

## Women and Archives

Laura Engel, *Duquesne University*  
Emily Ruth Rutter, *Ball State University*

In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” (1983), the novelist Alice Walker pays tribute to the anonymous women and Black women in particular whose creativity has been either neglected or unaccounted for by dominant conceptions of what counts as art or literature. As Walker queries, “But when . . . did my overworked mother have time to know or care about feeding the creative spirit? The answer is so simple that many of us have spent years discovering it. We have constantly looked high, when we should have looked high—and low.”<sup>1</sup> Walker discovers that “our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see: or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (p. 1186). Indeed, while we conjure literary ghosts and excavate the lost and found of women’s “creative spark,” we must always remain mindful of the voices and innovations sewn into but, like invisible thread, unseen in the archives. Put another way, while archives offer scholars like us many affordances, they are also hindered by both epistemological and material limitations.

During 2020, we confronted new exigencies and constraints as we attempted to conduct research and produce scholarship during a global pandemic. For public health reasons, archives were made more inaccessible than ever. There were also fresh concerns regarding gender and labor, with scores of women (often the primary caregivers for children, the elderly, and sick friends and relatives in general) attempting to juggle new personal responsibilities alongside their active research agendas. Intersectional forms of oppression exacerbate these gender inequities. As we write, the yawning gender gaps that have always existed in the publication, recognition, documentation, curation, and scholarly analysis of women’s literature—and have acutely impacted BIPOC and LGBTQ+ women’s literature—are likely growing wider.

Even before COVID-19 altered the world as we know it, archives were generating a great deal of academic concern among and beyond archivists. Over the last several decades, many scholars have pivoted away from conceiving of archives as simply sites to conduct research and have instead highlighted the role that vaults and repositories of documents and artifacts play in curating and preserving particular forms of knowledge at the expense of others. Indeed, as theorists Jacques Derrida and

Michel Foucault, historians Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Saidiya Hartman, and Marisa J. Fuentes, and literary and culture studies critics Diana Taylor, Ann Cvetkovich, Christina Sharpe, and Sara Ahmed, among others, have made clear, archives are never neutral.<sup>2</sup> Ahmed points out that “the act of building such an archive is not exhausted or exhaustive; there are things forgotten, paths not followed.”<sup>3</sup> Archivists Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook similarly assert that “archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance.”<sup>4</sup> This dual function of the archive as a vehicle for both reinforcing social inequities and engendering counternarratives frames our two special issues on “Women and Archives.”<sup>5</sup>

In thinking through how to introduce these issues, we decided to record our conversation about the paradoxes that lie at the heart of archives. We especially consider how our scholarship in distinct fields—eighteenth-century British literature (Laura) and contemporary American and African American literature (Emily)—as well as our lived experiences inform our understanding of the intersection of archives and women’s literature.

**Emily:** I thought we might begin our conversation by attempting to define the archive.

**Laura:** The archive can be both a tangible and an ephemeral thing. When we are talking about archives, we’re usually talking about institutional spaces that save significant materials in one way or another. Often women’s archival material was only preserved when they were connected to “men of importance.” There are also more informal ways of thinking about archival collections in everything from libraries to people’s own personal attics and closets. In other words, the archive can be both public and collective and a personal collection of things.

Moreover, the materials can be written and narrative, but they can also be objects. I’m really interested in how objects tell a different kind of story or even augment the story narrative material tells. Diana Taylor’s *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003) is, for example, a key text in pointing out the repertoire of rituals, behaviors, and performances, among other acts that the physical archive cannot contain. For me, the question of how to archive the intangible is really important. When we try to connect to traces of the past, we have to do it through the material that we have, but we also have to be mindful that that material *never* tells us the whole story.

**Emily:** For me, that absence is really how I became interested in the archive. As a lot of the essays in these issues suggest, creative writing plays a crucial interventionary role in the archive, especially in terms of marginalized histories. As a scholar and teacher of African American literature, I’m always thinking about the role that literature plays in both highlighting

and filling gaps in recorded history. A classic example is Toni Morrison's tour-de-force novel *Beloved* (1987), which ruminates on the unspeakable emotional and psychic trauma of enslavement and its aftermath that is notably absent in slaveowners' ledgers of names, dates, and transactions. In other words, I'm consistently probing literature for its epistemological implications, which often leads me to consider how creative writers engage with the dilemma of the archive.

**Laura:** Even in the way the archive is curated and catalogued, we have to think about white patriarchal influences. The question then becomes: How do you develop another system for research and discovery? Emily Friedman offers a new model for digital research with her innovative database *Manuscript Fiction in the Age of Print, 1750-1900*, which seeks to create a way to search and catalogue manuscript fiction unpublished in the author's lifetimes.<sup>6</sup> This tool is an example of the ways in which technology can potentially help us to find texts and authors that would have previously been unsearchable. There are also strategies for thinking about archival gaps that employ creative and/or curatorial methodologies in order to make informed speculations about the invisible connections between materials. I am reminded of both of our current projects here. Emily, your theory of "creative recuperation" in your forthcoming book, *Black Celebrity: Contemporary Representations of Postbellum Athletes and Artists*, proposes that creative writers, particularly poets and novelists, play significant roles in complicating and reconfiguring dominant narratives of famous Black figures. In my recent book, *Women, Performance, and the Material of Memory: The Archival Tourist, 1790-1915* (2019), I offer a strategy for considering archival research through the lens of tourism and performance. I contend that as researchers we are all tourists in the archive, curating materials according to our own subject positions and contextual performances. We both emphasize that creative ways of engaging in critical speculation are crucial in piecing together marginalized histories.

**Emily:** Absolutely, and like many of the essays featured in these issues, my research strives to reconceptualize the archive as more of a set of questions rather than a stable place or series of answers.

**Laura:** We have to think about our own investments and the different ways that we re-curate the materials and make meaning. Even though we work in different time periods, one of the connections between our research is the question of embodied history and its relationship to archival materials and knowledge.

**Emily:** Yes, it's really important to be critically self-aware about the set of embodied experiences that we are bringing to the archive or archival materials. In other words, how can we as white, cis-gender women encounter the archive in ways that do not repeat a kind of white, male master narrative, which the archive has been historically designed to reinforce?

I'm also interested in hearing your thoughts about what *recovery* means in the context of our two "Women and Archives" special issues.

**Laura:** I know there have been recent pushes to move away from a paradigm of recovery, or the search for previously unknown texts by women, but I would caution against thinking that recovery is not important anymore or thinking that there is nothing left to find. I'm also encouraged by the ways in which the digital realm has provided scholars and those outside of academia with more access to things. There is always more to find and other ways to know the texts, objects, and ephemera that we rely on to make sense of the past.

**Emily:** Right, to cease recovery or presume that we've "discovered" all of the significant texts or materials is to repeat the pattern of canon-making that we've inherited from white patriarchal institutions. As most scholars will acknowledge, the literature and objects of value to women have often been excluded or minimized in the dominant histories to which archives lend credence.

In the essays we've gathered here, however, scholars are deeply invested in recuperative work with at least an implicit aim to challenge further the biases that, however latent, still structure much of the curation of Western knowledge. I'm thinking of Laura Vrana's analysis of Robin Coste Lewis's "Voyage of the Sable Venus" (2015), Meredith Benjamin's excavation of the extra-literary materials, further editions, and performances of the iconic anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), and Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith's crucial insights into the archival significance of women's autobiographies and memoirs. All of these scholars are thinking about the archive in especially intersectional ways.

**Laura:** In terms of intersectionality, I think we also want to be clear that, while we use the term "women" in the title of our special issue, we are neither defining gender in biological terms nor thinking about womanhood in terms of patriarchal notions of the feminine.

**Emily:** Exactly, but the reality is that it is still necessary to focus specifically on archival knowledge germane to women and women writers because, if we don't make that specific effort, we risk repeating a pattern of focusing primarily on men whose lives produced the majority of what has been preserved.

**Laura:** I agree that there is still a place for thinking specifically about writing that is produced by women and considering the cultural constraints placed on them. We can't deny that the material conditions for women's creative production were characterized by constraint, and we are still faced with many of those same constraints even as our conceptions of gender are more fluid and inclusive. I'm particularly struck by how important it is to think about the circumstances for creative women during this unprecedented time in history. So many women are in the middle of balancing

their own work with home schooling, child care, elder care, and so on without any support. These realities are necessary to think about in the context of the archive. What will be imagined, produced, and saved during this period is just as crucial as what remains unwritten and invisible.

**Emily:** The pieces in these issues illuminate wide-ranging material constraints and conditions specific to intersectional women's lives. There is a tension between subjectivity and objectivity that is shot through nearly all of the essays as well as the archival records of women's lives. For instance, Vrana explores Lewis's poetic engagement with the artistic objectification of women of African descent, which overlaps with but is distinct from Benjamin's examination of the implications of Gloria Anzaldúa's archive for interpreting *This Bridge Called My Back*. Melissa J. Homestead's subversion of the prevailing narrative about the purported destruction of Willa Cather's epistolary exchanges with her partner, Edith Lewis, also reminds us that the archive is a contested, epistemologically unstable site. Jennifer S. Tuttle's essay shows not only the process whereby Charlotte Perkins Gilman was recovered as a feminist icon but also the extensive labor of archivists themselves in reimagining her legacy; Tuttle reminds us, therefore, that archivists and scholars work in tandem to produce knowledge, even as scholars are often credited with discoveries and interventions.<sup>7</sup> Alternatively, Lorna J. Clark's piece about a newly discovered cache of letters penned by the little-known novelist Sarah Harriet Burney (1772-1844), half-sister of the more famous novelist Frances Burney, not only enriches scholars' knowledge but also sends us back to Sarah Harriet's fiction. Fiona Ritchie, too, draws us into her archival research through the Kathleen Barker Archive; pouring over Barker's papers, Ritchie affirms that the history of regional theater in Britain and Ireland is in fact by and about women. Taken together, these wide-ranging essays suggest that archives provide not the only truth that matters but instead resources for complicating and offering alternatives to dominant narratives about women's art and lives.

**Laura:** There is a tension between the authentic and the constructed that we also want to be attentive to when we are thinking through archival documents. When encountering objects in the archive, one is really tempted to think they are raw or unvarnished materials, but they are often curated and constructed. Letters, for example, which may seem to be private, may be public documents as well, especially in early times when they were the most useful form of communication. Frances Burney recreated scenes and dialogue in her letters and journals that were often highly scripted and performative. We have to approach these materials as constructed documents rather than unmediated authentic narratives.

This also brings me to a point about the personal and the political that I want to hear your thoughts on. I think it's fair to say that we as coeditors,

as well as the other scholars in this issue, are approaching the archive through a feminist lens. Are we harking back to second-wave feminism in terms of the idea that the personal is political, or do you see this issue as a critique of that stance, or something in between? In other words, what do our feminist hermeneutics look like for this issue and the subsequent one that will follow this fall?

**Emily:** I think the mantra that the personal is political has always already been true, even when people have refused to acknowledge it. Particularly when it comes to the intersection of archives, literary research, historiography, and gender, neutrality is a mythical and especially problematic notion. I'm reminded of something that Irma McClaurin notes in her interview included in this issue about the ways in which

terms like "archive" or "feminist archive" [become] somehow detached from racialized thinking, but what is concealed there is an unspoken whiteness. If you look at what is represented historically in archives, you are generally seeing a white perspective. I think feminists need to own up to the fact that they too have practiced exclusion; they too have practiced citation omission; and they have also practiced appropriation of ideas from Black women in particular and scholars of color more generally.<sup>8</sup>

Considering McClaurin's insights, we can then begin to think about the idea of the personal being political in a deliberately intersectional manner.

**Laura:** Even if most archives are not foregrounding the intersectional, we are. In a recent re-reading of Judith Butler's *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1995), I got to thinking about the privilege of saving something and caring for something over time that many marginalized groups don't have. A lot of work on the queer archive talks about the ephemerality of tracing activist movements, as well as the emotional labor, affective connections, and even grief that attaches itself to movements. How, in other words, does this all get saved? Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) are pivotal texts in thinking through this question about ephemerality and affect and the ways in which embodied experience becomes part of the archive. The closet is also a potent metaphor for the kinds of things that we save or don't want to unearth versus the kinds of things that become visible and are potentially cathartic. The *affective* dimension to the archive is key, and I think we can see Julie Phillips Brown's essay on Susan Howe really bringing that dimension to the fore.<sup>9</sup>

**Emily:** Thinking through the personal further, I'd like to return to the idea of the selves we bring to the archive. For example, as a white woman who studies and teaches African American literature and who can trace my mother's (white) family tree to the Jamestown colony, I have a responsibility to approach the archive with a sense of its role in racial truth and



reckoning, not to mention in strengthening the case for reparations. In other words, I'm keenly aware of my responsibility to mine the written records, objects, and even literary texts that inform how we know what we know about Southern history so as to grapple with the genocidal violence and oppression that continues to structure the American present. The essay I wrote with Derrick C. Jones, who, like me, is from North Carolina, but whose family tree is filled with Black freedom fighters whereas mine has at least a few slaveholders, is a poignant example of the necessity of recognizing that we don't check our bodies at the door to the archive. Being conscientious about what that embodied knowledge means (and the unearned advantages and disadvantages that get attached to our physical selves) is crucial for my approach both to historical research and to contemporary literary studies.

**Laura:** For me, I'm often thinking about how to put pressure on the narrative of the *extraordinary* that often underwrites the archive and to think instead about documenting or archiving *ordinary* lives. Trying to record and access everyday lives is something I bring into the classroom, my scholarship, and my own relationship to my family history. For example, what can future scholars learn about cultural life, contexts, and struggles through the documentation of ordinariness? As a scholar of the past, it seems that almost everything we learn about women is extraordinary, yet we want to avoid thinking about an individual's experience as representative of the whole, especially since we don't have all of the data. These special issues attend to this tension between what we do have—in other words, what has been preserved—and what is absent in, say, the vault or the ledger. Further, while I'm tempted to think about this tension between archival presence and absence as a historical concern, it is also true of contemporary life.

**Emily:** Absolutely, and Smith and Watson's essay makes precisely this point about the through-lines of women's self-documentation in the past and the present:

In a sense, each of us is an archive unto ourselves, storing the remembered experiences of our past lives not only in memories but also in artifacts, documents, and memorabilia. In an age of social media and self-curation, this observation may seem obvious, but it is not particular to the contemporary moment. In fact, the history of life writing suggests that women have stored up written records of their personal and family pasts—in diaries, letters, and, when they existed, published works that tracked the stages and earlier versions of their lived experience and feelings, as well as in material objects such as samplers and quilts, photograph albums, and drawings.<sup>10</sup>

Smith and Watson's attention to public and personal archives also returns us to Walker's opening call to look high and low, and ultimately to think capaciously and conscientiously about what constitutes artistic knowledge, discovery, and the act of searching itself.

\* \* \*

This conversation is only the latest in a series we have had over many years about the significance of the archive not only as a repository of artifacts and documents but also as a crucial epistemological concept for examining the relationship between power, knowledge, and identity, both past and present. Some scholars in these two special issues draw heavily on archival material (Homestead, Bona, and Tuttle) to shed new light on women author's extra-literary lives, others consider women's writing as an archive (Smith and Watson, Benjamin, Brown, and Saxton), and still others examine literary interventions in the idea of the archive and its problematic preservation of hegemonic narratives (May, McClaurin, and Vrana). Our Archives (Clark, and Rutter and Jones), Innovations (Ritchie, Clingham, and Friedman), and Notes (Reznik) pieces elucidate the new narratives that emerge from understudied figures, texts, and artifacts.<sup>11</sup> Marginalized groups, including women, have maintained what might best be described as an ambivalent relationship to archives; read alongside one another, the essays in our two special issues capture this complex tension between the archive as a space of recuperation and of erasure.

LAURA ENGEL is Professor of English at Duquesne University where she specializes in eighteenth-century British literature and theatre. She is the author of *Women, Performance and the Material of Memory: The Archival Tourist, 1790-1915* (2019), *Fashioning Celebrity: Eighteenth-Century British Actresses and Strategies for Image Making* (2011), *Austen, Actresses and Accessories: Much Ado About Muffs* (2014), and coeditor of *Stage Mothers: Women, Work and the Theater, 1660-1830* (2015). She recently co-curated an exhibition "Artful Nature: Fashion and the Theater, 1770-1830" at the Lewis Walpole Library at Yale University and is working on a new project entitled "The Art of The Actress in the Eighteenth Century" for the Cambridge University Press Elements Series. She is the editor of the book series *Performing Celebrity* published by Delaware University Press.

EMILY RUTH RUTTER is Associate Professor of English at Ball State University. She is the author of *Invisible Ball of Dreams: Literary Representations of Baseball Behind the Color Line* (2018), *The Blues Muse: Race, Gender, and Musical Celebrity in American Poetry* (2018), and *Black Celebrity: Contemporary Representations of Postbellum Athletes and Artists* forthcoming from the University of Delaware Press in fall 2021. Along with Tiffany Austin, Sequoia Maner, and darlene anita scott, she coedited *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era* (2020).



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith, 3rd ed., vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2014), 1186. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Vintage, 2012); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: Norton, 2019); Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use: On the Uses of Use* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Ahmed, *What's the Use*, 20.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Shaping of Modern Memory," *Archival Science*, 2, No. 2 (2002), 13.

<sup>5</sup> The two "Women and Archives" issues are *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 40, No. 1 and 2 (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Manuscript Fiction in the Age of Print, 1750-1900, accessed 21 January 2021, <http://www.manuscriptfiction.org>.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer S. Tuttle's article will appear in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 40, No. 2 (2021).

<sup>8</sup> Irma McClaurin, "Archival Interventions and Agency: Irma McClaurin in Conversation with Emily Ruth Rutter about the Irma McClaurin Black Feminist Archive," interview by Emily Ruth Rutter, *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 40, No. 1 (2021), 122.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Phillips Brown's article will appear in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 40, No. 2 (2021).

<sup>10</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Alternative, Imaginary, and Affective Archives of the Self in Women's Life Writing," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 40, No. 1 (2021), 19.

<sup>11</sup> The works by Mary Jo Bona, Jennifer S. Tuttle, Julie Phillips Brown, Kirsten T. Saxton, Vivian May, Greg Clingham, Emily C. Friedman, and Alexandra Reznik will appear in *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 40, No. 2 (2021).