Body Parts” (~40k words); and part 2: “Bodies in Action” (~24k words). Although this division seems relatively clear on the surface, readers will discover that Lee constantly and purposefully undermines and subverts the structure of the book itself, picking up the threads of an argument foreshadowed in the introduction, circling around to reconsider evidence presented earlier, or returning to a story that seems to have concluded earlier. This “metamodern” or “post-postmodern” (p. 38) style may seem jarring or confusing at first—especially if following the Dutch Manual, Jenkinson, or Schellenberg on a syllabus—and it is likely to have its detractors, but, on the whole, it proves successful and even entertaining, a rare accomplishment for a heavily academic book.

Part 1 is subdivided into chapters entitled “Archival Underpinnings,” “Time,” and “Bodies,” each of which will reward readers of varying levels of experience and expertise. Chapter 1 provides the historiographical and theoretical contextualization for the rest of the text and, in doing so, provides one of the most expansive and wide-ranging literature reviews on archival studies currently available. Lee is a generous scholar, frequently citing others, especially “Queer, Trans, People of Color (QTPOC) scholars,” and follows Sara Ahmed’s “politics of

citation [in order to] incorporate non-dominant theorists who are also doing this work from their situated perspectives" (p. 12). The resulting "canon" draws heavily from archivists or scholars directly or closely engaged with the Archival Education and Research Initiative (founded by Anne J. Gilliland and others).² This shortlist includes authors undoubtedly familiar to *American Archivist* readers, such as archival scholars Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, Stacy Wood, Jennifer Douglas, Tonia Sutherland, Mario Ramirez, Rebecka Taves Sheffield, Jeannette Bastian, and Wendy Duff, and scholars from fields closely affiliated with archival studies, such as Alana Kumbier (research and instructional librarian at Amherst College) and K.J. Rawson (associate professor at Northeastern University and director of the Digital Transgender Archive). These scholars form the "body" of what Lee calls a "Critical Archival Studies" that engages in "collective critical thinking about ways to resist reinforcing oppression based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability in the archives" (p. 11).

Chapter 2 takes up time—specifically, it examines the ways that time intervenes in traditional notions of "the record." Lee achieves this by tracing the history of a specific AQA collection from initial contact through donation, processing, description, and all the other traditional archival processes. At each step, Lee thoughtfully reconsiders standard practices. An initial contact with a donor becomes an opportunity to create an oral history for the AQA's collection where the donor can describe their goals and the reason for their donations, as well as the importance of archives to them personally. Following the donation, the collection sat in "backlog" status until one of Lee's archival studies graduate students (Hope Herr-Cardillo) was so inspired by the initial oral history that they asked Lee to process the collection for a summer internship. Lee instructed Herr-Cardillo to take additional documentation steps while processing, and describing the collection. Specifically, they

asked Hope to include their own reflections within the record descriptions that might add a conversational and timely layer of context and affective engagement with Jay's records. [This] request did not align with the standardized instructions that are taught about how to make a finding aid in classrooms and mainstream archives. The archivist and their assumed neutrality make them an invisible hand that processes collections and makes them accessible through objective means. The finding aid is something that is created and then is left mostly static when it's made accessible to researchers and archives users . . . archivists rarely return to finding aids to attend to time, the shifting bodies of records creators and bodies of knowledge, and any descriptive mistakes or needed revisions. Re-description is something that is cast aside in order to attend to mounting backlogs of other collections. Therefore, [Lee] understand[s] that developing the conversational aspect of the finding aid is a way for the AQA to embody its participatory ethos. (pp. 58–59).

This understanding of finding aids as essentially four-dimensional, as well as the implications for that realization, is one of the more significant accomplishments and contributions of Lee's work to the field. The process of "conversational" description, where archivists literally place themselves into the history of the collection, the description, and the finding aid, upends many traditional archival principles, but does so in a way that is ultimately more "productive" for both the archives and for future historians and community members. These reevaluations and ideas are expanded upon in the following chapter, where Lee's longer arguments about the use of bodies as a method to "interrogate the archives as it produces bodies and is accessed by bodies" (p. 19).

The remaining third of the book contains part 2, "Bodies in Action"—also called "Assembled Bodies in Action" (p. 19) in the introduction (it is unclear if this is relic of an earlier draft)—and is subdivided into chapter 4, "Relational Reciprocity: Bodies as Archives/Archives as Bodies," and chapter 5, "Bodies Producing Archives Producing Bodies: The Power of Storytelling." In chapter 4, Lee uses a methodology developed in their earlier research (the *Queer/ed Archival Methodology* [Q/M]) along with case studies that demonstrate the efficacy of the concepts, methods, and ideas advocated in the previous three chapters. The chapter serves as evidence of how seemingly abstract archival theory can have real-world effects and can be applied to real-world cases.

Qualitatively, chapter 4 feels more like a summary and reworking of the previous three chapters—which may indeed be Lee's intention. However, for this reviewer, the total absence of disability studies became conspicuously apparent. Indeed, for a text so heavily situated in the physical body, and for one that begins with a life-altering physical injury, the absence of disability studies, which uses the injured/sick/crip(pled) body as primary mode of understanding and critique, seems to be an oversight. It may also be a conscious choice by Lee, or perhaps a reluctance to use the methods of a field with which they had not fully engaged. Either way, future work in this area by disabled archivists or archival studies scholars informed by disability theory and Gracen Brilmyer's work can and should build upon the pioneering work that Lee has done in this area.³

Finally, the shortest of the chapters, chapter 5, is around ten pages long. It offers what Lee calls "a hands-on look at mediating storytelling practices for the archives through participatory oral history workshops with local trans-identified people" (p. 19). As a practice-focused essay, it is genuinely useful. However, following a number of heavily theoretical chapters, it feels mildly misplaced. It seems likely that its uneven nature is a result of the late-breaking addition of the coda. Regardless, archivists with significant oral history collections or those engaged collecting LGBTQ oral histories should definitely consult Lee's recommendations. As *American Archivist* readers will be most interested in Lee's reflections on archives and archival studies, this review has focused on the discussion

connected to archival theory and practice, but readers interested in oral history can find a more free-form version of this review available on Twitter.⁴

Producing the Archival Body is an expansive and multifaceted work that contributes to oral history, media studies, digital humanities, queer studies, gender and sexuality studies, and, of course, library and information science. Students and practitioners trained in more traditional archival methods will find multiple places within Lee's text worthy of discussion, debate, and engagement. Finally, archives studies scholars and students, especially those interested in humanistic engagement with other fields, will discover that *Producing the Archival Body* is a crucial—and undoubtedly, soon to be fundamental—text.

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NOTES

- ¹ Arizona Queer Archives, <https://azqueerarchives.org>, captured at <https://perma.cc/3GU3-LLQA>.
- ² Archival Education and Research Initiative (AERI), <http://aeri.website>, captured at <https://perma.cc/93ZK-CX9C>.
- ³ Gracen Brilmyer, "Archival Assemblages: Applying Disability Studies' Political/Relational Model to Archival Description," *Archival Science* 18, no. 2 (2018): 95–118, <https://doi.org/10/gfzrst>; Gracen M. Brilmyer, "'It Could Have Been Us in a Different Moment. It Still Is Us in Many Ways': Community Identification and the Violence of Archival Representation of Disability," in *Sustainable Digital Communities, iConference 2020*, ed. Anneli Sundqvist, Gerd Berget, Jan Nolin, and Kjell Ivar Skjerdingsstad, 480–86, Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-43687-2_38.
- ⁴ The Twitter thread is available at <https://twitter.com/brimwats/status/1370842622097432577>, captured at <https://perma.cc/MSW8-3MFF>.