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Preface [to Libraries and Culture, Winter 2006]

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Preface

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From May to October 1893 the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago registered more than 27 million admissions of people who came to see the exhibits, explore the grounds, and take in the myriad scientific, technological, and cultural wonders on display. One such marvel was the Woman's Building, a stately and impressive neoclassical structure that served as a nexus of women's activities, exhibits, organizations, and leadership. Prominently located on the Court of Honor just inside the entrance to the fair's celebrated White City, the Woman's Building was conceived as both a monument to the progress women had made and an inspiration to their further advancement.

The exposition's Board of Lady Managers, formed through special legislation that granted women an administrative role at a World's Fair for the first time, decided early on that the Woman's Building would feature a literary exhibit to highlight the contribution of women to the world of print. A signal achievement in women's history and in cultural history more broadly, the resulting library gathered under one roof more than 7,000 volumes authored, illustrated, edited, or translated by women. Showcasing the literary achievements of women from across the country and around the world, this remarkable

collection resulted from the first attempt in history to represent in a single collection the global contribution of women to the world of letters.

Truly more of a museum of books than a fully operational library, the Woman's Building Library (WBL) was experienced chiefly as spectacle and display by the countless visitors of 1893 who gazed at the walls and walls of gleaming oak bookcases, peered into the display cases of autograph manuscripts and other literary artifacts, or simply admired the portraits and busts of famous women writers. With its emphasis on the materiality—and the material culture—of texts, the WBL made physically evident to fairgoers what could formerly only be imagined: the substantial literary and intellectual achievement of women. And that physical presence of well over 7,000 volumes, together with ancillary artifacts, had a powerful, sometimes overwhelming, impact on visitors unaccustomed to thinking about women's writing on such a monumental scale. Yet even as the display made visible, en masse, authors and texts that might otherwise have had only a very circumscribed existence outside the fair, the arrangement of the literary exhibit rendered many individual authors and clusters of texts *invisible*, or nearly so, lost in the crowd. Such is the case of works by African American writers, for example, which, aside from a small number of texts by black women highlighted as part of the New York women's exhibit, simply blended into the great, undifferentiated mass of books lining the walls of the WBL.

This special issue of *Libraries & Culture* brings to light many aspects and dimensions of the WBL, some of which were visible in 1893 but have since disappeared from view and others that were obscured in 1893 but, through research and recovery, now begin to emerge. The essays that follow analyze multiple strands or cross-sections of the roughly 5,000 texts contributed to the library by women of the United States. Bringing together scholars of literature, history, American studies, and library and information studies, these essays survey and analyze the contributions of women writers to the fields of American fiction and poetry, religion and devotional literature, African American literature, and children's literature and, in doing so, reveal the cultural significance, richness, and complexity of women's contributions in these areas.

The WBL offers almost limitless possibilities for research and analysis. Yet at the same time it presents unusual methodological challenges and obstacles. Most conspicuously, the library is no longer intact as a unified collection of books. Parts of it survive (although these are largely dispersed), but large chunks of what was once the WBL have been lost or destroyed. Aside from scattered remnants and long-dispersed volumes, only the blueprint of the collection survives in the form of a shelf list created in the library during the fair's six-month run to complement a more thorough, systematic catalog (now lost). (See "The Cover" in this issue.)

The unique process through which the WBL grew and took shape adds further complications as well as additional points of interest and opportunities for analysis. Following the lead of President Bertha Palmer, the Board of Lady Managers, along with its subsidiary state boards and foreign affiliates, advertised in newspapers, solicited contributions from publishers, and, most important, tapped into the vast network of women's clubs around the country, enlisting their members to identify local authors, obtain copies of their publications, and send them to Chicago to be cataloged and displayed. Each of the various state boards and foreign committees devised its own criteria for shaping its submission. Some states sought to include as many books as possible, while others favored a highly selective approach. Literary committees in some of the western states expressed concern that their contributions would necessarily be smaller than those of states with longer histories of European settlement and larger populations from which to draw. Some texts valued highly today were omitted, while other texts, often obscure, were contributed by multiple states. Sophia Alice Callahan's *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* (1891), thought to be the first novel by a Native American woman, is not to be found, but Mary Sophia Thompson's *Rhythmical Gymnastics, Vocal and Physical* was displayed in triplicate, as women from Ohio, New York, and Illinois all claimed the author as one of their own and deemed her text worthy of inclusion. As a result of these inconsistent criteria, gaps exist in the collection alongside redundancies.

And, of course, the sheer size of the collection is daunting but ultimately exhilarating. A newly created electronic database that builds

on the surviving shelf list and supplements it with additional bibliographical data (including Dewey numbers, where available) provides a point of entry into the vast and eclectic collection embodied in the library.¹ With the aid of the database it is possible to sift out coherent subsets of texts: texts united by subject matter, for example, or genre, region, or publisher—a tremendously valuable capability but one that visitors to the Columbian Exposition did not have at their disposal.

As a result of the attrition of the physical collection and the creation of the new “virtual” WBL, “visitors” today experience the library very differently from visitors to Chicago in 1893. The WBL has gone from a library sans readers to a library sans books. The challenges that the library presents today are different from those posed at the fair itself, and the questions that interest us are different from those that interested its first viewers. The way we approach the WBL has changed, as have the paths we follow through it. The contributors to this special volume were invited to make use of the electronic database, in addition to the print catalog, and to ask—and attempt to answer—their own questions about the WBL. The resulting essays present a mosaic of diverse topics and methodologies, from richly historicized rhetorical analyses of small numbers of texts (Gautier, Hochman) to large-scale content analyses and cultural studies (Brown, Gallagher, Sorby) and reception history and genre criticism (Lundin). More important, these six essays, together with Emily Todd’s afterword, open up windows that had long been sealed into the significance, functions, and cultural roles performed by women writers and their texts at this watershed moment in American history and in nineteenth-century America more broadly.

Notes

I am deeply indebted to Wayne Wiegand for sharing his interest in and extensive knowledge of the Woman’s Building Library with me and for encouraging me to guest-edit this special volume. It is my hope that this special volume will serve as a companion to our collaborative book-length study, *“Right Here I See My Own Books”: A History and Analysis of the Woman’s Building Library*. I would also like to thank Matthew Van Zee for his tireless efforts to identify women writers of color in the Woman’s Building Library, Erin Kogler for the many hours

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