

# Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives

## Composing Pasts and Futures

Jean Bessette

“In this innovative book, Bessette draws on a fascinating range of archives of lesbian experience in the United States to expand our understanding of what counts as an archive and how archives put rhetoric to use. Through meticulous analysis of archival objects ranging from films to love letters to buttons to posters, she shows how archives can be used for “retroactivism,” to shape collective identity, write new histories of lesbian experiences, and thereby multiply the range of identities and histories archives may represent.”—Jordynn Jack, author of *Autism and Gender: From Refrigerator Mothers to Computer Geeks*

### Retroactivism, archives, and the shaping of lesbian identity

Grassroots historiography has been essential in shaping American sexual identities in the twentieth century. *Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives* examines how lesbian collectives have employed “retroactivist” rhetorics to propel change in present identification and politics. By appropriating and composing versions of the past, these collectives question, challenge, deconstruct, and reinvent historical discourse itself to negotiate and contest lesbian identity.

Bessette considers a diverse array of primary sources, including grassroots newsletters, place-based archives, experimental documentary films, and digital video collections, to investigate how retroactivists have revised and replaced dominant accounts of lesbian deviance. Her analysis reveals inventive rhetorical strategies leveraged by these rhetors to belie the alienating, dispersing effects of discourses that painted women with same-sex desire as diseased and criminal. Focusing on the Daughters of Bilitis, the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and the June L. Mazer Archives, and on historiographic filmmakers such as Barbara Hammer and Cheryl Dunye, Bessette argues that these retroactivists composed versions of a queer past that challenged then-present oppressions, joined together provisional communities, and disrupted static definitions and associations of lesbian identity.

*Retroactivism in the Lesbian Archives* issues a challenge to feminist and queer scholars to acknowledge how historiographic rhetoric functions in defining and contesting identities and the historical forces that shape them.



RETROACTIVISM IN  
THE LESBIAN ARCHIVES  
COMPOSING PASTS AND FUTURES  
JEAN BESSETTE

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**Jean Bessette** is an assistant professor at the University of Vermont whose essays have been published in *Rhetoric Review*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Computers and Composition*, and *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*.

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List of Figures  
Acknowledgments  
Prologue

## **Introduction: Rhetoric and Identification in Grassroots Historiography**

Theorizes rhetoric and identification in “retroactivism” and situates the project in the intersections of rhetorical, feminist, and queer theories of gender and historiography.

### **1. The Daughters of Bilitis Archive: Clearing Historical Space for Clustered Anecdotes**

Investigates how the San Francisco–based national collective (1955–70) strategically deconstructed histories of lesbian pathology in sexology and pulp fiction and replaced them with the “anecdotal” experiences of organization members composed in print magazines (the *Ladder*) and books (*Lesbian/Woman*).

### **2. Classifying Collections: Subversive Schemas as Topoi in Place-Based Archives**

Focuses on how two lesbian archives, the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, New York (1974–), and the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives in Los Angeles, California (1981–), composed the past through classificatory procedures for archiving materials.

### **3. Remediating the Archive: Documentary Compositions of Lesbian Pasts**

Examines experimental documentary films by Barbara Hammer, Cheryl Dunye, and Jean Carlomusto. These films employ multimodal rhetorical strategies to frame, refigure, and even invent archival materials in new filmic histories.

### **4. “A History of Discontinuities”: On the Past and Future of Retroactivism**

Reflects on the legacy of retroactivism as partial and contradictory, yet effective in changing the evidence of the past available for research by women with same-sex desire. It also investigates how contemporary retroactivism in the form of digital video archives reflects and diverges from the strategies, media, and exigencies driving earlier retroactivists.

Notes

Works Cited

Index