# Coalition Talk: Feminist Historiography: What's the Digital Humanities Got to Do With It?

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Feminist Historiography: What's the Digital Humanities Got to Do With It? If Tina Turner was to revise her famous question in this way, many feminist historiographers might respond by shaking our heads. We might say we don't do digital work or that we're just sick of hearing the term "digital humanities" and the evangelical resonance it carries. In many ways, there is good reason for such response and such resistance. Not only does it seem that much of the digital humanities work being discussed today has little to do with our historiographic concerns (I'm thinking here of projects that involve gaming for instance), but it also feels as if the learning curve to enter into these discussions is just too steep, since many of us have not been brought up with the kinds of digital competencies as our colleagues in computers and composition. Thus, we might (gladly) conclude that the digital humanities does *not* have much to do with feminist historiography.

In this presentation, however, I join with the small number of feminist historiographers who would respond to my revision of Turner's question in a different way (See Graban and Sullivan, Enoch and Bessette, Solberg, Ramsey, and Ramsey-Tobienne). Here, I consider what one specific digital conversation and one particular digital innovation have to do with feminist historiography. I do so not because the digital humanities seems to be the newest and hippest kid on the block but because this particular kind of digital work speaks directly to our concerns as feminist historiographers.

To my mind, the most obvious connection feminist historiographers have to digital humanities scholarship is through the latter's deep engagement in and the consequent proliferation of digital archives. Any historian who scratches the surface of online databases would see that digital archives are everywhere. Sites such Hearth: Cornell's Home Economics Archive; Digital Schomberg: African American Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century; Indiana University's Victorian Women's Writers Project; and Harvard University's Women Working, 1800-1903 would likely incite a bit of archive fever in most feminist historiographers. However, one particular digital tool could change the way we encounter digital archives and the way we produce feminist scholarship. That tool is Omeka.

Developed by digital historian Tom Scheinfeldt and his colleagues at the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, Omeka is a free and open source web-publishing platform created specifically for the "purposes of displaying library, museum, archives and scholarly collections and exhibition" (Omeka). These scholars attest that creating a digital archive is now easy, as simple, they promise, as "launching a blog" (Omeka). In addition to the ease of creating digital archives, Omeka offers another feature. It invites user contributions to the archive by enabling visitors to tag items and even add their own content. Omeka, then, offers us a number of exciting historiographic possibilities. Here, I explore two of them and raise a few methodological concerns that I believe are critical for us to consider.

## Possibility #1: Archival Access

By enabling scholars to build their own archives, Omeka prompts a kind of archival proliferation that allows other researchers to access materials without incurring the time and expense often required to visit physical archives. There's no doubt that feminist scholars might benefit from researching at such Omeka-enabled sites as "Martha Washington, A Life" or "Frances Perkins: The Woman Behind the New Deal." However, it is significant to note that many of these archives are generated because of *specific* scholarly interests. Scholars often build these sites because the materials help to shape and inform their particular research questions.

Given the unique nature of these archives, we might revisit the warning Wendy Sharer offered in 1999 regarding curation practices for material

archives. Sharer writes, "We cannot afford to ignore the various material processes—acquisition, appraisal, collection management, description, indexing, preservation, oxidation, and de-accession—that affect the corpus of records on which we may be able to construct diverse and subversive narratives" (124). Such concerns should gain new meaning in light of Omeka-enabled archives, as they prompt us to reflect upon questions such as these: How can we gain a sense of individual scholars' decision-making practices in these particular archives? And how might these practices occlude or even erase the rhetorical significance of women or feminist rhetorical intervention?

As an extension of this concern and these questions, it also seems critical to consider how we might gain alternative reading practices for these "boutique" archives. Since these archives are in many ways personalized research spaces built for projects other than our own, how might we repurpose them for our own feminist historiographic ends? How, for example, might we approach an archive like "Lincoln at 200" or the "Queens College Civil Rights Movement" archive from a feminist historiographic perspective? How might the feminist practice of "reading it crookedly and telling is slant" function or be re-imagined in this digital archival context (Glenn 8)?

## Possibility #2: Archive Building

Feminist historiographers would likely agree that the most exciting prospect of Omeka is that it enables us to easily build our own archives. I am sure many of us see the benefit of sharing the materials we have collected so that others can continue the research we initiated. The ability to build such archives, though, brings with it new responsibilities and opportunities—ones that prompt us to explore what *else* these archives could do and *whom* else they might serve.

In *Traces of a Stream,* Jackie Royster underscores the responsibility scholars have to our research subjects and the communities they are part of. She writes,

> In addition to embracing the disciplinary methodologies that are current in my field, [. . .] I acknowledge, still, the need to be responsive both to the community that is the object of my

scholarly gaze and to that community's own articulation of values, beliefs, and protocols. (283)

Royster's point should gain new resonance when we imagine building digital archives of our own. We need to think beyond offering our completed research to stakeholders outside the ivory tower and to explore instead whether and how we might share archival materials with them. Furthermore, since the Omeka platform allows for *user* contributions, we should also consider how we might invite stakeholders not just to visit the archives we build but to add material to them.

As exciting a prospect as this may be, such a pursuit should be understood as a complex one. If we start to build archives that are not just personal research spaces, that is, if community stakeholders instead of academic scholars become our audience and indeed our collaborators, then we would need to reflect upon how we might shape these archives to suit their needs instead of our own. Heather Brook Adams' James Berlin Award-winning dissertation may be a perfect test case for us to consider. In her dissertation, "On Secrets and Silences: Unwed Pregnancy Since the 1960s," Adams interviews numbers of women who recall their experiences with unwed pregnancy during the period from 1960 to 1980 to explore the function of rhetorical silencing as well as to analyze rhetorical constructions of shame and blame.

If Adams were to create a digital archive of these interviews, what ethical and methodological principles should guide her work? How might she shape and compose this archive not only for an audience of feminist scholars but also for the women she has interviewed and others like them? Furthermore, in terms of taking advantage of Omeka's ability to allow for user contributions, how might Adams invite this contingent of women to participate in the archive? What kinds of outreach, publicity, and promotional work would this invitation entail? Answering these questions certainly calls us to understand how deeply rhetorical and political archive building can be. In addition, pursuing such work prompts us to see ourselves and our work differently. Here, we become public historians and even activists in addition to feminist historiographers.

I hope I've offered a convincing response to the Turner-esque question that inspired and initiated this essay: The digital humanities does indeed have something to do with feminist historiography. I hope too that my comments have served as an invitation to investigate Omeka-enabled archives and to consider further their methodological possibilities and problems.

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