

CALL FOR PAPERS
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
CONVENTION AND REVOLUTION

Life writing by women in the 1800s and 1900s: archives, critiques and methods

29 November -1 December 2017 Warsaw, Poland

deadline for submissions: April 30, 2017

Organizers: Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Digital Humanities Laboratory of the University of Warsaw, Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences

Long hours in the archives. Raise your hand if you have never yawned over letters of journals written by women of the centuries past. (No hands go up.) The thoughts creep in: this is so boring, so conventional, so predictable – and there’s another pile of pages to read...Fighting sleep, we still entertain hopes of revolutionary finds, fantastic rebel women, unknown facts about those who gained fame, controversies hidden among the yellowing pages. Yet in adopting this attitude, we are missing out on a far greater point. The very gesture of writing, when made by a woman, constitutes rebellion, and the conventionality of the text should not obscure this fact. Anachronism is the greatest power of any revolution. Many women, locked (quite literally) in their homes, using a narrative that mirrored what they had learnt, dreamt of freedom for themselves and others, whether that were aware of it or not. When they sat down to write, they created a moment just for themselves, and in doing so, they carved out a space of their own freedom – small at first, but gradually expanding – where they created themselves. They wrote themselves. With time, they became the subject of writing by other women, their biographers. Discovering, documenting and researching this chain of women’s lives suddenly no longer seems boring.

The international conference, scheduled to take place over three days, will focus on discussing the latest methods of working with women's personal documents, biographies and letters written on their basis. We are interested in strategies developed in contemporary historiography and literature studies, in particular interdisciplinary women's, gender and queer studies. We also have a strong interest in the experiences of researchers of herstory, oral history, and life writing. As for historical periods, we are interested mainly in the 1800s and the 1900s up to World War II. However, the true chronology will emerge out of the documents themselves. We have decided to focus on journals, letters, diaries and autobiographies of women in that period because it is, in our opinion, unique: this is when among Western elites the discourse of women's emancipation was articulated and started gaining popularity. Most women at the time responded with great reserve and even hostility, choosing instead to support the traditional understanding of gender roles.

Personal documents written by women in the 19th century are an excellent reflection of the ambivalence of their authors towards emancipation. Since the 1980s, many scholarly papers have been written to demonstrate that these texts, while ostensibly fitting with the conventions of gender representation, in fact undermine the traditional gender roles. Submission and its subversion, conservative attitudes and emancipation (if not overt, then expressed through a variety of strategies to promote empowerment and women's agency) – they meet, often in surprising ways, in these conventionalized, seemingly uninteresting practices of women's life writing.

Using the existing findings in the area of gender studies as a starting point, during the conference we will give the floor to researchers who will present other possibilities for reading women's personal writings, and reveal how we can access what often remains hidden under the surface of the texts which require a critical, contextualized reading. Together, we will discuss the interpretations that facilitate finding the seeds of rebellion and social revolution, while seemingly adhering to patriarchal norms (including formal and literary conventions).

On the first day the conference, we will focus on novel, critical approaches to reading journals, letters, memoirs, and autobiographies written by women. We will discuss what survival strategies were reflected in women's life writing, what this writing offered to its authors, what purposes it served, and how it influenced the next generations of its female readers.

On the second day the conference, we will investigate women's biographic writing. How can archives be used to write biographies of 19th century women? What are the most interesting

projects in this area, and what outcomes have they produced so far? What challenges are to be expected in this type of work?

On the third day the conference, we will look at the possibilities that the instruments of digital humanities offer in archiving and digitally editing women's life writing. Can digital archives and databases restore the memory of the women that have been forgotten, or is the opposite true – are they just a digital reinforcement of the traditional divisions and power (im)balances? We will discuss the most exciting projects, the new research tools, and the opportunities they offer.

During the conference key-note lectures will be delivered by such researchers as, Prof. Sidonie Smith and Prof. Julia Watson, authors and editors of the groundbreaking book entitled “De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography” , Prof. Cynthia Huff, author of many articles focused on women's diaries and author of descriptive bibliographies of nineteenth-century women's diaries, Prof. Andrea Pető, author of a biography of Júlia Rajk and author of books on women in Hungarian politics between 1945-1951 and the female perpetrators in Hungary during World War II. The Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson lecture will be followed by a seminar devoted to their new book of essays, which will be published in early 2017.

The conference is organized by the team behind the Women's Archive, a division of the Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences (www.ibl.waw.pl) now engaged in a long-term project The Women's Archive: writing (Archiwum kobiet: pisać). Co-organizers are the Digital Humanities Laboratory of the University of Warsaw (www.lach.edu.pl) and the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences (www.ispan.waw.pl).

The Conference “Convention and revolution. Life writing by women in the 1800s and 1900s: archives, critiques and methods” will take place at Staszic Palace in Warsaw, Poland November 27-December 1, 2017.

Conference fee for regular participants: 400 PLN/100 EUR

Conference fee for young scholars and PhD students: 200 PLN/50 EUR

Paper submissions please send till April 30, 2017 on email address:

convention_and_revolution2017@ibl.waw.pl