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Review of Producing the Archival Body

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Review of *Producing the Archival Body*

By Jamie A. Lee. London: Routledge, 2020. 182 pp. E-book. \$39.16.
ISBN: 978-0-4290-6016-8

In *Producing the Archival Body*, author Jamie A. Lee encourages us to view archives through a framework of the body as a way to move traditional archives and archivists in the direction of embracing multiple histories and ways of knowing. Community archivists, as Lee attests, are further along in attending to the relationship between bodies and archives. A focus on embodiment among all archivists, Lee argues, may be a key to opening more traditional archives to non-dominant voices and perspectives. Archives, of course, contain a range of records about bodies, but Lee is concerned with building more dynamic archives that contain records that are not simply *about* bodies but that actually document the perspective of a multiplicity of lived-in and always changing bodies. Lee, who is Assistant Professor of Digital Culture, Information, and Society at the University of Arizona's School of Information, director the Arizona Queer Archives (a community archives), and director of the Digital Storytelling & Oral History Lab, utilizes a transdisciplinary approach to archival theory and practice. In constructing the book's argument, Lee weaves together ideas from queer studies, critical archival studies, affect studies, posthumanist philosophy, and phenomenology. This transdisciplinarity allows Lee to interrogate modern archival theory and practice and focus on building a "critical archival praxis that will support archivists—professional, community, and those everyday archivists—to connect theory, practice, and community experiences with integrity to make applicable changes in small and large archival settings" (31). *Producing the Archival Body* communicates a sense of urgency about the importance of archivists engaging in transdisciplinarity. Embracing critical archival studies, Lee convincingly argues, will open archivists to the ways that critical theory has destabilized and unsettled notions of the body, of time, and of archives. This unsettling can and should, in turn, help transform archives into institutions that are more capable of embracing multiplicities.

Lee structures the book into two major parts. Each chapter within the two parts is usefully bookended by a prologue and an epilogue that ground Lee's theoretical arguments in the details of archival practice at the Arizona Queer Archives. The first part of the book, which Lee entitles "Body Parts," establishes the definitional and theoretical foundation for her core argument that archives and bodies exist in a reciprocal relationship. Part Two of the book, entitled "Assembled Bodies in Motion," explores more intensively the nature of this relational reciprocity among bodies and archives and elucidates the ways in which attending to this relationship can help archivists actively shape a more dynamic archival theory and practice.

Chapter One focuses on the preliminary work of “connecting the dots” for readers between archives, time, and bodies. Lee defines archives and lays out a direction for archival theory and practice based on moving the archival paradigm from the modern to the postmodern to the posthuman. Lee believes that posthumanism, a branch of philosophy and cultural theory that challenges the foundational notions of humanism, including any ideas of fixed bodies and the linear progression of time, offers archival studies the “critical, theoretical, and methodological position to effect change” (41). Postmodern archival theory, according to Lee, reanimated the rather static concepts of modern archival theory and did, indeed, lead to archives collecting more records and stories from non-dominant communities. Postmodernism in archives did not really significantly change archival practice though. Lee’s goal is to use posthumanism as a heuristic to build a “liberatory archival praxis that critically foregrounds the intersectional non-dominant, im/proper, (un)becoming body along with the archival status quo to focus on the relational processes of history- and meaning-making” (38).

In Chapter Two, Lee turns to an exploration of time. She suggests that archivists do not always attend well to time in the archives. Our descriptive work functions to stop time by marking and fixing human and nonhuman bodies. Bodies of knowledge and corporeal bodies, however, are temporal constructions and fixable (or settled) only for brief moments. Lee believes it is problematic that archivists rarely revisit description over time to reflect shifting bodies of knowledge and the changing bodies of creators (and even the changing bodies of archivists). Redescription, she argues, is something that archivists often “cast aside to deal with mounting backlogs” (57). Here, Lee centers the role of narrative. She echoes Sue McKemmish’s assertion that that the record is both a conceptual construct and a physical object. Narrative, produced by embodied archivists, embodied creators, and embodied users, animates records and allows them to be in relationship with each other at particular points in time. Archivists need a flexible and critical archival practice, a more dynamic approach to description, which would allow for the temporal fluidity of bodies and records. Crucially, Lee also wants archivists to reimagine what constitutes a record. This reimagining might allow for the building of a more multimodal archival body where “the metahistories—whether as episodes, scenarios, or ephemeral performances that are quickly vanished, but live on in memory—can weave alongside and up against the master narrative in order to tell other contested, competing, or otherwise unaccounted-for histories of those who have been often excluded from society’s record” (83).

In Chapter Three, Lee closes out the first part of the book by connecting bodies to archives and time. She ponders whether attention to the specific embodiment of each archivist and each record’s creator might create the possibility of transformative change. Traditionally, Lee thinks, distinction and difference are rarely the focus of archival practice. First, archivists often assert a certain disembodied neutrality or objectivity as part of their practice, which has the effect of erasing the archivist as an embodied creator of collection description. Second, archival description tends to situate all records in standardized descriptive forms (or scripts) and these forms

rarely seem able to capture the “mundane complexities of non-dominant life” (98). This, to Lee, can lead to “the violent erasure of difference and different bodies.” Lee argues that archival practices actually produce non-dominant bodies by not attending to them “adequately or accurately” (98).

Having laid this foundation, Lee then moves on in the second part of the book to a deeper exploration of the relational reciprocity between bodies and archives. In Chapter Four, Lee emphasizes the usefulness to archivists of a framework of the body that posits “individual embodiment as archival practice and archival practices as an embodied act” (113). Archivists must be critically aware of and unsettle the often normativized scripts (or tacit knowledge) that shape their work. Both configuration and reconfiguration must become integral to archival practice because bodies and archives are, in Lee’s words, kaleidoscopic, meaning that they are always a multifaceted and complex mix of elements that change over time. Because archives produce bodies and bodies produce archives they are both in a constant state of (un) becoming. The archival body, like every human body, Lee asserts, is a “story-so-far.”

In Chapter 5, Lee turns in more detail to her work as an oral historian to show how a focus on embodied narrative or storytelling, which is often nonlinear and unsettling, can generate an openness to multiple points of view in the archives. The embodied, timestamped narrative of the oral history, as Lee presents it, can exist alongside the master narratives of the archives to create a greater sense of multiplicity. This, in turn, animates and agitates archives so that they may better work to document “conflicting stories-in-process” in the service of social justice (149).

It is the attention to the tension between the fixed and dynamic that makes *Producing the Archival Body* so thought-provoking for archivists working in more traditional institutions, including those in academic settings. Lee, herself an archivist, acknowledges that archival practice has to tether human and nonhuman bodies in order to make them “intelligible, accessible and locatable in time and space” (119). What Lee questions, however, is the tendency among archivists to rarely revisit the original, tethering description to make allowance for change and new perspectives. Lee paints a rather inspiring picture of a potential archival practice in which archivists “tenderly” hold and structure the always becoming and unbecoming human and nonhuman bodies in their care. The book has left me (a supervisor of archival processing activities at a large academic special collections) rather preoccupied with this idea of “tender holding and structuring” (144). I find persuasive Lee’s argument that archivists must rethink their paradigm to focus just as much on unsettling as on settling, on dynamism as on fixity. There are some difficult conversations to be had, however, about how to do this in contemporary traditional institutions where resource allocators are preoccupied with efficient processing. Is dynamic description compatible with efficiency in processing? Perhaps not, Lee suggests. These conversations, it seems to me, should bring institutional archivists together with community archivists, like Lee, whose perspective might guide us in rethinking and reorienting our practice nearly two decades into the More Product, Less Process era.

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