

Out of the Closet, Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories. SUNY Series in *Queer Politics and Cultures*. Edited by Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell. New York: SUNY Press, 2015. 372 pp. Index. Hardcover. \$95.00.

How is LGBT history traced in an archives that makes no explicit space for it? How does the practice of performing research into queer lives in an archives differ between the institutional archives versus the community counterarchives? And what is gained or lost when the attainment of representation affords inclusion into a larger historical record that is owned and operated by a heteronormative establishment? *Out of the Closet: Into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories*, edited by Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell, has much to tell us about these questions and more.

In *Out of the Closet*, Stone and Cantrell have included contributors who delve into a wide range of topics fundamentally connected to the queer archives movement. Threading through these chapters featuring archival investigations into transgender history, activism, regional lesbian publishing, gay male pornographic video collections, and even a garden as archives is the unifying emotional pull these fragile materials have on each of the contributors. For all the complexities of researching marginalized sexual histories in the archives, the authors have a viscerally powerful connection to their subjects that is anything but abstract. It is as if they are performing genealogical research, where even just the sensory, experiential act of researching traces of a fragmented, suppressed history becomes part of an integrated whole, with their archival discoveries in some cases leading to profound revelations about the essential historicity of their subjects that the archives reveals.

As Anne Cvetkovich writes in the forward, “. . . the essays published here practice forms of the archival turn that put relentless curiosity and unapologetic passion to use as methods for intellectual invention” (p. xv).

Intellectual invention is often a necessity in doing queer archival research. As Stone and Cantrell make clear in the introduction, this work requires creativity. When one attempts to use the archival record to unearth buried queer voices, one participates in “a process of recovery and justice for a queer past and present—shifting the presence of LGBT lives and histories within archival scholarship from margin to center” (p. 3). This work is not easy and can require a willingness to employ “deviations from standard archival protocols” (p. 3). It can also, as the editors wisely point out, lead to unhappy discoveries that can “spoil or ruin an existing understanding of history” (p. 3). Ultimately, the work of listening to the suppressed queer voices of history hinges on an intellectual as well as an affective approach where neither critical inquiry nor the emotional investment that brought the researchers to the archives in the first place is sacrificed.

One of the real benefits of *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives* is the overview provided of just what kinds of queer collections—limited to those in English—exist within both establishment institutions and those that remain beyond their reach. Historically, community counterarchives preserved queer history before such collections were welcomed into larger historical repositories. In her chapter, “Making a Place for Lesbian Life at

the Lesbian Herstory Archives,” Agatha Beins contrasts the unconventional space and relaxed rules of the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in Brooklyn, where bagels are eaten next to boxes of photographs waiting to be cataloged by volunteers, with a conventional archives in a more formal setting. Beins notes that logistics of how an archives is set up has a demonstrative effect on how its users interact with each other and the materials. As she explains, “Space and place are produced—discursively, materially, and affectively—through interactions at different scales” (p. 27). By creating an unequivocally lesbian place, where the practice of community in any variance takes precedence over archival orthodoxy, the LHA represents something singular that cannot be reproduced in a traditional archival setting. As Craig Loftin quotes Anne Cvetkovich in his chapter, “Secrets in Boxes: The Historian as Archivist,” “One of the persistent values of grassroots and community-based archives is their capacity to keep the emotional need for the archives at the forefront of their mission” (p. 57).

More investigations into the epistemological underpinnings and affective resonance of unorthodox queer archives follow. In “Elsa Gidlow’s Garden,” Greg Youmans profiles Gidlow, the lesbian poet spiritualist, as part of his project of exploring “the lives and artistic practices of important but lesser-known queer people from the fairly recent past . . .” (p. 103). Gidlow was a naturalist revered for the simple way she lived, tending a garden in a bohemian rural enclave in Marin County, and Youmans comes to see her garden as an animate archives of her life and spirit. Youmans writes that in Gidlow’s autobiography, she “inserts herself into the cycle of life and death turning in her garden” (p. 113). He finds that her gardening and plants were “more than the stuff of metaphor for her. She aspires to *become the plant* . . .” (p. 114). He regards a seed loaned to him by the practitioner of a solstice ceremony performed for Gidlow the year she died as “offering a concept of history as an experience of generational connection not based on facts and substance but on the impermanence and mutability of matter” (p. 119). He sees potential in framing his work and that of his peers utilizing a more expansive idea of the archives and its material objects as part of the larger “alchemical process that is queer history” (p. 119), where we can imagine our archival objects and their basic materiality as a sacred inheritance.

A valuable contribution from Whitney Strub called “Indexing Desire: The Gay Pornographic Video Collection as Affective Archive” uses a collection of gay pornography housed at Cornell University, which includes “stunningly extensive, even obsessive indexes, notes, and commentaries” (p. 126) compiled by their anonymous donor, to, in part, reflect the way gay sex endured through the Reagan Era and AIDS. She writes, “The video collection gives us a valuable inside perspective on the creation of erotic meaning at a time of backlash, trauma, and an increasingly homonormative public face of LGBT life” (p. 130) and notes that Cvetkovich wrote of how “archives of trauma are also archives of resistance and resilience,” (p. 129) which challenges the notion of the archives as a manifestation of hegemonic power.

Robb Hernandez uses his chapter, “Straight Talk, Queer Haunt: The Paranormal Activity of the Chicano Art Movement,” to illustrate the way queer themes and

content can pervade an ostensibly un-queer testimony as part of an oral history project charting the history of the Chicano art movement in the United States housed at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. Hernandez challenges the notion of using a record of cultural preservation and commemoration to promote a thematic sexual binary in which queerness must be corralled into a distinctive piece of a larger story. Instead, Hernandez examines the Smithsonian's *Archivos Virtuales* oral histories and, referring to what he notes Ann Laura Stoler calls "reading along the archival grain," he considers "how queer knowledge is articulated through discursive formations of artist interviews," ultimately finding the queer evidence he is looking for through "oral reservoirs of meaning" (p. 176).

Out of the Closet, Into the Archives makes for further fascinating reading. I found Rebecca Lynne Fullan's "Victory Celebration for Essex Charles Hemphill," about a black poet and performance artist who died of AIDS in 1994, particularly moving. Trying to reconcile the psychic chasm between the way his family chose to mourn him, as a "saved" Christian, without regard for the way his sexuality and spirituality intertwined, and seemingly everyone else who knew him and his work, brings Fullan into a painfully intimate communion with her subject. She writes, "The ridiculous, grandiose, and impossible desire to find and connect with someone whom we have never known and can never know as a living fellow human is, I think, also the nature and purpose of every personal archive and, more broadly, the nature and purpose of research" (pp. 206–7).

It might seem grandiose or impossible to hope to know people marginalized in their own lifetimes, who may not have entirely understood themselves, through fading ephemera housed in disparate repositories where the potential for discovery depends on so many factors. However, *Out of the Closet, Into the Archives* proves that much can be learned when these fractured traces of lives and histories are excavated, contextualized, and given witness to. For the queer archivist, there is work to be done, and it is necessary and pleasurable work.

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