

REVIEWS

Ephemeral Material: Queering the Archive, Alana Kumbier, Litwin Books, Sacramento, CA, 2014, ix + 257 pp., USD \$35.00 (paperback), ISBN 978 1 936117 51 2

Exploring the ‘queering’ of the archive, Alana Kumbier seeks to visit ‘unconventional archives’; to see how queer communities build and maintain collections in response to the ‘particular demands’ of their subjects and aims; and to look at ‘how these queer archival practices can help us transform conventional approaches to archiving’ (p. 1).

‘Queer’ is a complex, contested term. Kumbier devotes a section to her own usage, which emerges more from activist practice and the self-definition of individuals and communities, and less from the academic, post-structuralist world of queer theory (though she provides a set of references for the curious). Queer is a verb as well as an adjective, incorporating oppositional, unruly and coalitional responses to dominant cultural and societal norms. While mostly focused on disrupting established notions of gender and sexuality, queer is presented as something which goes further, as an ‘open mesh’ (p. 7) potentially encompassing race, ethnicity, class, (dis)ability and more.

Kumbier goes on to introduce an equally broad definition of the term ‘archives’, and notes that the projects and collections discussed are archives due as much to self-definition as to formal criteria. In doing so, the author sees her work as following Laura Millar’s call for a broader, more inclusive understanding of archives that goes beyond the constrained, formal definitions of the term on which the profession sometimes (unnecessarily, in my view) fixates.

The remainder of the text is divided into two sections – ‘Negotiating Archives’ and ‘Archiving from the Ground Up’ – each with its own introduction.

The first section contains two chapters, each using a film to draw out particular aspects of queer archives and archiving. This includes discussion of absences and silences in the archive, the need for creative documentation strategies and the limitations of many established archival institutions (while also recognising community-based archives can have their own issues). The first film discussed, *The Watermelon Woman*, is a fictional work following a young African–American lesbian filmmaker investigating the life of an earlier African–American lesbian actress (also fictional). The second, *Liebe Perla*, is a documentary focused on disability and the Holocaust; in keeping with the ‘open mesh’ noted above, this is a work not specifically about gender or sexuality. Kumbier is effective in using the film as a means for exploring how representations of a marginalised community ‘can enrich a queer archival praxis’ and remind us ‘why our archives need to be accessible and inclusive if we want to avoid recreating inaccessible, normalizing spaces and records’ (p. 77).

Section two features an introduction and three chapters which together explore how ‘ground up’ approaches to the establishment and development of queer archives foster different possibilities to those engendered by more established, institutional, top-down practice. Refreshingly, the first of these chapters looks at two attempts to build archival collections which were unsuccessful, with the author clearly and succinctly describing how she and her collaborators changed practice based on earlier experiences. The other chapters look at collaborative archives, and the ways in which projects seeking to collect queer zines support open, non-hierarchical collection policies and community access.

Though much of Kumbier’s work is based on practice, where relevant she also introduces a range of literature through concise theoretical discussions. Given this, and her focus on collaborative approaches to archiving, the emerging area of participatory archival practice seems

to warrant more than the passing mention it receives. Australian readers will also likely see a missed opportunity to introduce continuum theory as a potential model for ‘queer time’ and the collapsing of linear models of archival practice; and, if looking to complicate – or ‘queer’ – dominant approaches in the field, it is unfortunate there is no exploration of distributed, post-custodial practice.

A conclusion linking queer archival practice to broader developments would address much of this criticism, providing a useful place to not only reflect on what has come before, but to look beyond – to other domains like Indigenous, feminist or activist political archives, punk and subcultural movements, or purely digital communities. Instead the book finishes rather abruptly, jumping straight from the final chapter to a bibliography and index.

Situating the work in broader contexts is therefore mostly left up to the reader. In most regards, though, the fact Kumbier is embedded in this world is a strength, not a weakness. Starting with her Introduction, and continuing throughout, the author emphasises her personal, sometimes intimate, connection with and participation in the communities, projects and activities described. The myth of the impartial archivist objectively documenting and managing collections is thankfully nowhere in sight. Though the author is not afraid to be critical where required, these projects are meaningful to her and her interest and passion are clearly evident. *Ephemeral Material* is engaging, insightful and well written, representing a valuable queer perspective in the growing literature on participatory, activist, communal and grassroots archival practice.

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The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation, edited by Carrie Smith and Lisa Stead, London and Farnham, Ashgate, 2013, xi + 210 pp., £54.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 1 409443 22 3

Archives tend to attract public attention when they manage the personal records of the noted and the notorious. The announcement, for example, that Germaine Greer had donated her personal archive to the University of Melbourne in 2013, and further updates more recently about the challenges of processing the hybrid paper/digital collection, received wide media coverage. Former Senior Curator at the Mitchell Library at the State Library of New South Wales, Paul Brunton, used to get excellent mileage in his talks and tours out of stories from the Patrick White archive. There is something that captures the imagination about the glimpses into the personal lives and creative processes of our favourite authors that can come from these records.

The personal working papers of writers have provided the inspiration for countless biographical books and essays, but far less often do we see analysis of these records from an archival viewpoint. *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation*, edited by Carrie Smith and Lisa Stead, both of the University of Exeter, sets out to explore this less frequently examined perspective. In its introduction, the editors explain that the ‘boundaries’ of the book’s title refer to the ‘physical and ideological boundaries of the archive’ which are, they propose, continually reconstituted as the world and attitudes change around it. This should make sense to us recordkeeping professionals: that perceptions of writers and their work, like those of other recordkeeping entities (government agencies, official record creators and their outputs) are always changing and this in turn changes the nature of the archive and the uses to which it