

Don't Throw It Away!

Tuula Juvonen

SQS
1-2/2012

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Queer Eye
Reviews

Tuula
Juvonen

Liz Bly & Kelly Wooten (eds):
Make Your Own History. Documenting Feminist and Queer Activism in the 21st Century.

Litwin Books: Los Angeles 2012, pp. 180.

In the past years, 'archives' has become one of the buzzwords in queer studies. While it is often used simply synonymous for an eclectic set of research data or materials used by a scholar in her work, it sometimes also is used in a more traditional sense as a repository of data collections, documenting particular events or lives lived. The anthology edited by Liz Bly and Kelly Wooten, *Make Your Own History. Documenting Feminist and Queer Activism in the 21st Century* leans to the latter definition, being a collection of articles, which address the issues crucial for establishing professional data collections documenting feminist and queer activism.

The anthology starts with five articles focusing on documenting underground (mostly zine) cultures, followed by three texts on lesbian and queer archives, two more on archiving of digital born material, and one on various collaborative strategies archives use in order to accomplish their tasks. The final piece is a memoir written by a passionate packrat turned into an owner of a historically valuable archive. The texts addressing this variety of topics end up being uneven in their take. Some are clearly

scholarly pieces based on original research, others are reports written by archival professionals, and some document or reminisce various forms of activism.

I find it unfortunate that the collection lacks an introduction pulling these texts together and contextualizing them for readers who might not be self-evidently familiar with e.g. with such activism as Riot Grrrl or Eternal Summer of the Black Feminist Mind. The editing assumes a rather local and narrowly defined readership, which makes it difficult for others to appreciate some of the articles, thus diminishing their applicability. However, many of the articles provide interesting insights into their specific topics. I enjoyed reading the text of Sarah Dyer describing her career as a writer, editor and publisher, and eventually a collector and archival donor of various zines.

Nevertheless, without a personal connection to zine culture, I feel I was not the part of the intended audience of the texts written by Jenna Freedman on the culture of self-publication and by Jenna Brager & Jami Sailor on archiving zines, although both could offer interesting impulses, for example, to scholars interested in various forms of alternative literary production. Next article, by the librarian Kelly Wooten, about outreach work done by librarians and archivists to make their audiences aware of the treasures housed in their collections could have also been matched with the article written by Elizabeth A. Myers on collaborative actions taken by archivists in order to develop their collections. Both articles list several

great tested and tried ideas about attracting new donors and users who could easily be put in action by dedicated professionals also in other places.

In the first section my favourite article was “Archiving the Movement” by Kate Eichhorn. She has written a rich and nuanced piece about one particular collection, namely the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library and Special Collections. In a fascinating way, Eichhorn’s text discusses the development of the collection, its significance in documenting Riot Grrrl phenomenon, and the reparative possibilities such a collection enables in order to publicise Riot Grrrl movement as a distinct culture with intellectual and artistic lineages.

In the second section dedicated to LGBT archives, Alana Kumbier’s piece on the independent film “The Water Melon Woman” by Cheryl Dunye as an invented archive allows us to take the theoretical discussion about missing archives further. Kumbier reads the film, among other things, as a plea for real life archival activism. Angela L. DiVeglia’s article, based on her recent study, is a thorough introduction to the key elements which have the power to make or break the actually existing LGBT community archives, or any other archives intending to collect LGBT materials for that matter – visibility, self-determination, accessibility, privacy, accountability and trust. The third article in this session, written by Alexis Pauline Gumps, becomes an archive itself documenting the activities undertaken by Black Feminists in order to grow “the presence, impact and collective memory of Black Feminism in the progressive and popular consciousness” (p. 59).

In recent years, every professional meeting with the archivists winds at some point to the problem of archiving digital materials. In this anthology, Erin O’Meara discusses in very useful way about the challenges and necessary approaches one must consider when dealing with digital materials. Amy Benson & Kathryn Allamong Jacob, for their part, make interesting comparisons with analogue and digital literary genres, juxtaposing diaries

with blogs, organisational correspondence and publishing with websites, or letters with e-mails, in order to evaluate their necessity in future history writing. This section makes it quite clear that archives cannot stop collecting communication only because the medium has changed – urging activists to secure their own digitally born materials.

One of my favourite articles in this collection is the concluding text by Barbara Sjöholm, who is more familiar for many as the detective author Barbara Wilson. In her piece, she takes us to the emerging world of small feminist presses of the 1970s, and allows us to follow the founding and growth of the publishing house Seal Press – as well as its business archives. Today, the archives of Seal Press, donated to Oberlin College Library, form a unique collection of documents preserving one segment of the Women in Print Movement, a movement which formed an invaluable literary backbone of the Second Wave lesbian feminism, not only in the US but, through its printed products, also in the overseas.

While the anthology makes a strong claim in its title *Make Your Own History* and persuades its readers to engage in archival activism, it can be disputed whether the collection actually succeeds in covering the variety of feminist and queer activism in the 21st century, and the challenges we will face in documenting it. However, the anthology may give some new impulses for people who are actually working with archiving and function as an always-timely reminder for those queers and feminists who have so far focused solely on activism: if they do not seriously think about archiving their own activism and undertake inventive measures to guarantee its preservation themselves, such activism will invariably disappear from our history writing and historical consciousness.

Inspired by the ideas fuelling archival activism, such as presented also in *Make Your Own History*, we in the Society of Queer Studies in Finland SQS have already taken measures to prevent such a loss from happening

in Finland. SQS has made sure that the National Library in Finland has added the website of SQS in its digital harvesting program, including also the content of its journal, *SQS Journal*. Likewise, the board of the SQS has included a new member at its internal mailing list, the archivist, in order to make sure that the internal correspondence will be automatically collected. This correspondence, along with other material documenting of SQS's activities, is regularly donated to the Labour Archives, a publicly funded professional archive with a dedicated interest in preserving lesbian, gay, bi, trans and queer history in Finland. By taking such measures SQS secures, for its part, that the existence of a vivid queer academic community in Finland will not be forgotten too soon.