

## Book Reviews

### **Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Archives.**

**Linda M. Morra and Jessica Schagerl, Eds.**

**Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2012.**

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**F**ifteen years ago Marlene Kadar and Helen Buss published their important anthology *Working in Women's Archives: Researching Women's Private Literature and Archival Documents* and established the foundation for researching women's lives and work in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Morra and Schagerl's *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Writing* takes up the challenges of this earlier work and fruitfully recontextualizes them in contemporary conversations about physical and digital archives. The editors have gathered a cross-section of scholars, archivists and artists to discuss both the processes of archivization and the ethics of archival research in relation to women's writing in Canada. The archives examined in this book include academic and national archives, digital archives, and alternative archives of oral and ephemeral materials. Indeed the essays repeatedly ask the reader to consider what constitutes an archive, what logics operate in different kinds of archives and how different kinds of archivization shape the creation of records and hence the production of knowledge. Pointing to the positivism which often underlies archival research, many of the pieces in the book offer a post-structuralist perspective on the archive, animated by the work of Derrida and Foucault. Many of the pieces also draw upon archival theory, feminist literary theory and queer theory.

The anthology is organized into three sections: Reorientations, Restrictions, and Responsibilities. The first section challenges the reader to consider archives and archival records differently, for instance looking at blogs, eBay records, email, and anecdotes. In this section, T.L. Cowan offers a particularly provocative contribution that stresses the importance

of anecdote in writing a “rhizomatic historiography of feminist cabaret.” (70) She asks what exactly is the object of study when considering the ephemeral form of the cabaret – the performances themselves, documentation about the event, the audience’s reception, the theatre space itself? (74) Cowan describes the scene of a feminist cabaret as an archive-in-motion, a repertoire of embodied practices which produce feminist knowledges. Such knowledges are necessarily rhizomatic, in the sense that people’s inexact memories of the specific cabaret connect specific cabarets to other shows and the broader political and social concerns of feminist scenes from that time period. The object of archival analysis for Cowan as a researcher then, includes not only the material traces and the what, when, who and where of what happened, but also, or perhaps instead, an examination of how we come to know what we know about shared feminist cultural and socio-political lived experiences. (82)

In the second section of the book, “Restrictions,” we find a range of encounters with institutional archives and an exploration of the purpose and problem of restrictions researchers find therein. For instance Catherine Hobbs writes about the ways in which the decisions and processes of archivists are themselves early acts of interpretation - acts which are not well documented and thus conceal their interpretive work. Ruth Panofsky and Michael Moir discuss the problems created for researchers by donor restrictions on access to materials, but also provide a nuanced understanding of why such restrictions exist and the necessary ethical decisions of archivists in accepting and negotiating such restrictions. While the archivists in this section point to the responsibilities and ethics of archivization from their perspective as practitioners, the section ends with a useful reminder from Karina Vernon of practical reasons to avoid depositing materials in institutional archives, which sometimes end up restaging exclusions from the national imaginary. (17) The mission, politics, and infrastructural limitations of institutions themselves give rise to the shape and meaning of the final archival fonds and to what becomes public knowledge. Leaving a deliberate gap in archives may thus be an important form of political praxis for marginalized groups. Silences speak volumes.

In the final section of the book, “Responsibilities,” researchers consider their own personal stakes in archival material. Kathleen Venema’s piece explores the ethical dimensions of creating an affective archive of her mother’s archive, as her mother slowly disappears, ravaged by Alzheimer’s disease. Julia Creet offers another moving account of a daughter struggling with her mother’s archive, in this case a secret cache of materials discovered after her mother’s death that reveals to the family that their mother had been a Holocaust survivor. Creet struggles to identify a place to deposit these records, asking critical questions about the relation of archives to national borders in a globalized world, whether records can or should be split between places, as well as considering the ethics of

depositing the private material of another. And indeed, while this book focuses on Canadian women's archives, the broader theoretical, ethical and methodological questions raised about archives, archival theory, archival researchers and archival practices are globally resonant, and useful to any scholar studying feminist archives.

In the Afterword, Janice Fiamengo leaves us with several questions that *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace* raises for her as a feminist scholar. She worries that "the understanding of archives as inexhaustible and continually open to interpretation frees us from impossibility of comprehensiveness, but makes our work unsettlingly historically contingent." (322) She also asks in relation to archival research, "to what extent does the emphasis on gender – on women's presumed differences from men, on the oppressions women have faced – determine our conclusions?" (323) To these probing questions I would add that as a scholar and tenured librarian, I am uncomfortably aware at times of the ways in which the labour of librarians and archivists are often rendered invisible in recent discussions of archives and the archival turn. Women dominate both professions, and the affective and immaterial labour of these jobs is often under-recognized in the neoliberal university and beyond.<sup>2</sup> To their credit, Morra and Schagerl's volume does include work by two practicing archivists (Hobbs and Moir) and published research by archivists are abundantly present in the book's sources.

However, more direct exploration of the potentially subversive and mediating role of the feminist archivist in relation to the institution would have made an interesting addition to this book. It is also the case that, given the austerity agenda of current neoliberal governments, institutional archives and archival programs are being ruthlessly cut and remade to suit a new vision of the national imaginary. Morra and Schagerl have created an impressive and admirable collection, which helps us identify feminist concerns in relation to contemporary women's archives, archives that have historically been dismissed and hard to find. While not dismissing the importance of alternative archives and reimagining and reorienting archives, a determined defense of those institutional archives and archivists who preserve and steward women's history is nonetheless a critical feminist political project and worthy of further examination, discussion and activist strategizing.

## Notes

1. Buss, Helen M., and Marlene Kadar. *Working in Women's Archives: Researching Women's Private Literature and Archival Documents*. Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2001.
2. Harris, Roma M., and Christina Sue Chan. "Cataloging and Reference, Circulation and Shelving: Public Library Users and University Students' Perceptions of Librarianship." *Library and Information Science Research* 10, no. 1 (1988).