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Review of Feminist Histories and Digital Media

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Paula Hamilton and Mary Spongberg, eds., *Feminist Histories and Digital Media*. Abingdon, U.K.: Routledge, 2019.

Originally published in the journal *Women's History Review* in 2017, *Feminist Histories and Digital Media* offers seven chapters and an introduction written by the volume's editors, Paula Hamilton and Mary Spongberg. The editors set out with the goal of assessing the ways in which the field has grown and changed since the advent of feminist archival research projects twenty years ago. The chapters are organized by the three main lenses through which they examine the changes. The first lens focuses on digital archives projects concerned with documenting the history of women's historical activism. The second examines digitization of primary source archives created by women. The last considers the impact of digitization on historical research about women. Although all seven chapters use case studies to explore these topics, each varies in size, methodology, goals, and results. The volume consistently emphasizes how historians and scholars combine the digital with traditional, paper-based archives to change the narrative of women's history. Intended as a signpost by the editors for future research in the field, the book serves to inform, inspire, and incite researchers to move forward with using digital archives in feminist scholarship.

For readers not closely familiar with the history of feminism and its “waves,” the early chapters lay a solid foundation for understanding the history, issues, and stakes of the scholarship discussed in subsequent chapters. “Women's and feminist histories are often re-inserted after the fact,” writes D-M Withers, and even if these histories are present, often they were produced by men, reflecting the era in which they were created (11). So whether the creation of feminist history comes from reading against the grain or minding the gaps, understanding the ways in which masculinist prejudices may have shaped the historical record is essential to understanding feminist scholarship. In particular, the chapter “Women's Studies 2.0: Italian Feminist Scholarship in the Digital Age” by Andrea Hajek provides a great introduction to feminist history, exploring early feminist archival research projects, allowing readers without a strong feminist sensibility to understand the context of feminist research, particularly in Europe. The majority of the contributors to *Feminist Histories and Digital Media* are either from or focusing on collections in Europe and Australia, with only one coming from the United States, so having a framework through which to orient oneself is key in understanding the particular issues of feminist studies internationally.

Much of the contributors' work would have been impossible in the print-bound form of traditional physical archives. Most of the sources needed for large-scale research were either not available in that type of repository or would have been prohibitively time-consuming and expensive to parse. With digitized records and technology, including crowd-sourcing metadata cataloging, however, researchers can create large-scale digital humanities projects, visualizations, and methodologies. The editors posit that “feminists in this volume are exploring both conceptual and theological issues about what it means to extend the boundaries of the previous unknowable past,” which will (hopefully) serve as a guide moving forward (1).

Despite the reliance on digitization for their research, the contributors refrain from hailing digitization of primary sources as a panacea. Instead, many explore the problematic nature of digital archives. The first issue addressed is the often-suggested theory that digitization provides

universal access. Although digitization can enable and extend access to collections across the globe, the accessibility of these records is biased to the First World or those with a computer and internet connection. The contributors recognize that many people have easier access to the internet than they might to a museum or archive on another continent, but such access is by no means universal.

Second, the contributors note the many economic issues tied to the creation and sustainability of digital archives. The editors open the floor to discussing the problematic nature of funding feminist archives in later chapters, commenting in the introduction that “there are certainly inherent tensions between the aims of feminist historians to make women historically visible and the financial exigencies which enable this to be possible over a number of years” (3). Elisa Beshero-Bondar and Elizabeth Raisanen observe the paucity of grant-funding opportunities and institutional support for non-canon archives. By highlighting different ways in which to create and utilize non-canon subjects in digital archive projects, they provide useful guidelines for how to obtain grant funding. They sound the call to address the issue of the digital canon continuing to reflect traditional issues of financial sustainability. Withers likewise discusses at length the role of capitalism in digital archives and the creation of feminist histories based on Withers’s findings while being a cofounder of the Women’s Liberation Music Archive (WLMA) in 2010. Without a market for standardized, interoperable data-sharing systems, marginalized histories such as feminist ones seem doomed to ephemera.

Lastly, Hajek highlights the creation of the Server Donne (Women Server), an autonomous internet service provider developed by Italy’s Women’s Documentation, Research and Initiative Center with an underlying feminist and ethical sensibility, what Hajek terms “virtual feminism.” The Server Donne was born from the “necessity to not simply ‘participate’ in the Internet, but also to create completely new, virtual spaces of sharing knowledge and creating connections without having to comply with the rules and conditions of existing, ‘patriarchal’ Internet providers” (29). This is especially relevant in Hajek’s discussion of collections and archives gaining political power and the complexities of being under an institutional umbrella. The creation of the Server Donne provides a concrete example of how feminist historians can utilize bespoke tools and platforms to perform their research.

Aside from digitization, the contributors recommend several additional methods of increasing access to women’s history records. The first is to help catalog or provide descriptive metadata for records. The cataloging of women’s records in many archives is either un- or underrepresented, making those materials essentially invisible to scholars. By being a part of the metadata creation, catalogers allow feminist histories to spread (17). Catherine Bishop discusses the increase in this sort of work by users other than archivists or professional historians in “The Serendipity of Connectivity.” These efforts have in effect established new types of history. Whether it is creating records or providing context to existing ones, adding underrepresented voices to the archive opens up a whole new world of discovery for feminist histories. In addition, many of these crowd-sourced collections rely heavily on peer review to ensure oversight in a way that other collections do not. They are also not static, as the digital lends itself to constant change, or what Hamilton and Sponberg refer to as “remixing archival material in next contexts and creating possibilities for greater diversity” (3).

Closely related to contributing to metadata creation, collaboration is key for many of these online archives, and not just between archivists. In “Women’s Literary History in Ireland: Digitizing *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*,” Anne Jamison recommends collaboration among researchers, computer scientists, digital humanists, librarians, and archivists. She uses a case study of a collaboration between the *Field Day Anthology* and JSTOR to explore the benefits and limitations of online websites, and compares those websites to earlier such projects. By not only being users of technology but also producers of technological tools, whether directly or through close collaboration with coders, researchers can construct tools to fit their needs rather than being limited by what tools are already available. This may open the doors even wider to researchers as concern for user experience becomes ubiquitous and archivists themselves master more of the digital realm.

One of the strongest chapters in the volume is “Recovering from Collective Memory Loss: The Digital Mitford’s Feminist Project” by Elisa Beshero-Bondar and Elizabeth Raisanen. This is the most technical of the chapters, surprising in a volume devoted to digital media. While other authors discuss the results of their research using digital media, Beshero-Bondar and Raisanen include details on workflow, methodologies, and tools, and provide the only illustration in the volume, a visualization of a data network. Considering the editors’ goal of informing, inspiring, and inciting researchers, this chapter excels in doing all three. It informs potential researchers about how to make a project like this work, including offering recommendations for obtaining grant funding; it inspires fellow researchers by showing the results of the authors’ work; and it incites others to carry the torch by concluding with a call to action to continue the feminist digital work that the first feminist archival research projects began.

Beshero-Bondar and Raisanen also question the 1970s feminist valuations of women’s literature, which leads to the first of two issues that stand out in review of this volume. The first is the use of the feminist wave theory by Hamilton and Sponberg as a backdrop against which subsequent chapters are positioned. The three feminist waves are generally considered, first, the suffragettes in the early twentieth century; second, the 1960s–1970s women’s movement; and the third beginning in the 1990s, and while the editors briefly mention the problematic nature of this limiting term in their introduction, evoking Kate Eichhorn, they make no other reference to how this may or may not affect our understanding of feminist history.¹ Hajek does address this and recommends the possibility of challenging the very concept of generational waves as it imposes a linear perspective of feminist history and erases conversations that do not conform to the dominant narrative. Hajek states that although the wave theory is problematic, the critiques do not apply in the Italian case about which she is writing. The lack of this discussion in other chapters may stem from the majority of contributors coming from outside of the United States, where the waves are more clearly delineated and accepted. Even so, there is no discussion about the possibility of the fourth wave, whether it exists currently or if we are still riding the third wave, and what the answer to that question means for future feminist historians.

The second issue presents itself in the book’s opening chapter, “Ephemeral Feminist Histories and the Politics of Transmission within Digital Culture,” in which Withers details their involvement in the creation of the WLMA and the digitization of analog audiovisual media. One of Withers’s main points is that it may be fruitless to digitize primary source materials as formats change so

¹ Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013).

rapidly. While this may be true for some analog formats, it most certainly is not for audiovisual material, the topic of Withers's chapter. Technical naivete of grassroots digital archive-making is an issue when it comes to preservation of audiovisual materials. While paper can wait, magnetic media cannot, as there are not enough hours left on existing machines to digitize even a majority of the content in archives, let alone keep up with the deterioration and obsolescence of consumer-grade formats most often found in archival collections. Withers does admit the shortcomings in the process of digitizing audiocassettes for the WLMA, but instead of offering a call to action for women and other marginalized groups to digitize now before it is too late, they caution, regrettably so, to wait, stating, "The wisest thing perhaps is not to be seduced by any digital imperative deemed to have all the answers, but to wait to see what stabilities emerge within the field of digital information management in order to act carefully" (18). Most people would agree that the digital offers as many, or more, issues as paper-based archives, but the imperative to migrate to the next format is an understood and expected irritation in all digital archives. Audiovisual archives are no different. Withers's recommendation to wait to digitize audiovisual materials presents a huge disservice to the archival and feminist communities. Narratives by women, people of color, and the LGBTQ community are at an even greater risk for loss because there are fewer available in the archives.

Despite this, Withers's chapter and the others in *Feminist Histories and Digital Media* are interesting and insightful, and utilize digital media in new and innovative ways to promote and enable feminist scholarship. Although the volume is geared more toward feminist scholars and historians, and most of the authors are feminist scholars and digital humanists themselves, it reaches beyond researchers. It inspires archivists to connect with digital humanists and work together to combine the digital with the traditional, paper-based archives in order to change the narrative of women's history. Hamilton and Sponberg succeed in selecting works that introduce feminist history as well as highlight the need for communication, collaboration, and cooperation between archivists and users of their records. Digital archives help enable connections beyond local and national borders, and this volume has met the editors' goal of providing a signpost for future feminist scholarship by clearly pointing the way toward further collaboration across disciplines, borders, languages, and generations.