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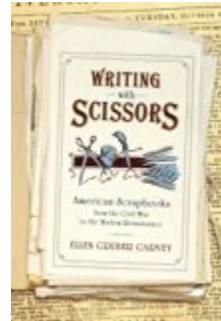
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ellen Gruber Garvey. *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-992769-2.

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Creating Private Histories Out of Public Words

As historians, we are used to delving into archives. If we are lucky, then we might be able to have free access in order to mine the shelves in search of precious gems that can be brought to light, small bits of information that we hope could send shock waves through the literature on a particular event, person, or era. Archives are usually filled with dark nooks and crannies, small areas into which nobody has ventured since the Eisenhower administration, filled with a haphazard assortment of items that the archivist cannot classify. Obscure records, government pamphlets, foreign-language publications—the list can be and frequently is varied. And sometimes there are preprinted books into which someone has pasted newspaper clippings; in other words, a scrapbook. As historians we can be quick to dismiss such things as of limited use, as they have removed articles from their appropriate context, fail to provide proper citations, and can seem a jumbled, haphazard mess—and as a result, we pass them by, relegating them back to the piles from whence they came in favor of more traditional evidentiary fare. Ellen Garvey would claim that we have let a precious find slip through our fingers. In *Writing with Scissors*, she argues that “just as present-day readers manage digital abundance with favorites lists, bookmarks, blogrolls, RSS feeds, and content aggregators, nineteenth-century readers channeled the flood of information with scrapbooks” (p. 4). But more than merely charting the waxing and waning (and waxing once more) of scrapbooking during the one-and-a-half centuries since the Civil War, Garvey presents an elegant argument that actually

shifts the reader’s paradigm toward such things. Hers is an argument that, with only a few minor philosophical quibbles, forces us to reexamine our opinions toward the aggregation of information during the age of the newspaper, the concept of the author, and the hegemonic nature of cultural history.

At the core of Garvey’s work sits the nineteenth-century newspaper. In much the same way we are sometimes overwhelmed with the sheer amount of information granted to us by our wired world, a reader in the decades after 1850 would have been overwhelmed by the sheer number of newspapers available for consumption. Garvey is quick to point this out, and notes that a combination of factors (including new printing technologies, price reductions resulting in changing profit models, and increasing literacy) created a state in which almost one million daily newspapers were consumed at the start of the Civil War. This expansion continued after the war; as she notes, by the turn of the century “cities often supported a dozen or more dailies, and the largest of them had half a million readers each by 1900” (p. 6). As the numbers of periodicals grew, readers began to become overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information presented to them, especially considering that it quickly became impractical to collect and store an ever-growing amount of newsprint. Thus, in order to winnow out those items that held little personal interest while simultaneously tracking topics of great import to them in particular, individuals began to cut out specific items and paste

them in books for easy access in the future. And thus the scrapbook was born.

Rather than merely charting the rise of the scrapbooking craze, Garvey argues that by examining what an individual scrapbooker retained, we can gain a greater insight into the worldview of the creator. In her opinion, newspapers created communities of shared readers that frequently transcended geographical limitation. Scrapbookers further delineated these communities into smaller, more refined groups of like-minded individuals who sought to “pull apart mainstream culture and remake it for their own uses.” They were not simply saving clippings to collect; instead, they sought to “create their own cultural nexus, a knot of threads leading into and out of the family or community” (p. 49). In Garvey’s opinion, the scrapbook is central to an individual’s cultural transmission from past through the present and into the future, serving to bind together both families and communities.

Starting with an introduction that explains the background behind the need to scrapbook, the author charts the growth of the scrapbooking industry, citing the experiences of Samuel Clemens. Clemens garnered critical and worldwide acclaim through the creation of the “Mark Twain’s Patented Self Pasting Scrap Book,” and is widely credited as the first to use the phrase “scrapbook” as a verb. Clemens attempted to retain some control over his published works through scrapbooking, yet he quickly ran into trouble. Others began to use scrapbooks to reframe the accounts presented in newspapers, using selected clippings and layout to “analyze and critique their accounts, or to insist on a more satisfying version of events” (p. 86). Starting during the Civil War, both Unionists and Confederates used scrapbooks to chart the course of the war, follow individual units throughout their campaigns, and reinforce nationalist ideals—or, to follow and promote ideals that were an anathema in their respective nations (such as abolitionism in the South). The war had a profound impact on the concept of scrapbooking, primarily because “a wider swath of Americans learned to think of events as news, to expect to find material relevant to their lives in the newspapers, and to look to the newspaper to connect with their fellow citizens” (p. 130).

But it is in the postwar period, when scrapbooking was taken up by marginalized groups within American society, that Garvey’s argument really takes off. As early as 1854, Frederick Douglass urged readers to use scrapbooks as weapons in the cause of black emanci-

pation and black suffrage. This practice continued after the war, during the rise of Jim Crow segregation in the nation, as African Americans created scrapbooks that served to fill in the “gaps in mainstream accounts” and present an “unwritten history” that moved themselves (and their people) into the center of the national narrative. They undertook this rewriting by “recontextualizing clippings scissored from both the black and the white press” through written notes contesting the published account or “through the subtle language of juxtaposition” (p. 131). Similarly, the scrapbooks created by women working towards the cause of suffrage “reveal them to be in the process of negotiating what it meant to take a place in public, and developing strategies for using the press over the course of decades of women’s rights struggles” (p. 174). Finally, Garvey links the scrapbook of the past to our current methods of dealing with information and charts the evolution of data management from “Back Number Budd” and clipping bureaus to the interfaces of such online databases as LexisNexis.

A theme that runs through *Writing with Scissors* is that of agency. This, perhaps, is the work’s greatest strength. By detailing the methods scrapbookers used to retain information, the way that marginalized peoples used scrapbooks to author an alternate historical narrative, and the evolution of data management, Garvey reminds us that the past is not merely a collection of sterile, once-removed factoids stored away in wait of a scholar to unearth and examine them. Rather, the past consists of people acting. Individuals created scrapbooks, culling a wide assortment of periodicals in order to remind themselves (or, perhaps, to show those in the future) what issues in particular were of great import to them. If viewed in this manner the scrapbook transcends its humble beginnings and its “scrapy” nature, becoming an intensely personal letter from an individual long past who wishes to speak to us in the present. Facts are merely facts, but the scrapbook reminds us that those facts were generated by living human beings existing in a particular time and place, and subsequently judged by an individual as worthy of retention. If viewed in this manner, the scrapbook becomes more than ephemera gathering dust in an archive and instead becomes a valued historical source.

Yet if this new interpretation of the scrapbook as a historical source encourages us to shift our paradigms when it comes to the historical narrative, at the same time it presents some problems as a source. Some Garvey readily acknowledges: the archivist-as-gatekeeper who may judge such a work as unworthy, the chronological fluidity that can be evidenced by the placement of items

within their pages, the sheer subjectivity of their creators as to importance of a particular item as opposed to another. To these the reader must add two more, one practical and one more philosophical. First, in order to accept the author's argument that scrapbooks can present an alternate historical narrative, we must also acknowledge that these narratives represent a wholly personal creation of an individual sitting in judgment of the worthiness of the material itself. Can we judge a scrapbook's alternate narrative as anything more than the personal opinion of a select individual? In asking this question the reader runs the risk of getting caught in a mental hall of mirrors. Would an educated scrapbooker interested in the agency of African Americans within their community include articles detailing African American crimes? Perhaps, if they could also illustrate how the crimes were part of a continuing trend to define African Americans within the wider context of race relations in America. But wouldn't an item that a scrapbooker elected *not* to include in their book be just as indicative of their alternative narrative? William Dorsey, a college-educated African American in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia, created a scrapbook that tracked the lives of centenarians. Okay, that's fine— but how would W. E. B. DuBois judge his attempt at an alternate historical narrative? How about Martin Luther King? John Hope Franklin? Would *their* scrapbooks be similar, slightly different, or wholly different creatures? Because of its subjective nature the scrapbook is a subjective source and must be viewed as such, a fact that is neither good nor bad, but merely is.

However, this argument that the scrapbook creator is an author constructing an alternate narrative brings up an important philosophical point that is closely linked to

the subjective nature of scrapbooks. Scrapbookers judge a particular item worthy of inclusion in their book, cut it out, and paste it in. But, did they judge the item worthy because it contributed to an ongoing project to define their world, or was it included because it supported a narrative that the creator has already defined? Did they include the item because of its thematic qualities, or because it supported the author's thesis? Is their scrapbook a conscious attempt to create an alternate narrative, or is the narrative an unforeseen result of the items they chose to include? As the lives of most people who scrapbooked were not considered significant enough to record, how can we tell if theirs was a conscious attempt to define their world, or merely a byproduct? Garvey may argue that this is a moot question, especially when she declares that "scrapbooks are a democratic form of archives" (p. 227). Still, the question remains, and apparently many more scrapbooks must be examined before we can even attempt to provide an answer.

Yet perhaps this is merely splitting hairs. In truth, *Writing with Scissors* is a well-researched, well-written, thoroughly enjoyable book that provides a glimpse into the relationship between information and readers over a hundred-year span. It also attempts to weigh in on the ongoing debate over what constitutes a source. If read just for its contribution to material culture, Garvey's work is invaluable—but peel back the layers and the arguments become much more subtle, much more profound, and remind us that history is not the study of the past but instead the study of the *people* of the past. *Writing with Scissors* shows us a way to glimpse their personal thoughts on their contemporary lives and times. In a way, it brings them back to life as human beings acting in their world.

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