

Perspectives on Women's Archives. Edited by Tanya Zanish-Belcher and Anke Voss. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013. 502 pp. Index. Softcover. \$69.95. \$49.95 for SAA members.

Perspectives on Women's Archives satisfies on two counts. This collection of essays provides a useful summary of the development of the field of women's history since the emergence of the discipline in the 1970s and of the growth of women's archives from the earliest days of the republic. As such, it might well be incorporated into reading lists for both history and archival studies programs. But the book also offers stimulating prescriptions for the future direction of archives and raises urgent questions about the quality and equality of access in our overwhelmingly digital environment. In this way, it advances the ongoing discussion of why archivists do what we do and how we can do it better—all without the grating neologism “herstory” making more than a token appearance in the text.

The editors originally intended to collect in one volume all the available archival literature on women's archives. Not only did they discover that the amount of archival material supporting work in women's history is daunting, they also decided that one book is inadequate to address all the major issues in the field that demand attention. This in itself points to the fact that both women's history and women's archives have come a long way since their inception and are now a vital part of our cultural universe.

The book begins with prominent historian Gerda Lerner's overview of the appearance of women's history as a field of serious academic study in the activist 1970s, a time of striving for social equality and inclusion. She traces the trajectory of approaches used, from compensatory and contributory history, or the activities of women considered notable in a man's world and on a man's terms, through a transitional history focusing on women's culture, to today's emphasis on a holistic history of all humankind. The simultaneous search for sources in which to ground this discipline revealed that the emergence of women's archives had preceded the formal development of women's history per se, with historian Mary Ritter Beard proposing a revolutionary World Center for Women's Archives in 1935. Although Beard's dream failed to give rise to a lasting independent entity, Anke Voss argues that her long collaboration with Smith College archivist Margaret Grierson established a model for future collecting endeavors aimed at illuminating women's experience. Yet, as Janice E. Ruth points out, the Library of Congress had been accessioning women's materials such as poems by Phillis Wheatley since shortly after its founding in 1800, and, by the turn of the twentieth century, was actively soliciting the papers of prominent women such as abolitionists, suffragettes, and pioneers in fields traditionally dominated by men. Taronda Spencer shows that historic black colleges and universities were also in the forefront of the women's archives movement, collecting materials produced by their female graduates even prior to 1935.

But as Deborah Gray White and Audrey T. McCluskey assert, black women's own voices remained scarce in mainstream archives, even those with a commitment to collecting in women's studies. This was due partly to the black community's heavy reliance on oral tradition and partly to the majority society's tendency to interpret black women as victims rather than agents. Inevitably, literate, white, upper-class women generated the most material in traditional formats as well as the most interest among collecting

institutions. Eva S. Moseley emphasizes that, absent documents telling the stories of nonelite women, apparently trivial domestic records can assume hitherto unimagined importance. She cites historians' use of household accounts to add new dimensions to studies of American economic history and recommends expanding descriptive norms to capture the existence of such materials in archives (a suggestion that rather reduces the allure of "More Product, Less Process"). Indeed, unusual sources increasingly recognized as important carriers of women's culture—artifacts like textiles and family albums, self-published photocopied journals or 'zines, web-based records—pose challenges of description and preservation that severely strain the limited resources of many institutions.

Mary A. Caldera notes that access to records documenting the lesbian experience is influenced not only by the definitions arising from identity politics and bias in the lesbian as well as archival communities, but also by privacy concerns surrounding sensitive materials. Given the private sphere to which women were long relegated, it is not surprising that privacy and censorship considerations loom large in women's archives. The records of human reproduction (including abortion) treated by Tanya Zanish-Belcher and those of medical facilities and social welfare agencies held by many congregations of women religious, mentioned by Fernanda Perrone, are cases in point.

The editors highlight three major issues for women's archives, all of which are of equal significance to the archival community as a whole. One revolves around the current buzzwords "hidden collections": access problems associated with intellectual control and spatial location may be greater for women's archives with their host of anomalous formats containing some seemingly innocuous subject matter and housed in a myriad of often unexpected places, but the paucity of institutional resources that enters into the equation resonates with almost every archivist. Resources, as Zanish-Belcher and Voss insist, have an enormous impact on what is saved, what is publicized to potential users, and how this information is disseminated. While marginalized groups have traditionally been defined in terms of race, ethnicity, occupation or class, and sexual orientation, the current divide between technological haves and have-nots, whether these be individuals or institutions, is potentially almost as deep and as damaging to the historical record and to our collective memory.

It is increasingly easy to regard digital technology as both the blessing and the bane of modern archives, a vicious cycle in which more records are created and broader access is possible, but where such access may prove illusory if, for example, migration issues limit its permanence and if those without technological resources or skills are barred from sharing in the bounty. This dilemma is echoed in the conclusions of two essays cowritten by Kären M. Mason and Tanya Zanish-Belcher. In their 1999 collaboration, the duo recognized that while computer technology promises greater archival access, care must be taken not to exclude the nonwired public from the conversation. In 2007, however, they delivered a paean to the democratizing effect of digital technology on archives with no attendant caveats. One wonders whether the increased use of the Internet over the prior 10 years lulled them, and perhaps other archivists, into a false sense of security that thankfully has proved temporary. The editors' cautious stance today represents a necessary corrective to the constant digital hype that appears to hold us captive.

A related concern of the editors is what they perceive to be the erosion of the archivist's historical sense. The current focus on information management, whether analog or digital, and the widespread adoption of the library degree as the standard in the archival profession may be destroying the traditional humanistic orientation of archivists. Past collaborations between archivists and historians, as in the case of Mary Ritter Beard and Margaret Grierson, were instrumental in the creation of collections of women's materials necessary to support scholarship in the burgeoning field of women's history as well as women's own expanding feelings of self-worth. If, as Eva S. Moseley claims, archivists have the ability to promote new trends in history, and if, as so many of the authors of these essays assert, improving the documentation of underrepresented groups requires the intervention of activist archivists, then archivists must fundamentally be scholars, even if they do not themselves function as such professionally. It also is not difficult to foresee a decline in intellectual access to collections if archivists lose their grounding in the humanities and become IT specialists.

The final major issue for women's archives posited by the editors is the role of the professional archivist vis-à-vis citizen archivists, whose grassroots community archives enrich the documentary record of neglected segments of the population, including the "man in the street." Here the activist archivist once more strides to the fore. This vision of the archivist as, in Elizabeth A. Myers's words, "gateway, rather than gatekeeper" (p. 434) encourages the professional to collaborate with the citizen archivist and even to create records in an attempt to integrate underrepresented groups into the archival landscape. This is one instance in which the usual reservations about artificial collections fall by the wayside.

While the essays can grow repetitive, a failing common to compilations structured around a very specific topic, this reviewer welcomes this overview of the present state of women's archives, as well as the exhortation to archivists to craft a higher, more proactive professional and community profile. Ambitious, perhaps, especially in this era of blighted budgets, but this ambition is worthy of those who have gone before, who faced even greater odds in their quest to create a new historiography. Holistic history demands holistic archives.

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