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## Global voices from the Women's Library at the World's Columbian Exposition: feminisms, transnationalism and the archive

Review of Dalbello, M., & Wadsworth, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Global voices from the Women's Library at the World's Columbian Exposition: feminisms, transnationalism and the archive*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. xvii, 267 p. ISBN: 978-3-031-42489-2

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This edited volume is a rich, interdisciplinary exploration of women's contributions to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (also called the Chicago World's Fair). Across fourteen chapters, feminist scholars analyze the international materials sent by women's organizations from 23 countries to the Woman's Building Library in Chicago, which were then viewed by thousands of visitors over the six-month duration of the fair. Collectively, the roughly 8,200 works included in the library represented the complex women's movements and feminisms developing across North America, South America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East near the turn of the nineteenth century. The Woman's Building Library functioned not only as a transnational exhibition of women's writing across genres, but also a site for global feminist exchange.

In the opening chapter, editors Marija Dalbello and Sarah Wadsworth provide a strong rationale for the volume, noting that while a small body of research exists about the Woman's Building Library and its importance to the Chicago World's Fair, it has largely eschewed comparative, in-depth studies of international materials submitted by women's organizations for the exhibition. The essays in this volume clearly demonstrate how the documents chosen by international women's organizations for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition actively engage with issues of gender, class, domesticity, labor, education, religion, political and social reform, as well as contested cultural and (trans)national identities. Many contributions in the volume also include colored photographs of primary sources, as well as tables and data visualizations illustrating the thematic and categorical composition of national collections.

The introduction also foregrounds the long-term scholarly work leading to the volume. First initiated in 2008 and revived in 2020, the project reflects more than a decade of research and collaboration. Together with colleagues at Rutgers University, Dalbello spent some of the intervening years exploring the international aspects of the Woman's Building Library materials as part of a Digital Humanities project, [1893.rutgers.edu](http://1893.rutgers.edu), carried out between 2011 and 2016. That project now exists as a fragmented (though still illustrative) digital artifact on the Internet Archive.

The chapters in *Global Voices* are organized into three thematic sections. Part I, "Reading (Across) the National Collections," comprises four chapters devoted to national groupings, including European materials from Austria, Belgium, Bohemia, Great Britain, Germany, Holland, France and Spain, as well as focused studies of the Italian, Swedish and Spanish contributions. Chapter 2, co-authored by Anselm Spoerri, Marija Dalbello, and Janette Derucki, is the most expansive in scope. It offers a comparative meta-view of the themes and document types present across the eight national collections, drawing on data from WorldCat, Wikipedia, national library catalogs, and the

digitized version of the short-title catalog of the “foreign titles” included in the Woman’s Building Library, compiled in 1893 by Edith E. Clarke. A digital version of Clarke’s catalog is also included in *A Celebration of Women Writers*, a resource maintained in the University of Pennsylvania Digital Library.

Part II of the volume, “Gender and Modernism,” brings together four chapters examining collections from Central Europe (Bohemia and Austria), Imperial Germany, Great Britain, and Norway. In her chapter about the Norwegian collection, Marianne Martens describes how an initial categorical organization and analysis of the 161 books evolved into a targeted reading of individual books, alongside an examination of biographical information about the female authors. That, in turn, led to a discovery that the topics of the books often had cross-categorical, feminist undertones, and their authors were connected through various feminist networks. By tracing these connections, Martens demonstrates how a relatively small national collection can still yield deep insights into feminist organizing and literary production. Her analysis underscores the remarkable trajectory of Norwegian feminism: in just three decades (1883–1913), Norwegian women progressed from establishing their first major women’s rights association to achieving universal suffrage.

The final section, “Close Readings: Authoring Female Agency,” comprises four chapters focused on individual works or subcollections within the national collections, highlighting Peruvian, Indian, Turkish, and French perspectives. Jackielee Derk’s chapter (11) is particularly compelling, balancing a distant reading of 100 British novels with a close reading of the sole work by a female Indian author included in the British collection sent to the Woman’s Building Library: *Saguna* by Krupabai Saththianadhan. Derk’s analysis demonstrates how Indian women writers had to engage with dominant British literary conventions to tell their stories, yet, as Saththianadhan shows, they could also subvert and reshape these conventions. This discussion illuminates how a marginalized female voice negotiates colonial authority while grappling with issues of gender, economic and social status, and complex cultural identities.

Taken together, these chapters indicate profound tensions at the heart of the nineteenth century female experience: between progress and tradition, nationalism and transnationalism, empowerment and constraint. Such tensions were present in the heterogeneous body of selected documents, in their notable silences and omissions, and in the national actors who shaped (or quietly exerted influence on) the processes of selection.

The final chapter, Christine Giviskos’s “The Library as Exhibition,” provides a fitting conclusion to the volume by illustrating how the various components of the national collections came together to form a coherent “visual experience.” The chapter traces the organization of the exhibits in the Woman’s Building Library in Chicago and examines how the Exposition was promoted through a print campaign encompassing a range of media, including posters, picture postcards, photomechanical prints, and stereographs. These materials also functioned to memorialize the event, and the Library itself, alongside photographs of the Woman’s Building Library that were later reproduced in commemorative volumes.

Overall, *Global Voices* is a welcome and impressive addition to the complex narratives of feminism in the late nineteenth century. The authors tease out the local contingencies of practices such as document selection, classification, translation and preservation, and how those practices directly influence what can be known about women’s public and private lives before, during and after the assemblage and subsequent fragmentation of physical (and digital) archives. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the essays illuminate the indispensable role that women’s organizations and female activists, archivists, authors, composers, editors, illustrators, librarians, pacifists, scholars, scientists and translators have played in shaping the social, intellectual and political contours of cultural modernism and the historical record itself.

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