

PROFESSIONAL READING

COLLECTING, PRESERVING, AND SHARING WOMEN'S HISTORY

by Phyllis Holman Weisbard

Saskia E. Wieringa, ed., *TRAVELING HERITAGES: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON COLLECTING, PRESERVING AND SHARING WOMEN'S HISTORY*. Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publishers, 2008. 307p. bibl. ill. \$34.95, ISBN 978-9052602998.

"Paper, to some extent, is patient, but bits and bytes are not" (p.42).

How does an archivist deal with material that is "born digital"? That's just one of the many contemporary issues discussed in this volume of essays, which was generated by a day-long seventieth-birthday celebration and seminar at the International Information Centre and Archives for the Women's Movement (IIAV) and edited by the IIAV's director. The title *Traveling Heritages* is meant to convey movement — the migration histories (physical and mental) both of the donors and visitors to the IIAV and of the shifting "truth claims and concepts" whose heritage(s) and views of history are sought and preserved. The essays focus on practices, projects, and ongoing challenges of the IIAV in particular, but they are generalizable to any archive. This book should definitely be consulted by archivists, historians, librarians, and others concerned with the record of women's lives and endeavors, both past and present, because choices made today will determine what future generations have at their disposal.

The IIAV's interesting and dramatic history is outlined by Francisca de Haan and Annette Mevis in the first chapter, from the founding of the organization in 1935 by Jewish activist Rosa Manus and colleagues, through her deportation and murder by the Nazis and the expropriation and removal to Germany of her papers and those of others (where they were presumed

lost), to the miraculous discovery of the papers in Russia in 1992 and their return to the archive in 2003. The IIAV has a dual mission — to be "both a repository for historical material and a dynamic, activist organization working to ensure that answers to questions about women's history and the position of women in society are available and accessible" (<http://www.iiav.nl/eng/iiav/index.html>) — and is actively engaged in exploring how to meet (or perhaps adjust?) that historical and contemporary mission in the twenty-first century.¹

The other essays in the first part of the volume focus on history. Chapter 2 takes up the legacy of colonialism as seen from the vantage point of Susan Legêne, a long-term curator in the Tropenmuseum, who describes both a negative example of de-contextualized Korean clothing pieces and a recent well-thought-out project that focused on the unique culture (especially in songs) of people originally from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India, who migrated first to (then Dutch-owned) Suriname and later to the Netherlands. Legêne asks for more projects like that one, which connects personal memories to a collective history through what are sometimes intangibles — "language, songs, poetry, lifestyle, photographs, musical principles, recipes and systems of knowledge" (p.61).

Another chapter explains why there is so little documented yet on feminism and women's movements in Eastern Europe, highlighting in particular the fact that the movements are tainted by association with either the Communist past or Western foreign domination or both. The author, Francisca de Haan, calls for more projects like the *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms: Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (which she co-edited), for a regional database directory of women's archival resources, and for more digitization of primary sources, including the reports of congresses of international women's organizations. In a subsequent essay in the volume, Tilly Vriend of the IIAV mentions the reports as a category under consideration for digitization.

Vriend's contribution, devoted to new media, is in the second part of the book. She describes how the IIAV has embraced electronic resources and moved beyond physical collecting. As she says, "A digital library is not simply a digital copy of its physical collection" (p.112). To my mind, one of the most useful e-projects the IIAV has undertaken is to capture and store, electronically, issues of women's newsletters, magazines, and other online

periodicals. (To date, some 606 titles are included. See <http://www.iiav.nl/scripts/wwwopac.exe?&DATABASE=digitaaltdschriften&Pe=x&SRT1=ti&LANGUAGE=0>.) Although there are important digital serial preservation projects afoot in the U.S., such as LOCKSS and Portico, their focus is on academic journals. The IIAV project is unique in covering women's grassroots publications. Another novel and proactive IIAV project mentioned by Vriend, and described in more detail in a later chapter by Kloosterman, is the development of high-school curricula on women's history and women's issues using gaming technology.

The importance of visual material is tackled in two essays. Anna Honigh uses a case study of a single photograph of two Dutch women oyster-industry workers, from among the IIAV's 20,000 images, as a springboard to discuss what goes into analyzing visual material from a feminist perspective. Grietje Keller and Josien Pieterse describe their videographic process in interviewing Dutch leaders of Second Wave feminism. They see the camera as an ally in recording women's life histories instead of as an obtrusive barrier.

Not all articles are about the IIAV or Dutch women's resources. Antonia Byatt covers media projects in the Women's Library in London. In conjunction with the British Library, the Women's Library archives periodic snapshots of women's organizations' websites (to see what's been archived thus far, search for "women" or "feminis*" at <http://www.webarchive.org.uk>). Another project addressed the lives of individuals. A combination of oral history interviews and photographs has documented the lives of women living in the ethnically diverse (older Jewish, newer Bangladeshi and Somali) neighborhood surrounding the Women's Library. But Byatt takes issue

with those who say that immigrants are best engaged by exhibits when they can see themselves reflected in the displays. She notes that first-generation Bangladeshi women were very stimulated by an exhibit at the Women's Library that featured British suffrage banners made with embroidery and appliqué; some made their own banners in response.

The third section of the book, "Identity, Citizenship, and Archives," includes two essays on immigrant and multicultural issues, plus chapters on creating a pan-European feminist forum, an oral history of the Second Wave video project, academic feminism, nationalism, and the high-school curriculum project mentioned above. In any book of this type that concentrates on one institution, there is bound to be some overlap in content from essay to essay, and by this third section it is quite apparent. Rosa Manus has come up in several chapters, as have the importance of visuals, the need to expand collecting to more than "white women's history," particularly for immigrant women, without "othering" them, and references to online developments. This is not much of a burden to the reader, as such interrelationships are inevitable and the emphasis changes. Some readers may simply want to browse through the numerous striking photographs throughout the volume. Many are likely to pick and choose from among the chapters rather than read straight through. Archivists wishing to document the lives of minority women should read Marjet Douze and Twie Tjoa's description of the successful collaboration between the IIAV and three immigrant organizations in creating an interactive website ("Her History" <http://www.haargeschiedenis.nl>) that features the results of archival research and oral history.

Editors of feminist periodicals will want to absorb writer Manu Bühning's take on the feminist magazine as an empowerment tool — and perhaps nothing else in the volume. She writes from her experience as a writer for the Dutch periodical *Lover* (Dutch for *foliage* and also a shortened form of *literatuurlover zicht*, meaning a list of recent publications), which the IIAV publishes. Young Dutch women today do not identify as feminists or with the feminist tradition, Bühning says. This is an all-too-familiar plaint in feminist circles outside the Netherlands as well. But maybe the *Lover* editorial board's decision to put feminism literally "undercover" will be a useful one to others — they removed "feminism" from the magazine's cover, although the orientation of the magazine hasn't changed. Secondary school teachers and others interested in how and what is transmitted as history can glean insights both from the Kloosterman article on the IIAV's work in secondary education and from Maria Grever's closing essay, in which she interrogates the teaching of national canons and offers instead a framework from a global perspective, "based on crucial turning points in history that includes the national history of the country that students live in" (p.299).

The volume does not necessarily "need" the article by Clare Hemmings on academic feminism; it does not relate very directly to the work of "collecting, preserving, and sharing women's history," and from the perspective of North American readers, it rehashes two shopworn debates among women's studies scholars: autonomous women's studies departments versus integration of feminist research into all parts of the curriculum, and women's studies versus gender and sexuality studies. However, her examples from Europe and elsewhere cast a different light on the issues and make for an interesting

read. For example, she mentions the influence of external funding sources, including equal opportunity agencies in Spain and Finland and international support for thirty-two independent women's studies centers in India. And the debate between "women" and "gender" plays out differently based on language — she cites Finnish, where "woman" already has multiple meanings, both biological and cultural" (p.276).

Some interesting funding sources are mentioned but not particularly elaborated on in various chapters. I was already aware that the Women's Library in London received several million pounds (£4.2 million to be exact) from the Heritage Lottery Fund to purchase a site for its library. But I was unaware that Ted Turner funded an international information-sharing project, headquartered at the IIAV, that reported on the results of the Beijing Platform for Action from the Fourth U.N. World Conference on Women (p.139). Why Ted Turner? Not explained in Lin McDevitt-Pugh's otherwise excellent overview of the IIAV's international work. A Web search reveals the likely connection: media mogul Turner is founder and chair of the United Nations Foundation. "We connect people,

ideas and resources to help the United Nations solve global problems," states the Foundation's website (<http://www.unfoundation.org/>).

Another funder that caught my eye: "Mama Cash" — which I must admit I first misread as "Mama Cass," perplexing though that was, since the lead singer of The Mamas and the Papas died in 1974. According to Marjet Douze and Twie Tjoe's chapter on the cultural heritage of women in multicultural Dutch society, Mama Cash was one of the funders of the launching of a website that provided a portrait of the cultural heritage of three immigrant groups to the Netherlands: Surinamese, Moroccan, and Dutch East Indian (p.204). Later in the volume, Gisela Dütting and Joanna Semeniuk refer to Mama Cash as an international women's fund, based in the Netherlands, that hosted a 2004 meeting of European feminist activists that resulted in the European Feminist Forum (an organization structured by "affinity groups" that cross national boundaries).

Traveling Heritages is very well edited. Were one not aware that English is not the first language of most of the contributors, their essays would not betray them; the English is idiomatic and flowing. The book is well worth acquiring

for any individual or library with interests in women's history, migration, Dutch women, the application of new media to old and new resources, and the meanings of feminism today.

Note

1: After the book appeared and this review was written, the IIAV has done just that, through a name change to **Aletta: Institute for Women's History**, new URL (<http://www.aletta.nu/aletta/eng>, for the English language version), and sharpened mission statement: "Aletta's mission is to share knowledge and information about women's history and women's position in society as widely as possible. We also work to expand this body of knowledge and to promote further research about women and women's history. This is how Aletta contributes to securing women's rights and empowering all women." <http://www.aletta.nu/aletta/content/62553/mission_and_core_objectives>, accessed September 18, 2009.

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