

Archives and New Modes of Feminist Research. Edited by Maryanne Dever. Oxon: Routledge, 2019. 228 pp. eBook. \$39.16.

Originally published as a special issue for *Australian Feminist Studies* (volume 32, March–June 2017), this collection of writings poses a direct and thoughtful response to emerging discourse on feminist archives. It emphasizes community-focused, distributed, decolonized, and postcustodial archival approaches for many interdisciplinary and community uses and for community self-representation. Editor Maryanne Dever spends little time recounting the basic tenets of feminism or of archives and instead brings the reader directly into the challenge of the moment—interrogating the how and why of disruptive feminist advocacy and of practices that could crack open archival futures. Presented as 12 chapters by 17 contributors, it reads first and foremost as a work targeted at an interdisciplinary scholarly audience newly engaging with archival theory. First published in 2017, the writings, of course, predate the pandemic, #MeToo, #BLM, and the broader 2020 movement for racial and social justice and so only indirectly call for antiracism, reparative practices, and digital access equity. Nevertheless, in many ways, they presage those clarion calls by insisting the larger academic world must better engage with archival theory for a more just, equitable, inclusive, feminist future.

The first two chapters argue for the inherent yet often overlooked research value of records most established institutions consider marginal and ephemeral. They analyze both the granular and the collective properties that combine to form divergent materialities surrounding ephemera. In “Stains and Remains: Liveliness, Materiality, and the Archival Lives of Queer Bodies,” Marika Ciphor reflects on the evidential and visceral values brought by the very literal embodiment of evidence and vitality within the archives; namely, items such as hair and blood, that derive or relate viscerally to actual human bodies that experienced violence and oppression. Margaret Galvan critiques existing institutional approaches to cataloging the creators of artistic publications, insisting that archives must provide more detailed information and more accessible data to enable scholars to explore complex social and thematic networks. Her chapter, “Archiving Wimmen: Collectives, Networks, and Comix,” recounts a frustrating user experience navigating archived comix publications online, stressing her difficulty finding the very names of artists outside the mainstream.

Exploring and collecting the everyday, even proactively documenting it, is key to the grassroots “affective archiving” described in the third through fifth chapters titled, respectively: “Affective Archival Work Queering the Community Music Archive,” by Zelmarie Cantillon, Sarah Baker, and Bob Buttigieg; “Archiving the Other or Reading Online Photography as Queer Ephemera,” by Gemma Killen; and “Archives, Creative Memoirs, and Queer Counterpublic Histories: The Case for the Text-as-Record,” by Faye Chisholm Guenther. Each offers an expansive and helpful literature review on feminism in archives and describes the context by which nontraditional “archiving” embraces the political nature of archives and focuses resources toward community participation. In the context of advocacy, Cantillon, Baker, and Buttigieg further note that sharing what works and what does not with other community-based archives produces an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural body of knowledge.

Authors Nikki Henningham, Joanne Evans, and Helen Morgan further explore this notion with their in-depth case study in “The Australian Women’s Archives Project [AWAP]: Creating and Co-curating Community Feminist Archives in a Post-custodial Age.” This remarkably grounded and insightful chapter demonstrates a well-established and active case for postcustodial feminist archives with its mission, challenges, and many successes enumerated:

This sense of personal responsibility and radical empathy has in turn ensured the project’s longevity. We are all willing to listen and learn, evolving policies, practices and technological systems that embody mutually respectful relationships and challenge the power differentials built into existing archival and historical processes and systems. AWAP embraces projects which feature collaboration and co-curation, building communities of people and records, that go beyond cataloguing and collecting. (p. 99)

These approaches characterize and motivate the feminist commitment of the archivists, historians, and community representatives who work together for the AWAP. Likewise, Trish Luker’s “Decolonising Archives: Indigenous Challenges to Record Keeping in ‘Reconciling’ Settler Colonial States” is important for its focus on the ethical responsibilities of archival institutions with particular regard to indigeneity and decolonization. She considers a trauma-informed perspective when challenging some of the foundational principles in archival theory and practice; namely, the very provenance, ownership, preservation, and control of records along the power continuum.

Chapters 8 through 10 present three more opportunities for readers to engage with the value of nontraditional archival content. These are “Feminist Archiving [a Manifesto Continued]: Skilling for Activism and Organising,” by Jenna Ashton; “Documenting the Domestic: Chantal Akerman’s Experimental Autobiography as Archive,” by Jane Simon; and “Of Archives and Architecture: Domestication, Digital Collections, and the Poetry of Mina Loy,” by Jacinta Kelly. Overall, the authors drive home their focus on feminist research uses and “archiving” of published memoirs, poems, magazines, comics, ephemera, still photos, films, and assembled materials as powerful storytellers for marginalized experiences.

In perhaps the most intriguing of all 12 chapters, Michelle Moravec writes a specific and thorough review of ethical considerations for researchers in approaching digital archival environments, foregrounding key research from feminist library and archival theorists. With “Feminist Research Practices and Digital Archives,” she grapples directly with the book’s central pull. To feminist researchers, she poses questions regarding consent, labor, and archival absences, framing all in the context of a recent case involving the British Library’s digitization of the *Spare Rib* magazine publication. Those questions are “Have individuals whose work appears in these materials consented to this? Whose labour was used and how is it acknowledged? What absences must be attended to among an abundance of materials?” (p. 186). In response, she offers that researchers can seek out copyright, permissions, and provenance statements in digital displays; seek out and acknowledge the invisible labor that built digital access and

advocate for transparency in the use and terms of intern, volunteer, and contract labor; and investigate how digital surrogates were created, explore the criteria for metadata creation, and consider the interpretative contexts of a digital archival environment. Moravec insists researchers consult and debate these provocations when reconsidering practices.

An engaging and focused analysis of the notion of archival silences closes the book. In the concluding chapter, titled “Silence in Noisy Archives: Reflections on Judith Allen’s ‘Evidence and Silence—Feminism and the Limits of History’ (1986) in the Era of Mass Digitisation,” Kathryn Hunter considers where and how silences of women’s voices and experiences persist in archives despite decades of awareness and growth in both collecting and open access since Judith Allen’s foundational essay. Hunter says:

Digitised sources are seductive: they promise ease of access to records we could never have hoped to comb in their analogue form. But we must be clear-eyed, that while digitisation has made the labour of searching less arduous, it has not transformed the nature of the sources we are searching. . . . As historians, we must guard against becoming more skeptical about silences and less so about the constitution of “evidence.” We must continue to write and teach about what *may not* be known, and *why* it remains unknown. (p. 210)

This book speaks to those silences and encourages an audience of interdisciplinary feminist scholars to consider more deeply what archives mean to present and future communities of marginalized people. It will also interest archivists who want to better understand and support interdisciplinarity in scholarship, promote more equitable and feminist uses of collections, reconsider a record value scale too long based on the relative social position of creators and media types, and work actively to enfranchise community users outside of established institutions. The references in toto comprise a phenomenal reading list on feminism in archives.

As the title puts forward, this book explores modes of feminist research and the many archival questions underpinning them. Archivist readers may note that little in the text grapples with concepts such as processing fonds or the differing natures of organizational records versus personal and/or collective manuscripts. Perhaps too often the generalized verb “archiving” stands in to describe a variety of systematic practices or conceptual approaches, unfortunately belying the complexity of some aspects of professional archival knowledge. Also, the years since 2017 have brought much upheaval to the world, so the social justice commentary compiled here may not seem cutting edge to today’s readers. Nevertheless, it provides an expansive scholarly conversation marking the important moment in archival scholarship when so many responded to theorist Michelle Caswell’s call¹ for the academic and archival worlds to more meaningfully benefit from each other’s insights. Most contributors cite Caswell’s scholarship directly, and, in her excellent introduction to this book, Maryanne Dever says to her fellow feminist researchers, “Indeed, as our work evolves so too must our engagements with those working professionally in archives and in the field of archival science” (p. 1). Archivist readers may crave a deeper dive into elements of feminist archival practice, everything

from selection, to provenance, to functional analysis, arrangement, preservation, digitization, DAMs, and reference services. Perhaps our raising those in conversation is the next step in meeting the challenge.

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NOTE

1. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 23–43.