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Book Review: Organizing Women: Home, Work, and the Institutional Infrastructure of Print in Twentieth-Century America, Christine Pawley

Abstract

In carefully selected case studies of white and Black middle-class American women, Pawley, a professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Information School, provides a detailed exploration of the "largely untold history" of women who used their involvement in print-centered organizations to reshape their lives beyond the unpaid domestic sphere (1). The first three chapters of the book trace the histories of primarily domestic women who held active roles in institutions of print culture such as journalism and radio broadcasting while the last three focus on the lives of women whose full-time employment helped to shape the developing public library system. While Pawley's main argument is that involvement in print-centered organizations provided these women with opportunities to gain agency, she simultaneously delineates the racial and gender inequality embedded in and replicated by these structures. Through a meticulous examination of institutional records and official documents, Pawley's book is a valuable addition to the historiography of print culture and library and information studies.

Keywords

Women, Women's history, Public libraries, Print culture, United States history

About Author

Madelaine Russell (madelaine.russell@mail.utoronto.ca) is a Master of Information candidate at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information. She holds a Bachelor of Arts and Science (Honours) from Lakehead University in Interdisciplinary Studies as well as a Bachelor of Education from Lakehead University. Madelaine has worked as a teacher and teacher librarian at the elementary and secondary levels and as a public library children's programmer. Her areas of research include gendered information behaviour and equitable access to information.

Pawley, C. (2022). *Organizing women: Home, work, and the institutional infrastructure of print in twentieth-century America*. University of Massachusetts Press.

In her book *Organizing Women: Home, Work, and the Institutional Infrastructure of Print in Twentieth-Century America*, Christine Pawley (2022) provides a detailed account of the otherwise largely untold history of women who used their involvement in print-centered organizations to reshape their lives beyond the unpaid domestic sphere. Through Pawley's carefully selected histories of middle-class American women, her book "focuses principally on the relationship between Blackness, Whiteness, and print culture - a dynamic central to American history" (p. 1). The first decades of twentieth-century America saw a rapid, nationwide proliferation of print-centered organizations, including commercial publishing houses and newspapers as well as nonprofit educational and governmental organizations. Print technology allowed for publications such as periodicals and rule books on which organizations became dependent to link sometimes widely dispersed members. These print-centered institutions provided both White and Black women with new opportunities to participate in public life on a large scale.

Pawley's main argument is that throughout the twentieth century, many educated middle-class women, already active consumers and producers of print, recognized and acted upon the unique opportunity for personal agency and societal influence that participation in organizations of print afforded them. She counters Max Weber's (Weber & Kalberg, 2012) *iron cage* metaphor for bureaucracy by arguing that rather than trapping women in repetitive and powerless systems, these organizations were malleable and created spaces that women could control. However, Pawley also faithfully delineates how these structures simultaneously "embedded and replicated patterns of racial and gender inequality" (p. 209), including in-depth analyses of the endemic racism characteristic of the popular novels of the day and the gender discrimination that held women back from promotions.

Each chapter of the book chronologically traces the history of a specific woman or small group of women involved in organizations over the course of the twentieth century ranging from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and public libraries, to name a few. While her agenda to account for more than a hundred years of American women's participation in public and private institutions of print culture may seem overly ambitious at times, Pawley narrows her selected subjects to "White Anglophone women of Northern European descent" and "women of color of African descent" mostly living and working in Midwestern states (p. 1). However, while limiting the geographical and demographical focus of the case studies refines the scope and overarching narrative of her book, it may also present an incomplete understanding of women's history. Prospective readers seeking a truly diverse representation of women of various cultural and racial minorities across the United States may be disappointed.

The first three chapters tell the stories of primarily domestic women - wives and homemakers - who sought out and maintained active roles in organizations of print. The first two chapters are dedicated to the lives of two married White women, Clara Steen, a farmer and

journalist, and Leanna Driftmier, a radio broadcaster and homemaker. The messages communicated throughout their publications and broadcasts promoted an ideal of the rural American family. Pawley then provides a much-needed counter-narrative in the third chapter, examining a group of ten African American women who used their reading club to discuss serious issues of race and other social and political matters. The last three chapters focus on the lives of women later in the century who chose full-time employment over marriage and family. The three women in the second half of the book are each located in a distinct aspect of the developing public library system: Lutie Eugenia Stearns, the developer of Wisconsin traveling libraries, Mary Emogene Hazeltine, the head of the Wisconsin Library School, and Vivian Gordon Harsh, the first African American person to direct a branch of the Chicago Public Library. Pawley's consideration of the organizations of print themselves, another main theme of the book, is most significantly realized in her expert explanation of the evolution of public libraries.

Pawley, a professor emerita at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Information School and former director of the Center for the History of Print Culture in Modern America, establishes a strong foundation for her book through her unique methodological approach. She deftly relies on an array of often dismissed organizational genres of writing as her primary sources. Through a meticulous examination of institutional records and official documents that include annual reports, bibliographies, meeting programs, bulletins, and official correspondence, Pawley successfully brings to light the work and lived experiences of women whose contributions may otherwise be lost. By examining the organizations themselves alongside their participants, the book presents these women as public actors in the institutional cultures that shaped the lives of all Americans in the twentieth century.

The institutional infrastructure of print operates between the micro-level of the individual and the macro-level of the societal culture at the meso-level. As Little (2023) explains, this intermediate space of analysis focuses on the characteristics of specific groups and organizations, allowing Pawley to link issues of individual agency to broader historical trends. As Pawley acknowledges herself, the meso is a level that print culture historians have often overlooked as a site of analysis. As such, her book is a valuable addition to historiography and serves as a methodological model for future studies. It will surely be of interest to print culture, library and information studies, and women's history scholars. While its ambitious agenda blends the histories of libraries, women's roles, print infrastructure, and racial issues, Pawley's enjoyable narrative style and extensive contextual material make it accessible and engaging for a broader readership. *Organizing Women* is a necessary addition to any academic library.

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