

# Kicking Off the Women's "Archives Party": The World Center for Women's Archives and the Foundations of Feminist Historiography and Women's Archives



SARAH LUBELSKI

RÉSUMÉ Le *World Center for Women's Archives (WCWA)*, proposé en 1935 par la féministe pacifiste Rosika Schwimmer et dissous seulement cinq ans plus tard, est perçu aujourd'hui comme une expérience presque entièrement ratée. Les écrits scientifiques courants suggèrent que la seule contribution à long terme de l'organisation était la conservation de matériel historique des femmes qui a éventuellement servi de base à des collections plus importantes. Cependant, une analyse plus approfondie révèle qu'au-delà de son rôle de centre de dépôt, le *WCWA* était une organisation innovatrice dans les domaines de l'histoire des femmes et des archives. Le fait que l'organisation reconnaissait le pouvoir des archives, y inclus le rôle des archives dans le façonnement de la mémoire historique et les politiques d'exclusion présidant à la création d'une collection d'archives, a eu une profonde influence sur les idéologies des centres d'archives. Dans sa quête de récupérer l'histoire des femmes, le *WCWA* en est ressorti comme sorte de « contre-archives », se servant d'approches alternatives à la documentation historique et à la production du savoir, dans le but de refléter l'expérience des femmes de façon plus large. Les principes et pratiques directeurs du *WCWA* peuvent être perçus comme ayant jeté les bases du paradigme historiographique féministe, du mouvement des archives des femmes et des études savantes en archivistique de façon générale, surtout vis-à-vis les groupes marginalisés.

ABSTRACT Proposed in 1935 by feminist pacifist Rosika Schwimmer and dissolved only five years later, the *World Center for Women's Archives (WCWA)* is now remembered as a mostly failed experiment. Current scholarship suggests that the organization's sole long-term contribution was the preservation of women's historical materials that would form the basis of more significant women's collections. However, a more in-depth analysis reveals that, beyond acting as a repository, the *WCWA* was an innovator in the fields of women's history and archives. The organization's understanding of the power of the archive, including the role of the archive in shaping historical memory and the politics of exclusion that governed the building of an archival collection, had a profound influence on the Archives' ideologies. In the quest to recover women's history, the *WCWA* emerged as a counter-archive, employing alternative approaches to historical documentation and knowledge production in order to represent the female experience more widely. The guiding principles and practices of the *WCWA* can be seen as foundations of the feminist historiographical paradigm, the women's archive movement, and archival scholarship more generally, particularly in relation to marginalized groups.

On 25 February 1939, the *Washington Post* published an article titled “Women Plan Archives Party,” which announced a luncheon, to be held in Washington, to promote the World Center for Women’s Archives (WCWA). Hosted by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and the WCWA director, Mary Ritter Beard, and attended by 1,500 invitees, the event featured an exhibition of some of the Archives’ most prestigious holdings, including the letters and documents of Nellie Tayloe Ross, former governor of Wyoming. This article reflects on the public image of the WCWA, one of the first archives dedicated to women’s history. Proposed by feminist pacifist Rosika Schwimmer in 1935, championed and led by Beard, a well-known historian and advocate of women’s history, and boasting board members and sponsors such as Roosevelt, Inez Haynes Irwin of the National Women’s Party, and artist Georgia O’Keefe, the WCWA appeared to have a bright future. It was launched to great fanfare in 1937 at a gala at New York City’s iconic Biltmore Hotel, and countless exhibitions, parties, and lecture series followed. The Archives was known for its high-profile collections, the most famous being Amelia Earhart’s papers, including the charts, maps, and records of her last flight.<sup>1</sup> But just five years after the WCWA was established, it was dissolved. In a final letter to the organization’s members, dated 16 September 1940, Irwin attributed the closure to the difficulties associated with fundraising for charities not “connected with the War and the evacuations.” However, as she wrote, the WCWA had made a lasting contribution by opening “the minds of people all over the country to the necessity” of women’s archives, and a project of “such magnitude and importance” would never die: “When the quiet days of peace and reconstruction come, we are sure there will be many such organizations as we have worked so hard to form.”<sup>2</sup> Identifying the WCWA as the trailblazer of the women’s archives movement, Irwin was sure that it would be well remembered.

Under the scrutiny of the historical lens, however, the glow that surrounded the WCWA during its years of operation has faded. It is now remembered as a mostly failed experiment: short-lived, financially unstable, and fraught with board infighting. Although Anke Voss-Hubbard acknowledges that the WCWA was an early attempt to create a women’s collection, she notes that it was “unable to build a permanent future.” Its long-term value, she states, lies in “its preliminary work in soliciting women to donate or deposit their papers in an archives center.”<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Hildenbrand similarly categorizes the WCWA as part of the “preservation” phase of women’s archives;

- 1 “Last Flight Data of Miss Earhart Goes to Archives,” *Washington Post*, 16 December 1937.
- 2 Anne Kimbell Relph, “The World Center for Women’s Archives, 1935–1940,” *Signs* 4, no. 3 (Spring 1979): 602–3.
- 3 Anke Voss-Hubbard, “‘No Documents – No History’: Mary Ritter Beard and the Early History of Women’s Archives,” *American Archivist* 58, no. 1 (Winter 1995): 22.

the WCWA was "not a total failure," she writes, because "it encouraged many individuals and institutions to preserve materials that might otherwise have been lost; and it contributed to the establishment of two of the most important women's collections," namely the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College in Northampton, MA, and the women's rights collection in the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University in Cambridge, MA.<sup>4</sup> The highest praise given to the WCWA is that it improved the circumstances for collecting women's documents, and that the materials became the seeds from which more successful and enduring collections would spring.<sup>5</sup>

Further examination of the WCWA and its founders, however, reveals a more intricate portrait. Beyond acting as a repository, the WCWA – and in particular its outspoken director Mary Ritter Beard – can be seen as an innovator in the fields of women's history and archives. Scholarship surrounding feminist historiography and the women's archival movement typically purports that the process of producing women's history largely began in the later twentieth century. Laura Mayhall writes that it was the "generation of women creating the discipline of women's history in the 1970s" who first asked, "How, ... given political history's emphasis on the actions of famous men, could evidence of the lives of ordinary (or even extraordinary) women be retrieved?"<sup>6</sup> Yet, arguably, the WCWA had addressed this question decades before. In an era when the archive was still believed to possess historical fact or truth, Beard and her colleagues shrewdly observed that it was not a neutral space; their understanding of the power of the archive, including its role in shaping historical memory and the politics of exclusion, had a profound influence on the WCWA's ideologies. The slogan "No Documents – No History," which appeared in the organization's information pamphlets, acknowledged that historians were dependent on the availability of historical material when writing their histories; the devaluation of women's historical documents, and their subsequent exclusion from archival collections, was, then, the source of women's exclusion from dominant historical narratives. In the quest to tell

- 4 Suzanne Hildenbrand, "Women's Collections Today," in *Women's Collections: Libraries, Archives, and Consciousness*, ed. Suzanne Hildenbrand (New York and London: Haworth Press, 1986), 2–3. See also the Sophia Smith Collection: Women's History Archives at Smith College, accessed 25 July 2014, <http://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/>; and the collections of the Schlesinger Library at Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, accessed 25 July 2014, <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/collections>.
- 5 Patricia Miller King, "Forty Years of Collecting on Women: The Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America, Radcliffe College," in *Women's Collections: Libraries, Archives, and Consciousness*, ed. Suzanne Hildenbrand (New York and London: Haworth Press, 1986), 75–77.
- 6 Laura Mayhall, "Creating the 'Suffragette Spirit': British Feminism and the Historical Imagination," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 232.

women's history, the WCWA emerged as a "counter-archive," which Alana Kumbier defines as an archive that employs "alternate methods and modes of historical knowledge production" to challenge the historical record's "claim to truth" and "articulate 'alternative realities' in relation to a dominant culture."<sup>7</sup> The organization's collections policy showed an inclusive approach toward what constituted a historical document. The Archives solicited unconventional materials such as personal letters, shopping lists, journals, ephemera, and more – a popular method of building alternative archives today – to incorporate the perspectives of women from every walk of life and to assign value to histories of both the public and private realms. Finally, from the user perspective, the WCWA prioritized accessibility in order to encourage research and education. Ultimately, its guiding principles and practices can be seen as foundations of the feminist historiographical paradigm, the women's archive movement, and archival scholarship more generally, particularly concerning historically marginalized groups.

Though an anomaly of its time, the WCWA was also, in some respects, a product of its historical context; the idea of creating a centralized repository of women's historical documents reflected the United States' new focus on the archive as a national public institution. Unlike many European countries that boasted long traditions of national archives and which, particularly throughout the nineteenth century, idealized these repositories as keepers of "comprehensive knowledge,"<sup>8</sup> the United States had been part of what Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland identifies as the "historical manuscripts tradition," which was "shaped by private antiquarian collectors" and community-based organizations, such as local historical societies. It was not until the early twentieth century, he argues, that the "alternative paradigm for the administration of historical records," namely "the public archives tradition of France and Prussia, was ... imported to America."<sup>9</sup> In 1914, historian John Franklin Jameson delivered a speech at the annual meeting of the American Library Association, asserting that "neglected and unarranged" papers had the potential to be "full of historical information" and as such were a "valuable national asset."<sup>10</sup> This notion that historical knowledge was dependent on the archive finally began to take hold: federal funding for a national archive was allocat-

7 Alana Kumbier, "Inventing History: The Watermelon Woman and Archive Activism," in *Make Your Own History: Documenting Feminist and Queer Activism in the 21st Century*, ed. Lyz Bly and Kelly Wooten (Los Angeles: Litwin Books, 2012), 97–98.

8 Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), 7.

9 Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Community Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History," *American Archivist* 54, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 161.

10 Kaspar Risbjerg Eskildsen, "Inventing the Archive: Testimony and Virtue in Modern Historiography," *History of the Human Sciences* 26, no. 4 (October 2013): 9.

ed in 1926 and a governmental agency responsible for the preservation effort established in 1934. The WCWA was influenced by this archival revolution. It was created partly in response to the National Archives, which, according to the WCWA's pamphlets, only specialized "in men's materials," and ignored "the broad history of women."<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously, the WCWA recognized the strength of centralized institutions in shaping national histories and wanted to employ a similar model.

Additionally, the WCWA benefited from the women's suffrage movement. In the decades preceding its establishment, the fight for women's suffrage had shone a spotlight on women's rights, social roles, and participation in the public realm. Across Britain and North America, women mobilized as a socio-political force in order to gain new rights. Importantly for women's archives, this movement generated "considerable records, including pamphlets, correspondence, minutes, yearbooks of regional and national suffrage organizations, and a rich record of print runs of various suffrage magazines" that would become foundational material.<sup>12</sup> Mayhall describes one such collection in her exploration of the archives of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Britain, which served as a "meta-narrative ... of the suffragette experience as told from one perspective."<sup>13</sup> While the WCWA differed by adopting an inclusive approach to the history of women, representing different organizations, political perspectives, professions and more, women's suffrage organizations and source materials were still at its core. Organizations and individuals that had been prominent in the United States suffrage movement became major supporters of the WCWA, and records of women's suffrage groups and the personal papers of movement leaders formed significant parts of the collection.<sup>14</sup> Beard hoped that the spirit of the suffrage movement would carry into the Archives; in a letter to women's rights activist Florence Brewer Boeckel, dated 10 August 1935, she wrote that the WCWA could "revive some of the old indomitable spirit which centered around the old Cause."<sup>15</sup>

By approaching Beard as a partner in the establishment of a centralized women's archive, Schwimmer had made a rational – and likely calculated

11 Ann J. Lane, ed., *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 212–13.

12 Katja Thieme, "Letters to the Woman's Page Editor: Reading Francis Marion Baynon's 'The Country Homemakers' and the Public Culture for Women," in *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Archives*, ed. Linda M. Morra and Jessica Schagerl (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 215.

13 Mayhall, "Creating the 'Suffragette Spirit,'" 233.

14 Mary Trigg, "'To Work Together for Ends Larger Than Self': The Feminist Struggles of Mary Beard and Doris Stevens in the 1930s," *Journal of Women's History* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 71.

15 Nancy F. Cott, ed., *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 131.

– choice. From the beginning of her career, Beard had criticized the marginalization of women in history, arguing that “women have done far more than exist and bear children. They have played a great role in directing human events.”<sup>16</sup> In an assessment of Woodrow Wilson’s *The New Freedom*, she acidly observes that the work was “typical in one respect. A visitor from Mars reading it would imagine there had been no women in this part of the universe from the landing of the Pilgrims to the present day.”<sup>17</sup> Her book *On Understanding Women* (1931) expands on this notion:

After the great State was founded on primitive societies by the sword, when kings, priests, and noble classes were established to engage the attention of historians, women merely dropped out of the pen portraits. They remained in actuality. They were members of all castes from the slave stratum at the bottom to the ruling families at the top and, even where restrictions were the tightest, took part in nearly everything that went on in the world.<sup>18</sup>

This passage touches on three of Beard’s central ideas: first, that the historical profession had excluded women from history by adopting a narrow viewpoint; second, that women had always taken an active role in every aspect of society and were thus “equally responsible for defining” society<sup>19</sup>; and third, that women, spread as they were throughout all “castes” and “stratum[s],” could not be singularly categorized. These concepts were adopted as central tenets of the WCWA, which challenged the myth that women had no meaningful role in history. According to the *New York Times*, it was a “contention” of the organization “that no fair evaluation of women’s part in the rise of civilization has ever been made, and that historians have not accorded them their just dues in that regard.”<sup>20</sup> Publicity materials further highlighted the WCWA’s position that “the prevalent theory ... that women, other than queens, had no history until they got the vote ... is an unsound one.”<sup>21</sup>

The recognition that women had been excluded from the historical narrative would later be echoed in feminist historiographical scholarship and would serve as an impetus for the development of the field. Gerda Lerner has argued that although women’s history is the “history of the *majority* of humankind,”

16 Mary Ritter Beard, *Woman as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities* (New York: Macmillan, 1946), vi.

17 Mary Ritter Beard, “Woman’s Work for the City,” *National Municipal Review* 4, no. 2 (April 1915): 205.

18 Mary Ritter Beard, *On Understanding Women* (New York: Longmans & Co., 1931), quoted in Ann J. Lane, ed., *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook* (New York: Schocken Books, 1977), 140–41.

19 Voss-Hubbard, “‘No Documents – No History,’” 19.

20 “Women Organize Archives Center,” *New York Times*, 18 October 1936.

21 Lane, *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook*, 211.

and women are present in every segment of society, they are also "part of the anonymous in history," ignored because of the patriarchal nature of institutions, including the historical profession itself.<sup>22</sup> Sue Morgan identifies "the recovery of women as subjects of, and agents in, the making of history" and the "decentering of the male subject" as central to women's history, and notes that "feminists have been instrumental in exposing the gendered politics of knowledge production."<sup>23</sup> Like Beard and other proponents of the WCWA before them, later scholars of women's history have problematized the fact that, although they have been a part of every aspect of human life, women are absent from the historical record. This is considered to be more than an issue of historical accuracy; from the perspective of feminist historiography, women's exclusion from the historical narrative has convinced them that theirs is a "history of passivity confined to household chores and trivial pursuits,"<sup>24</sup> affirming their inferiority and dependency.<sup>25</sup>

Beard herself argued that women's historical absence undermined their collective strength; their inclusion in the historical narrative was therefore "the antidote to women's underestimation of their own efficacy" and the key to female empowerment.<sup>26</sup> "There are serious defeats for women in the world today that must be turned into a victory," she told the *New York Times* in an interview about the WCWA. "By knowing ourselves better we shall be better equipped to recover and advance."<sup>27</sup> The goal of the WCWA was not to produce a women's history to rival men's, but to widen the historical viewpoint altogether in order to incorporate both genders. In a 1939 letter to WCWA member Lena Madessin Phillips, Beard wrote that it was "surely time for women to understand that they help to make the world and that the world is thus a two-sex affair."<sup>28</sup> This perspective is echoed in a letter dated 17 September 1935 from the WCWA to potential supporters:

We aspire, in studying and discussing the archives of women, to study and discuss with men as well as women the totality of culture represented by the two sexes. In this way – and in this way alone – can men or women really understand how life and labor go on, how ideas and interests are formulated and developed, what relation the work

22 Gerda Lerner, "Placing Women in History: A 1975 Perspective," in *Liberating Women's History: Theoretical and Critical Essays*, ed. Berenice A. Carroll (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 360.

23 Sue Morgan, ed., *The Feminist History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006), 1–3.

24 Sarah D. Bair, "Finding Women 'Under the Dead Leaves of History': An Historical Analysis of the Social and Educational Thought of Mary Ritter Beard" (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 6.

25 Ellen DuBois, "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," in *The Feminist History Reader*, ed. Sue Morgan (London: Routledge, 2006), 88.

26 Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 46.

27 "Feminist Archives Planned by Group," *New York Times*, 18 October 1935.

28 Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 187.



and ideals of one sex bear to the other sex.... In this Center we may demonstrate that equality is a firm foundation for the state.<sup>29</sup>

Although this letter does not explicitly use the term “gender,” it shows that the WCWA had already conceptualized what would later become known as gender history. According to Joan W. Scott, gender history decentralizes the biological distinction between men and women to focus on the “social organization and relationship between the sexes,” acknowledging that “men and women were defined in terms of one another, and no understanding of either could be achieved by entirely separate study.”<sup>30</sup> Advocates of gender history, including Scott, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, and Gisela Bock, have argued that it is no less problematic to “separate the history of women from history in general than to separate the history of men – and even more so, truly general history – from the history of women.”<sup>31</sup> Evidentially, the WCWA was at the forefront of this line of thinking. In order to bring women out of isolation, the organization posited, they would need to be integrated into the historical landscape as a whole.

The recovery of documents<sup>32</sup> related to women’s history was seen as a crucial first step in this regard. As Beard wrote in 1940 in a letter to Dorothy Porter, a librarian at Howard University, “Papers. Records. These we must have. Without documents, no history. Without history, no memory. Without memory, no greatness. Without greatness, no development among women.”<sup>33</sup> The common narrative surrounding the women’s archives movement is that “the study of women and women’s history was the impetus behind the founding of women’s research centers and women’s archives.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, dating the emergence of feminist historiography to the 1970s, Karen M. Mason and Tanya Zanish-Belcher contend that women’s archives of the same era only served to catalogue previous holdings, and that separate women’s collections did not “blossom” until the 1990s,<sup>35</sup> implying that archives have played a

29 Kimbell Relph, “The World Center for Women’s Archives, 1935–1940,” 599–600.

30 Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): 1053–54.

31 Gisela Bock, “Women’s History and Gender History: Aspects of an International Debate,” in *The Feminist History Reader*, ed. Sue Morgan (London: Routledge, 2006), 106.

32 Seemingly, the WCWA often used the terms “documents” and “records” to refer more generally to a wide variety of historical source materials. A description of the materials the Archives collected follows later in this paper.

33 Trigg, ““To Work Together for Ends Larger Than Self,”” 71.

34 E.A. Myers, “The Juggling Act: Cooperative Collecting and Archival Allies in the Collection Development of Second Wave Feminist Materials,” in *Make Your Own History: Documenting Feminist and Queer Activism in the 21st Century*, ed. Lyz Bly and Kelly Wooten (Los Angeles: Litwin Books, 2012), 144.

35 Karen M. Mason and Tanya Zanish-Belcher, “A Room of One’s Own: Women’s Archives in the Year 2000,” *Archival Issues* 24, no. 1 (December 1999): 41–43.



supporting role in the shaping of history. In contrast, Beard and her colleagues at the WCWA understood that archives have a "tangible and visible" influence on historical practice,<sup>36</sup> and that, as Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook famously assert, "archives – as records – wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups and societies."<sup>37</sup>

Even prior to becoming involved with the WCWA, Beard was acutely aware that her work as a historian greatly depended on the availability of records. As she told the *Washington Post*, she came to this realization when, in the process of writing her books, she could not find complete documentary evidence on any leading female figures.<sup>38</sup> Calling women the "unrecorded sex," she argued that "if a controversy arises as to [women's] achievements, there are no readily available data ... to bring to bear upon the question."<sup>39</sup> Instead of assuming that there was no evidence to be had, however, Beard attributed the lack of material about women's history to the inadequacy of existing archives. As a result, when Schwimmer approached her to propose the development of an archival collection focusing on the lives of women, Beard responded with unbridled enthusiasm: "I think it imperative to put this material together.... It does me a great good to learn that one so competent as you stands ready to assume the task," she wrote to Schwimmer in 1935. "Now that your plan has arrived for the Archive, I shall proceed at once to push for its execution. Your statement is so completely convincing that I must believe that the scheme will capture the imagination and appeal to the practical sense of American women."<sup>40</sup> In explaining the need for a women's archive, the WCWA accused mainstream archival institutions of perpetuating an "unsound" version of history, "injurious" to both men and women, through their biased collection and preservation policies. The idea that women have no history prevailed, they claimed, "largely due to the paucity of accessible documents pertaining to women," showing that archives could and did shape histories. According to a WCWA brochure, the tendency of institutions, including the Congressional Library, the National Archives, colleges, and local libraries, to ignore women's historical documents meant that the "public at large did not realize the extent to which history eliminates the story of women." Whether this was done "willfully" or through neglect – "from the lack of facilities for preservation; from the absence of

36 Pieter Huistra, Herman Paul, and Jo Tollebeek, "Historians in the Archive: An Introduction," *History of the Human Sciences* 26 (October 2013): 5.

37 Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (January 2002): 2.

38 "Women Plan Archives Party," *Washington Post*, 25 February 1939.

39 Beard, "Woman's Work for the City," 205.

40 Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 129–30.

an appreciation of their social value; through casual transfer ...; through the indifference of existing institutions more concerned with source materials on men” – the result was a collective national history and identity that reinforced and perpetuated the marginalization of women.<sup>41</sup> These assertions illustrate Elizabeth A. Myers’ argument that the creation of early women’s archives was an “overtly political act,” functioning not only as a critique of mainstream historiographical practice, but also as “a claim towards women’s equality, and a way to engender consciousness among women.”<sup>42</sup>

The WCWA’s acknowledgement that archives are consciously created, and therefore are as much defined by their “exclusions,” “emptiness,” and “what is not catalogued” as by what is,<sup>43</sup> is in keeping with contemporary archival theory that seeks to critically assess archives’ treatment of the “other.” Scholars have come to understand that archives can privilege as well as marginalize populations, with gender serving as a prominent example:

The gendered nature of the archival enterprise over time is a stark example that the archives are not (and, indeed, never have been) neutral, objective institutions in society. Archives, since their very origins ..., have systematically excluded records by or about women from their holdings and, as institutions, have been willing agents in the creation of patriarchy by supporting those in power against the marginalized.<sup>44</sup>

By deconstructing the archive, argue Schwartz and Cook, researchers can illuminate new voices. They point to Lerner as an example of a scholar who has examined populations that have been marginalized by the archive and has traced “the systematic exclusion of women from society’s memory tools and institutions, including archives.”<sup>45</sup> Similar research is being conducted in relation to colonial archives, which construct and privilege the history of dominant groups at the expense of the powerless. The anthology *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* is one such example of archival scholarship that exposes the constructed nature of the archives through “complex processes of selection, interpretation, and even creative invention.”<sup>46</sup> This includes Helena Pohlandt-McCormick’s study of the depiction of the Soweto uprising in the State Archives of South Africa, where documents that

41 Lane, *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook*, 211–14.

42 Elizabeth A. Myers, “I Am My Sister’s Keeper: Women’s Archives, a Reflection,” in *Perspectives on Women’s Archives*, ed. Tanya Zanish-Belcher and Anke Voss (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013), 437.

43 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 68.

44 Schwartz and Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power,” 16.

45 *Ibid.*, 7.

46 Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 8.

could be injurious to the state were strategically destroyed, as well as Adele Perry's exploration of the challenges faced by the Gitksan and Wet-suwet-en tribes in British Columbia in authenticating land claims based on oral histories. Each case highlights the impact on marginalized populations of discriminatory archival practices, such as erasure and control over the definition of archive. As Perry observes, the archive is "an unreliable ally" in the telling of history.<sup>47</sup> Reflecting more generally on approaches to the colonial archive today, Ann Laura Stoler connects this new-found awareness of the ways in which colonial powers have excluded indigenous populations from the archives to the erosion of the notion that archives are "inert sites of storage and conservation: a new generation of scholars is ... reimagin[ing] what sorts of situated knowledge have produced both colonial sources and their own respective locations in the 'historiographic operation,'" critically assessing how archives have been used as a tool of the powerful.<sup>48</sup>

By recognizing the exclusionary nature of traditional archives, scholars whose work involves marginalized populations have been led to develop new methodologies for producing alternative historical narratives derived from standard archival sources, and to create new archives altogether. According to Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, this involves "finding new meanings by reading documents 'against the grain'" and bringing "a host of new and unconventional sources to the fore, including social movement newspapers, songs and material objects, and oral histories."<sup>49</sup> Chaudhuri, Katz, and Perry argue that, in the case of women's collections, it was the feminist scholars of the 1960s and '70s who began the process of "reconstruct[ing] the underrepresented" by "question[ing] methods of archival collection that appeared to leave out the less powerful," thus making "the case for preserving diverse voices and experiences."<sup>50</sup> The collection policy set out by the WCWA in the 1930s reflects the same understanding. The organization placed a high value on collecting historical materials that were otherwise "in danger of being destroyed" because of their presumed insignificance. Having allowed "priceless documents" related to women's history to "lie crammed in drawers crumbling to dust," the WCWA claimed that libraries and archives had proven themselves incapable of preserving women's history. However, it was not only institutions that failed to recognize the value of women's docu-

47 Adele Perry, "The Colonial Archive on Trial," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 327.

48 Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 84.

49 Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, eds., *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xiii.

50 *Ibid.*, xiii-xiv.

ments: “women are inclined to destroy their own documents, while carefully preserving the letters and other materials of their fathers and brothers,” explained a WCWA brochure.<sup>51</sup> Like community archives – which are born out of grassroots movements by populations whose histories are “often absent from mainstream archives and other heritage institutions,” and which take charge of documenting, recording, and preserving their own histories<sup>52</sup> – the WCWA believed that it was time a woman-centred organization took responsibility for safeguarding and perpetuating women’s histories. They pledged to systematically seek out, assemble, and preserve source materials that addressed all aspects of female life.

The organizers employed creative methods to achieve this goal. Not only did they redefine what constitutes a historical record by seeking unconventional materials, but they were also open-minded about the collection process. In his article on the archive in the Netherlands East Indies, Charles Jeurgens describes historians who, in the quest to uncover the history of the indigenous populations, rejected the colonial archives in favour of the “untamed archive” – a widespread collection of indigenous manuscripts, inscriptions, religious texts, and more that had to be locally sourced. Likewise the WCWA turned to the “unstructured archive jungle” to trace and collect the “raw materials needed for history-writing.”<sup>53</sup> They made use of the press to spread the message that the Archives would welcome anything “relating to the work and advancement of women,” including letters, diaries, speeches, pamphlets, articles, manuscripts, notes, books, correspondence, posters and more.<sup>54</sup> As director, Beard circulated an open letter asking women to “forage in their basements and attics and send in all material, whatever little value they might put on it.” A wide range of materials were sought, she noted, spanning records of women’s public activities, such as professional associations, labour unions, political movements, co-operatives, and businesses, in addition to materials relating to daily life and the family, such as “household budgets, grocery lists, and even records concerning community gossip.”<sup>55</sup> No opportunity to uncover records of women’s lives was missed. When asked to plan a research activity for the Camp Fire Girls of America, Beard challenged the young people to investigate the lives of their grandmothers and great-grandmothers by looking for “old letters or a diary or journal ... a speech she delivered but never

51 Lane, *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook*, 211–13.

52 Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9, no. 1–2 (June 2009): 73.

53 Charles Jeurgens, “The Untamed Archive: History-Writing in the Netherlands East Indies and the Use of Archives,” *History of the Human Sciences* 26, no. 4 (October 2013): 97–101.

54 Kathleen McLaughlin, “Committee to Review Campaign to Establish Women’s Archives,” *New York Times*, 22 November 1936.

55 Lane, *Mary Ritter Beard: A Sourcebook*, 35.

printed ... a novel she wrote but not for publication ... things she wrote down as just notes about life and what she saw and felt." She added a note to the program: "If you should discover interesting old papers of the kinds described, the World Center for Women's Archives ... would like to know about this very important discovery," and she requested that "the papers thus discovered might be given to this Center so that they would become a part of a great collection of materials about women which it is trying to assemble for students and writers to read and use."<sup>56</sup>

In addition to recovering already existing materials, the WCWA created new historical records. This was not an entirely novel method: Zanish-Belcher and Voss note that document creation has commonly been used by women's archives as a proactive way to "[create] memories for the next generation."<sup>57</sup> For example, in her article on the WSPU, Mayhall notes that the organization "created" documents "for the archive in response to a questionnaire" that asked its members to recount their experiences of being imprisoned for their participation in suffrage militancy.<sup>58</sup> The WCWA's approach to records creation, however, was arguably more organic. According to Nancy F. Cott, Beard and other members of the board conducted oral interviews to deposit in the collections, aiming to gather individuals' reflections and stories of their life experiences, affirming "women's agency in creating their own history."<sup>59</sup> This methodology is now considered part of the researcher's toolkit in relating the histories of populations who have been excluded from official records. In her reflection on the impact of women's archives, Myers discusses the oral history projects of several archives, such as the Jewish Women's Archive's Community Stories, which includes "Katrina's Jewish Voices," and "Weaving Women's Words: Seattle Stories," and, importantly, the Sophia Smith Collection's Voices of Feminism Oral History Project,<sup>60</sup> which resembles the WCWA's oral history collection in terms of its wide interest in women's life experiences and commitment to diversity. Such collections "create access to previously silenced lives and voices" and challenge the "power embedded in the

56 Mary Ritter Beard, "Program for Research Activity Planned by Special Request of Camp Fire Girls," in *A Woman Making History: Mary Ritter Beard Through Her Letters*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 179.

57 Tanya Zanish-Belcher and Anke Voss, eds., *Perspectives on Women's Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013), 1–9.

58 Mayhall, "Creating the 'Suffragette Spirit,'" 243.

59 Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 62.

60 Myers, "I Am My Sister's Keeper," 451–57. See also Jewish Women's Archives, "Community Stories," accessed 25 July 2014, <http://jwa.org/communitystories>; and Sophia Smith Collection: Women's History Archives at Smith College, "Voices of Feminism Oral History Project," accessed 25 July 2014, <http://www.smith.edu/libraries/libs/ssc/vof/vof-intro.html>.

formation of archives,” argues Joanne L. Goodwin, who collected for the Las Vegas Women Oral History Project various accounts of middle-class women working and living in Las Vegas after the Second World War. The collection and preservation of these oral histories offer “new and valuable perspectives on women’s choices and challenges,” adding to the “fragmentary evidence of women’s lives” that typically exists in archives.<sup>61</sup>

The spirit of inclusivity that governed the WCWA’s view of historical source material extended to the organization’s attempt to incorporate women from every caste and stratum of society, which Beard saw as integral to the WCWA’s success. On 12 May 1936, she wrote to Schwimmer: “We should have no outcome, I fear, if we undertook that fine work of selection by elimination. As it is, a widely representative group, several with national and international reputations, representing peace, feminism, labor, the three major religions, racial and civil work and the arts, has been brought together.”<sup>62</sup> According to Beard, the WCWA needed to feature all perspectives and histories. Writing to one of the sponsors in 1938, she noted that “the attempt had been made to make the collection of materials widely represented and it seemed wise therefore to have all groups and interests among women identified with the leadership.”<sup>63</sup> One of Beard’s main projects in this regard was to secure the involvement of the Negro Women’s Archives (NWA) in order to help the WCWA obtain source material on this important minority group. After successfully convincing the NWA to appoint a liaison to the WCWA, Beard wrote to welcome the new appointee, Juanita Jackson Mitchell, in March 1939: “You have consented to serve as the chairman of the Negro women’s archives for the World Center for Women’s Archives. Nothing could give me greater pleasure as general chairman of the archives. And nothing will mean more to this Center than a fine record of this side of American life.” Seemingly eager to impress Mitchell with the organization’s open-mindedness, she wrote at length on the diversity of materials the WCWA wanted for its collection, adding “not only shall we want the documents revealing Negro women since the civil war but everything we can get pertaining to their lives and labor under slavery.”<sup>64</sup> In her role as director, Beard put aside personal politics in order to serve what she saw as the WCWA’s higher mission. For example, despite the disapproval of some of her fellow board members, she

61 Joanne L. Goodwin, “Revealing New Narratives of Women in Las Vegas,” in *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 178–81. See also University of Nevada, Las Vegas, “Las Vegas Women Oral History Project,” accessed 25 July 2014, <http://www.unlv.edu/content/las-vegas-women-oral-history-project>.

62 Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 151.

63 *Ibid.*, 174.

64 *Ibid.*, 181.

sought to obtain for the Archives' an interview with conservative New York state legislator Ruth Pratt, who had "no allegiance to feminism whatsoever." This was part of the quest to ensure that the collection represented a "comprehensive" political spectrum.<sup>65</sup>

Through this policy of inclusion, the WCWA advocated the reconstitution of historical focus. As previously discussed, the organization contended that women's history had been ignored because women had traditionally functioned within the domestic space, and few historians had ever "prioritized the family unit as a force in history."<sup>66</sup> Indeed, Zanish-Belcher and Voss similarly note that materials relating to women's history are often devalued and receive "poor care" because they largely relate to the private sphere.<sup>67</sup> By attaching just as much importance to source material that, as a function of the private realm, was typically seen as mundane (e.g., grocery lists, diaries, and oral testimonies) as they did to documents derived from the public sphere and thus traditionally categorized as historically significant (e.g., political and professional records), the WCWA positioned domestic work, the family, and the social environment as cornerstones of civilization and human history. Such revaluing of women's "work and sociocommunity pastimes" through the collection of materials that relate to everyday life has been identified as one of the major contributions of women's archives overall.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, by ensuring the comprehensiveness of the Archives in terms of the stratum of female life that were represented, the WCWA demonstrated the diversity of the experiences of womankind. In essence, the Archives pointedly embraced the everyday as a historical perspective. It would be later in the twentieth century that the field of historiography would more generally advocate the study of the everyday. Michel de Certeau is one of the most famous proponents of the importance of the everyday, arguing that while empires, having left behind the most extensive records, have been the focus of history, common people, modes of thought, and daily life can teach us much about the past.<sup>69</sup> Perhaps because women had often been excluded from histories of empire, feminist historiographers have also been interested in elevating the everyday. Lerner, for example, has argued that it is fruitful to examine all areas in which women have functioned, rather than examine exclusively outstanding figures or notable public movements, such as Elizabeth I or the women's suffrage movement.<sup>70</sup>

65 Ibid., 177–78.

66 Bair, "Finding Women 'Under the Dead Leaves of History,'" 128.

67 Zanish-Belcher and Voss, *Perspectives on Women's Archives*, 4.

68 Myers, "I Am My Sister's Keeper," 442; Gerda Lerner, "Holistic History: Challenges and Possibilities," in *Perspectives on Women's Archives*, ed. Tanya Zanish-Belcher and Anke Voss (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2013), 416–18.

69 Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

70 Lerner, "Holistic History," 359.



It is clear that the WCWA put a great deal of thought into building their collections. However, despite claims that the organization had primarily served as a site of preservation, its founders had intended to do more than hold historical materials: “We want more than shelves filled with records,” the WCWA board explained in a letter to potential supporters. “It is our idea to make this Center a vital educational plant in which the culture represented by the archives will receive the attention at present given in ‘seats of higher learning’ to the culture of men alone. By this agency we hope to provide an *equal education* which is sadly lacking now.”<sup>71</sup> From its inception, the WCWA was envisioned as a true site of knowledge production; the organization *collected* so that source material could be *used*. Passages from Beard’s letters to various board members and sponsors demonstrate that the Archives’ “interface” – which Margaret Hedstrom describes as a “meeting place,” a boundary with permeability that allows “people, information and ideas to pass from one space to another”<sup>72</sup> – was of utmost importance. “I hope you are enthusiastic about the enclosed Plan,” Beard wrote to Phillips in 1935. “I see in it, beside what is set forth by [Schwimmer], the nucleus of a true Woman’s college. We could have seminars at the Archive Centers and talks by competent persons on the role of women in society.... The design of the building could take account of all sorts of things ... including a lecture hall and alcoves for student tables.”<sup>73</sup>

In the grand vision of the organizers, the WCWA would come to play a central role in scholarship of the female experience, which meant that ensuring accessibility and usability was a top priority. Reflecting on the experience of building the Archives in 1944, Beard noted that she had envisioned a centralized location where individual scholars could find everything they needed on the subject of women’s history (therefore saving time and travelling costs) and where women’s studies programs across the country could find support for the growth of their programs.<sup>74</sup> The Archives would be to the study of women’s history what Washington’s Folger Library was to the study of Shakespeare and Elizabethan England, Irwin told the *New York Times*.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, in order to maximize availability, the WCWA prioritized the use of “microfilm and other modern processes” to reproduce important materials in their and other collections.<sup>76</sup> Beyond welcoming the wider community

71 Kimbell Relph, “The World Center for Women’s Archives, 1935–1940,” 599 (emphasis in original).

72 Margaret Hedstrom, “Archives, Memory, and Interfaces with the Past,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2002): 26.

73 Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 133.

74 *Ibid.*, 235.

75 McLaughlin, “Committee to Review Campaign to Establish Women’s Archives.”

76 Voss-Hubbard, “‘No Documents – No History,’” 20.

into the Archives – which, according to the organization would include social historians, playwrights and novelists, biographers, educators, journalists, professionals, students, general information seekers, and more – the WCWA created opportunities to bring the Archives to their intended audience. Radio appearances, exhibitions of archival holdings, and guest lectures at private events and universities across the country, featuring notables such as Canadian doctor Kate Campbell-Mead, author of *Women in Medicine*,<sup>77</sup> were intended to increase awareness and use of the Archives, provide educational opportunities and support for academic programs, and build a sense of community.

When the WCWA dissolved in 1940, a devastated Schwimmer wrote to Beard: "I have buried many dreams in these last decades. The World Center for Women's Archives goes now with the lot."<sup>78</sup> Beard, however, faced the end of the project with a great deal more reflexivity and hope. "I understand fully your feeling," she told Schwimmer, "but, as I now try to analyze the slow progress toward a great Women's Archive, I come to the conclusion that dreams must be subjected to sharp realities for their realization if anything approaching their designs is attained.... But I am also convinced that your-my dream of a great Women's Archive is not lost."<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the lofty ambitions and ideals of the WCWA were, along the way, tempered by reality. The financial constraints cited as the cause of the closure were only part of the story. While board members were genuinely committed to collecting and preserving women's historical materials, as well as supporting research and education in women's history, there were internal disagreements on how these goals should be achieved. And despite the board's outward dedication to inclusivity, there was turmoil within. Opposing political groups had difficulty working together, bringing what Beard described as "factional strife [from] within the woman movement" into the WCWA boardroom.<sup>80</sup> The local Washington chapter

77 "To Discuss Women's Archives," *New York Times*, 1 May 1938.

78 Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 212–13. Aside from Schwimmer's sorrow at the Archive's closure, this passage hints at her conflicted relationship with the WCWA. Though she had been the driving force behind the Archive's creation, Schwimmer officially parted with the organization in 1936, and various causes for her departure have been identified. Cott notes that Schwimmer objected to the lack of publicity surrounding the Archive (p. 141). Anke Voss-Hubbard reports that Schwimmer resigned because the WCWA began to welcome documents from women's groups that were not pacifist in nature (Voss-Hubbard, "'No Documents – No History,'" 20). Rachel Miller argues that Schwimmer ultimately left the WCWA because Beard had been in contact with Rosa Manus, a major figure in the International Archives of the Women's Movement, headquartered in Amsterdam, with whom Schwimmer had had a falling out several years before; see Rachel Miller, "'Kick Her in the Shin for Me': The International Women's Archives Projects of Two Warring Suffragists in the 1930s and Their Digital Footprints in the 2010s," in "Seventy-Five Years of International Women's Collecting: Legacies, Successes, Obstacles, and New Directions (Session 506), *American Archivist* 74, supplement 1 (2011): 506:5.

79 Cott, *A Woman Making History*, 213.

80 *Ibid.*, 161.

refused to extend membership to the black women working with the WCWA on behalf of the NWA. Disagreements about professional appointments and funding allocation (specifically, whether money should be going toward publicity or the collection and archiving process) also abounded. Fed up with this dysfunction, Beard resigned as director in 1939. In her final letter to the board, dated 26 June 1940, she wrote that “strong new blood” must be “transfused into our movement’s management” if the WCWA was to work toward its higher purpose, and she urged board members to begin working together.<sup>81</sup>

Given the WCWA’s closure one year after Beard’s resignation, her parting words appeared to have little impact. And it is perhaps this fraught ending to the short-lived institution that has led the few scholars who have examined the WCWA to see it largely as a failure – though kindly acknowledging that the materials collected have been of value. However, as Beard understood, it was the execution of the idea, and not its essence, that was faulty. In the end, as she told Schwimmer, she still believed that there was an “active nucleus ... which is determined to carry the idea and build up a visible collection of important archives of women,” and that as long as the WCWA served to “widen and deepen curiosity respecting what women have wanted of life and have tried to procure,” its work had been worthwhile.<sup>82</sup> For this reason, the dissolution of the WCWA can be seen as a new beginning – a second chance to build awareness of women’s contributions to history and to support women’s history education and research through archives. Though some of the materials were returned to their original donors, the WCWA asked the donors to consider gifting the “items to other centers” so that they could “serve as a nucleus on which collections can be built.”<sup>83</sup> The materials that Beard herself had jurisdiction over were, as Hildenbrand mentions, given to other women’s collections, most notably those at Radcliffe College (now Institute) and Smith College.<sup>84</sup>

However, Beard gave more than materials. Radcliffe College president Wilbur J. Jordan implored Beard to serve as an adviser for the development of its women’s history collection. She freely shared her vision for the nature of the collection, made valuable introductions to donors, and sourced materials on Radcliffe’s behalf. Beard’s role in the development of the Sophia Smith

81 Ibid., 211–12.

82 Ibid., 213.

83 “Women’s Archives Given to Colleges,” *New York Times*, 24 November 1940.

84 In light of the WCWA’s dedication to community outreach and the public accessibility of their collections, as discussed above, it is interesting to note that Beard chose to distribute WCWA materials to these private institutions. For a more in-depth discussion on the distribution of WCWA materials and the adaptability, sustainability, and survivability of “grass-roots” women’s and feminist archives, see Kate Eichhorn, “The ‘Scrap Heap’ Reconsidered: Selected Archives of Feminist Archiving,” in Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 25–54.

Collection at Smith College was a great deal more involved. In the Smith College archivist, Margaret Grierson, Beard found a kindred spirit and willing student. Again, Beard provided practical assistance, but also instilled in Grierson – and thus by extension the Sophia Smith Collection – the ideals that had been intended to guide the WCWA. In Grierson's words, Beard had convinced her that Smith must "redefine the collection to include works about, as well as by women ... material that records and reflects the ideas, interests, visions, endeavors, and achievements of American women as a force in shaping the patterns of our national growth."<sup>85</sup> With Beard's help, Smith College leveraged its collection to support new academic programs and become a research hub in women's studies and history. In 1947, the Friends of the Library Association reported that its rapidly growing membership was largely due to the popularity of the Sophia Smith Collection.<sup>86</sup> Writing to Beard's son William in 1959, the year after Beard's death, Grierson told him that it was Beard who "patiently led us to a clear understanding of the significance of women in history and to a clear conception of the proper nature of our research collection. It is very truly her own creation."<sup>87</sup> Beard's involvement with Radcliffe and Smith Colleges stands as an example of the WCWA's lasting influence. While the WCWA did not wholly embody its foundational ideologies, the organization did make an indelible mark. From the progressive principles the organization espoused to the innovative practices it embraced, including its collections policy, threads of the WCWA have been woven into the fabric of feminist historiography, the women's archives movement, critical thinking surrounding the traditional archive, and the building of alternative archives or counter-archives.

*Sarah Lubelski is a PhD student at the Faculty of Information and in the Collaborative Program in Book History and Print Culture at the University of Toronto. She holds a BA (Hons) in English and History from Dalhousie University in Halifax and an MA in Publishing from Oxford Brookes University, U.K. Her Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)-funded doctoral research explores the feminization of the Victorian British publishing industry and the impact of gender on the book trade and historiographical practice.*

85 Voss-Hubbard, "'No Documents – No History,'" 25–26.

86 *Ibid.*, 26.

87 *Ibid.*, 24.