
Transgressive Archives and the Labor of Recovery: The Case of Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Jennifer S. Tuttle*¹

¹University of New England – United States

Abstract

Throughout her life, Charlotte Perkins Gilman traveled back and forth on an East-West axis, attracted and repelled by New England (her birthplace) and California (the place where she chose to die). Recovering her telling regional affiliations, insistence on mobility, and transgression of social boundaries has been possible only through dogged archival research. This kind of activist scholarship, on Gilman and other women writers, has supported women's and allied liberatory movements of the last sixty years. Recovery is the bedrock of politically engaged literary praxis, yet our focus on the lone researcher and our self-congratulatory narratives about the cultural change that archival work can achieve erase myriad individuals whose labor enables our own. In this paper, turning the interpretive lens of travel and transgression backward onto the archives, I interrogate the scene of production for recovery scholarship, which has a complex and largely unacknowledged genealogy. In the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America are letters, exchanged for four generations since 1961 between archivists and Gilman's descendants, which reveal how the library acquired the Gilman papers. Themselves traversing the continent between New England and California, these letters demonstrate the astonishing ways that archivists and catalogers enabled Gilman's recovery. Indeed, like Gilman, these committed professionals traveled from East to West and back again. They wooed Gilman's family, fended off competing offers, sorted through storage units, rescued precious documents, and brought them safely back to the land of Gilman's birth-ironically, to the region from which she fled to achieve her freedom and find her voice. Recognizing this invisible labor has implications far beyond Gilman studies: it illuminates the role that archivists have played in the establishment and growth of the field of American women writers, in the recovery that has been the engine of that growth, and in the transgressive cultural work that that feminist recovery continues to perform.

*Speaker