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## **FEMINISMS IN THE ARCHIVES: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF FEMINIST APPROACHES IN ARCHIVAL STUDIES LITERATURE, 1973-2023 (Paper)**

### **Abstract or Résumé:**

The complex relationship between archival records and institutions, power, and history making is a shared concern of both archival and feminist research and praxis. This paper reports key findings of a critical literature review that examines the presence and prevalence of critical feminist theories, practices, and approaches employed in archival studies research between 1973-2024. Our key findings highlight how feminist approaches not only serve archival studies research that aims to promote visibility, credibility, control, and care to communities whose voices have been systematically excluded from mainstream archives but also encourages an array of archival functions and practices embedded in critical intersectional feminist values, methods, and ethics.

### **1. Introduction**

The complex relationship between archival records and institutions, power, and history making is a shared concern of both archival research and much humanities focused feminist research and praxis. This paper reports key findings of a critical literature review that examines the presence and prevalence of critical feminist theories, practices, and approaches employed in archival studies research between 1973-2024. This work is part of a larger study that examines the use of intersectional feminist theory and practice across library and information studies (LIS) and LIS sub-domains to better understand how feminisms are taken up in the LIS field as well as “to move toward a critical intersectional femiLIS movement that is embraced and embedded within our field“ (Allard, Oliphant, & Chambers, 2022; Allard, Oliphant, & Chambers, 2023). Our objective is to share a historically informed and evidence based analysis of the application of critical feminist approaches to archival studies research.

The field of archival studies is defined as “a subfield of information studies dedicated to understanding the nature, management, and uses of records . . . [It] broadly encompasses the cultural, social, political, technical, and scientific aspects of the study of archives” (Caswell,

2016). While the field of archival studies focuses specifically on archives theory and professional practice, the term “archive” has broad societal resonance, particularly since Derrida’s publication of *Archive Fever* (1996) and the subsequent “archival turn” of the 1990s. Although archival studies itself has a narrower focus, feminist researchers in humanities fields have taken up the term “archive” broadly and metaphorically to “cover almost any kind of memory, collection or accumulation” (Dever, 2017, p. 1). The term feminism too, has multiple meanings. There are many feminisms, and feminist theories and approaches are applied across disciplinary fields. The definitional ambiguities around “archive” and “feminism” have created complexity in executing this review. These ambiguities *also* offer opportunities for archival studies to consider the meaning of archives, records, and praxis beyond their traditional scope. Key findings highlight how critical feminist approaches not only serve archival studies research that wishes to promote visibility, credibility, control, and care to communities whose voices have been systematically excluded from mainstream archives but also encourages an array of archival practices embedded in critical intersectional feminist values, methods, and ethics.

## 2. Method

This work is a part of a larger systematic literature review that aims to identify studies in the LIS literature that use feminist theories and approaches. In summer 2022, we carried out a critical literature review of the LIS literature and feminisms. We systematically searched four databases: (1) Web of Science; (2) Library & Information Science Abstracts; (3) Library & Information Science Source, and (4) Scopus. A total of 6,296 abstracts and titles were imported into Covidence (a systematic review management tool) for screening. All article abstracts were scanned to see if they met our inclusion criteria with 490 records in our final dataset. Of the 490 records, 69 or 14% were labelled as relevant to archival studies *and* had significant feminist presence. Metadata of the archival records were downloaded from Covidence into an Excel spreadsheet.

We took a three-part approach to review and analyze archival records:

- (1) reviewed the 69 articles retrieved from our original systematic review for inclusion and exclusion criteria (see below). Thirty two articles were excluded and 37 records were included
- (2) updated our original search (2022-2023) with in-depth keyword searching across original databases (11 articles retrieved), and pearl growing as necessary based on authors’ knowledge of subject areas and review of key article bibliographies (29 records retrieved). Forty records were added for a total of 77 records in our dataset; and
- (3) conducted a thematic analysis of topics based on: (1) a close reading of abstracts and select articles, and; (2) keyword analysis of all article titles and abstracts using Voyant (a data visualization tool) to analyze word frequencies and intersections of topics.

Scholarly articles published in English were eligible for inclusion in this final dataset if they met the following criteria:

- the authors explicitly named and drew from feminist theories, methods, or practices to discuss or describe issues related to archival studies (as defined above)

Studies were excluded when:

- the focus of the article was on gender rather than feminist theory (e.g. articles that described women’s archival collections but did not use feminist analysis)
- the focus of the article was a feminist collection (e.g. the fonds of a well known feminist activist), but the study did not itself apply feminist theory
- the focus of the article related to feminism, such as decolonization and queer theory, but wasn’t explicitly positioned as feminist. This work is often feminist, but was excluded when such connections were not explicitly stated
- the focus of the article described the archive but did not address archival studies themes (as defined above)

We followed this inclusion and exclusion criterion to highlight the work of scholars who are using feminist approaches explicitly, rather than indirectly, to make visible how critical feminist approaches are taken up in archival studies. Given the interdisciplinarity of the fields under review and the definitional ambiguities of key terms “archive” and “feminisms”, we also noted and paid attention to records that were excluded, but still relevant to our understanding of our core corpus of scholarly articles, as we discuss below. Our key findings thus take into account how definitions of feminisms have changed over time as well as how feminist interpretations of what is an archive both challenge and contribute to definitions of archives as they are now and might be understood within archival studies.

### 3. Key findings

In their 2017 article exploring “critical feminism in the archival field” Cifor and Wood note, “that archival theory and practice have yet to fully engage with a feminist praxis that is aimed at more than attaining better representation of women in archives” (p. 2). Our review supports their assertion that there are indeed many articles within archival studies, but also across feminist fields, that highlight and explore women’s, and specifically feminist, archival collections. We also note, however, an expanding array of feminist approaches used in archival studies, especially since 2014. Of the 77 records reviewed, the earliest five articles were published in a 1973 special issue in *The American Archivist* about women in archives. This early scholarship focused on the presence of women in archival collections and the presence and role of women archivists in the field and aligns with second wave and liberal feminist values about equal representation and workplace equity. Most articles (58) however, were published after 2014 when feminist approaches began to grow significantly in archival studies literature. Five articles each were published in 2022 and 2023 suggesting that growth continues. The journals that address feminist approaches to archival studies research are, unsurprisingly, predominantly archival studies journals such as *Archivaria* (16), *American Archivist* (11), *Archives and Manuscripts* (8), and *Archival Science* (7). This list also extends to some “umbrella” LIS journals (*Library Trends* (2), a special issue in *Critical Journal of Library and Information Studies*) and queer and feminist journals (*GLC*, a special issue in *Australian Feminist Studies*) suggesting that the conceptual intersections between archives and feminisms resonate beyond archival studies. Not surprisingly, recent scholarship embraces a broader spectrum of critical and intersectional feminisms.

Below we briefly explore four themes that emerged from our analysis:

1. **Literature highlights and explores feminist and women’s collections.** There is a great deal of archival research that examines specific women’s collections and archives. Our

review included many articles that examine specific feminist collections arguing that these collections are potential sites for “recuperating histories of Black feminist resistance..., combating institutional modes of erasure, and challenging dominant historical narratives” (Lobo, 2019, p. 68). Our review also excluded many more articles that simply identified women’s collections without using feminist analysis. We note the existence of those excluded resources here too, because they are an important element of the feminist project of recuperating, validating, and celebrating women’s history. They also reflect a significant trend in terms of how archival studies has historically and continues to take up “women’s issues”.

2. **Literature explores the relationships between gender and identity, power, archives, and history making.** Moving beyond just identifying collections of women’s history, this literature is committed to identifying and operationalizing the power that can be mobilized within archives, to serve the multiple goals of silenced and marginalized communities, in order to, for example, promote feminist social movements and accurate and humanizing representations. As discussed elsewhere (Chernyavska & Allard, 2022), these feminist approaches understand that archives have power in a way that archivists, who have historically minimized their own influence in shaping archives, do not. This literature identifies and validates different types of records (oral histories, ephemera, embroidery, photographs, and digital exhibits) and forms of record collections (calling them counter-archives, community archives, and activist archives). It widens the definitions of archival record, archival institution, indeed what it means to archive. It also questions traditional historical research methods and historiography, offering feminist methodological approaches to find and augment specific voices in historical research. For example, Fournet “analyzes how the Bit Rosie archives implements elements of both feminist and activist archival practice in a born-digital context to integrate overlooked women music producers into the archives of the recorded music industry” (2021, p. 119).
3. **Literature broadens archival praxis through the application of feminist theories.** Feminist theories have been applied to scholarship that reconsiders traditional archival functions such as appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation, and access. For example, Brilmyer (2018) examines archival description through a disability studies and feminist lens, Lapp (2022) articulates a feminist approach to provenance entitled “provenancial fabulation”, and Caswell introduces “feminist standpoint appraisal” (Caswell, 2021). Caswell and Cifor’s (2016) article *From human rights to feminist ethics: Radical empathy in the archives* has been very influential to research that examines how archival functions might be approached with a feminist ethics of care. A special issue of the *Critical Journal of Library and Information Studies* is dedicated to this topic. Other current research trends in the archival literature around affect and archives, and trauma and archives, have also been deeply influenced by Caswell and Cifor’s work (2016) as well as other feminist scholarship (Cifor, 2016).
4. **Literature examines the feminized labour of archivists as well as efforts within the profession to address heterosexism, racism, and inequality.** A small number of articles examined the history of feminization in archival work (Orchard et al., 2019) and advocacy efforts opposing the discrimination of women and people of colour in the

archiving profession (Poole, 2018). This work also explores the harmful “handmaidens of history” archivist stereotype that has contributed to undervaluing archival labour and expertise (Lapp, 2019).

#### 4. Conclusion

Our study findings make visible the contributions that feminisms have brought to archival studies, revealing important observations about the contestation, negotiation, and shared understandings of key terms “feminisms” and “archive” across disciplinary fields. Most importantly, findings demonstrate that intersectional and critical feminisms have much to contribute to archives to understand the relationships between archival records and institutions, gender and identity, power, history making, and, importantly, archival labour and practice. Consistent with the application of intersectional feminist theory and practice across sub-genres of LIS examined to date, a critical feminist lens is driven by social movement goals to find where power resides (in this instance within archives), and to put that power to use in the service of social liberation for specific equity-deserving communities. For a more fulsome picture of the conceptual intersections between archives and feminisms, as well as to encourage critical conversation between fields, further research is needed that also systematically examines how concepts of the archive are taken up by feminisms.

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