

REBECKA TAVES SHEFFIELD, Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times

Shyla Seller

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Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times. Rebecka Taves Sheffield. Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2020. 272 pp. 987-1-63400-091-8

SHYLA SELLER

Archivist

Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre

In *Documenting Rebellions*, Rebecka Taves Sheffield presents well-researched and thoughtful histories of four archives that emerged out of the gay and lesbian movement in North America: two in California, one in New York, and one in Toronto, where the author lived, studied, and worked in the lead-up to this study. She traces the archives' origins and development, de-radicalization and strategic neutrality, and transitions from volunteer-run to professionally staffed organizations. She then analyzes and compares these histories in order to assess the archives as going concerns, considering their sustainability strategies over time, their volunteer and paid labour, their material needs for space and stable funding over time, their independence from (or domination by) large academic institutions, and their success (or failure) in changing along with the communities they attempt to serve and represent with their collecting and outreach activities. The publication is number 11 in the Litwin Books Series on Gender and Sexuality in Information Studies, edited by Emily Drabinski, and is based on Sheffield's 2015 PhD thesis.¹

Sheffield conducted several original interviews for this work, talking to founders, former directors, volunteers, and others involved in the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA) in New York, the ONE National Gay and Lesbian

1 Rebecka Taves Sheffield, "The Emergence, Development and Survival of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives" (PhD thesis, University of Toronto, 2015), https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/97285/1/Sheffield_Rebecka_T_201511_PhD_thesis.pdf.

Archives in Los Angeles, the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives in West Hollywood, and the ArQuives: Canada's LGBTQ2+ Archives in Toronto. Without losing her strong authorial voice, she brings in her interview subjects' stories and their memories – of difficult relationships and decisions, stressful moments, and the impacts of key individuals since passed; it is evident throughout this book how much care and respect Sheffield holds for these individuals and organizations and how much they mean to her. Her curiosity and interest in the subject is professional and personal, as she reflects on her experience of being seduced by and finding inspiration and possibility in materials in the archives she visits, even while personally experiencing the effects of patriarchy within the organizational culture of the archives where she volunteered before writing this book.

Sheffield is currently a senior policy advisor in the Recordkeeping Strategies Unit of the Government of Ontario and the Vice-President of the Association of Canadian Archivists. In the past, she worked as both a volunteer and the Executive Director of the ArQuives, then known as the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. This experience results in a greater depth of analysis and examination of that organization compared with those of the American archives profiled in the other case studies. In the introduction to one particularly striking story, Sheffield recalls the feeling of sitting with long-standing, dedicated volunteers at a Toronto Pride week event at the ArQuives, as an audience member, possibly thinking of Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*, claimed that the queer archive would always be a failed project (p. 3).

The author uses this story, and the idea of the inevitable failure of a life's work, to situate her work as informed by queer and cultural theory as well as by archival theory and practice; she demonstrates, through the description of an audible gasp, the significant gap between these disciplines and the difference between the rhetorical "archive" and the hands-on work of archives created as conscious interventions, by real people, through endless amounts of their archival labour. *Documenting Rebellions* aims to be an interdisciplinary space, to span boundaries and increase understanding both between archival and archive studies and across academic and activist communities. Sheffield approaches her research with a goal of being normative and political, of providing insight into a particular cohort of archival institutions and their functions, symbolic and material, rather than performative (p. 13). She acknowledges the limitations of identity-based archives, their whiteness, and the ways in which the lack of diversity in collections impacts users. In order to show "how this cohort of community

archives has been affected by the very same combination of socio-political and economic factors that shape the cultural histories they preserve” (back cover), she considers how the sheer existence of the archives in their current forms affects the ways in which people think about the communities represented within their collections. The result is quite grounding, honest, and surprisingly practical, especially for someone like me, working at a non-profit community archives, with strong personalities on its board, facing (some) similar pressures and ongoing questions of sustainability over time.

Documenting Rebellions is organized into two sections framed by an introduction, conclusion, and back matter listing research sources referenced in the work. In her introduction, alongside personal stories and experiences, Sheffield includes a brief section on choices for terminology used in the book, like *homosexual*, *lesbian*, *gay*, and *queer*, without warning the reader at this point about the surprising term *archivette*, used by the LHA to describe volunteers. She describes the book itself also as an “archive,” using the more metaphorical cultural studies meaning of the term (although, to this effect, the book could have benefitted from another round of proofreading and better-quality binding – reminders that independent academic book publishing operates under near-impossible financial burdens similar to those of community archives). A literature review highlights key works informing her analysis, and a more thorough list of these is presented in a bibliography at the end.

Four chapters dedicated to the history of the four profiled archival institutions comprise the first section of the book, entitled *Origins*. In the second section, *Keeping On*, Sheffield looks at issues that connect these organizations’ development histories and focuses particularly on sustainability strategies, noting how the archival institutions evolved differently over time while under similar pressures and identifying the particular importance of founders, volunteers, and champions – long-term community members with institutional knowledge and commitment. Sheffield weighs some of the benefits and risks of different survival strategies, including the increasing professionalization of the archives and the structuring of an archival organization as a non-profit society, which enables it to diversify fundraising and apply for grants from different funding bodies. But non-profit status also means that the society cannot be involved in overtly political work. Some of the independent archives profiled eventually joined forces with large, more stable, deep-pocketed universities, and in so doing, risked being swallowed up within diverse special collections and

losing their direct relationships with volunteer champions active in community-led collecting activities. In her conclusion, Sheffield returns to the ArQuives, addressing its name change and outreach attempts (to increase its inclusivity and queerness) and discussing the challenges it continues to have in developing connections with younger and BIPOC audiences.

The engaging stories driving this book can leave the reader behind in some places, particularly in the second section of the book, when Sheffield's deep familiarity with personnel connected with the four institutions can leave the reader feeling lost in a sea of names or unsure of the significance of a particular anecdote without a clear memory of which organization or period of time an individual was linked to. Different archives changed names over time, and this contributes to some of the confusion in this section.

I would have liked to have read more about the origins of the archives' early cataloguing and arrangement and description activities, especially given that a couple of the archives were connected with gay and lesbian publications whose staff were familiar with bibliographic data systems. Sheffield's primary focus is on the sociocultural and financial forces impacting these organizations rather than on the development and implications of their collecting activities, mandates, and cataloguing systems. Neither does the book dig deeply into the collections' reference and use. It would have been interesting to consider the author's thoughts on how archival theory around the personal records of individuals plays out in the collections of these organizations.

That said, I found a lot to take away from the stories the author gathered and told and from the various strategies of survival attempted by these organizations, and I found it interesting to consider these histories within the social and political lens and scholarship referenced in the book. I could not help but compare some of the stories to the structure and history of the non-profit community-based archives where I work. Although some of the pressures and challenges referenced are particular to the queer experience, others – like the business need of an independent archives for ongoing and stable space, funding, expertise, and outreach – will be of particular interest for those engaged in the work of community-led archives, especially those operating within a framework of social justice.