

# Working with 'the biographical archive': the uses of life-writing from a gender perspective

13 June 2016

09:45-18:00

University of Groningen, room A3 in the Academy Building

The workshop is free of charge. Coffee, tea and lunch will be provided. For more information and registration, please contact the Centre for Gender Studies: [centreforgenderstudies@gmail.com](mailto:centreforgenderstudies@gmail.com)

## Programme

09:45	Welcome and opening
10:00	Keynote Lecture on Digital Archives by dr. Susan Aasman (University of Groningen)
10:45	Discussion
11:00	Coffee and tea break
11:15	Workshop I 'Obituaries and Commemorative Sources' by Anna Cabanel (University of Groningen) and Lisa Swanfeldt-Winter (University of Stockholm)
13:15	Lunch break
14:00	Workshop II 'Photographs and Visual Sources' by dr. Marta Kargòl (Research Institute for Material Culture in Leiden) and Prof. Mineke Bosch (University of Groningen)
16:00	Lecture by Christa Hämmerle (University of Vienna) organized and financed by the Centre for Historical Studies (University of Groningen)
18:00	End of Workshop

## Description

The Centre for Gender Studies invites all who are interested to participate in this one day workshop on the topic of 'the biographical archive'. The aim of this workshop is to discuss how gender historians can utilize and work with the biographical archive, specifically looking at the wide variety of (personal) sources or life-writing within personal archives, and how these can be used in (historical) biographical research.

Most often biographical research is based on personal archives in which those sources that shed light on subject and identity formation are central. Indeed, sources function not just sites of knowledge retrieval but also sites of identity formation and performance. In this workshop we will focus on these life-writing sources within and outside personal archives (summarized as the biographical archive) and their role in the biographical narrative.

The concept of 'the biographical archive' used in this workshop refers to the great variety of life-writing sources that are of crucial importance for biographical research as they give evidence of how a person or an individual presents him or herself, and how this person or individual is perceived by others. The concept of the biographical archive is derived from the concept of 'the colonial archive'. The archival turn and consequent revaluation of archives led to the understanding that archives are not just sites of knowledge retrieval but also the outcome of deliberate constructions in which power relations are inscribed. For 'the colonial archive' it has been argued that the way in which the collective colonial archive is structured and what is in- or excluded (on the level of the archive and

the repository) is just as important for the colonial narrative as the individual sources within the archive.

Personal archives and the biographical archive at large were taken seriously as important sites of memory conservation only from the 1980s. For a long time life-writing or the biographical archive was criticized and problematized for a lack of objectivity and transparency. Under the influence of the linguistic turn, feminism and the wish to write women and other marginalized groups back into history, the biographical archive experienced a reevaluation. Combined with a growing interest in biography as a genre, life-writing sources have experienced a growing popularity.

But how can gender historians work with the biographical archive? This workshop examines different types of sources prevalent in personal archives to see how these can be utilized. All of these sources function as sites of identity formation and they can help provide insight into how someone constructed his or her identity or persona and how someone has been perceived and remembered. Both identity formation and commemoration also have a clear gender component. Both are gendered performances meaning that ideas about both masculinity and femininity will always influence the way in which identities are constructed and people are remembered. By working with the biographical archive, insight can be gained into the effect of gender on how someone wanted to be seen and remembered. This workshop will therefore provide insight into how the biographical archive can be used in gender sensitive research.

Lastly, the rise of the internet and the increasing digitalization of society have again signaled a change in thinking about personal archives. Nowadays identities are often constructed online through the use of for example social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter. The internet enables people to use a wide variety of media in constructing their (online, gendered) identities. The use of photographs for example has drastically changed in the last few decades. Whereas at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century photography was something special that was used only to commemorate special events, nowadays the rise of mobile photography enables people to take photographs of absolutely everything and also to instantly share these photographs with people all over the world. Photography is not something special anymore. People are basically constantly constructing their online identities using a much wider variety of mediums than had been possible in previous times and building enormous online archives in the process. This workshop therefore also wants to explore how this digitalization of personal archives influences identity and/or persona construction and commemoration, but also whether and how such online data need a different methodology. Identity theft or fake persona for example have become easier and more predominant as well as issues regarding the lack of clarity about the copyright of online sources, requiring a new methodology.

This workshop will consist of a key-note lecture on digital archives and two hands-on sessions on how to work with commemorative sources and visual material. To finish the workshop all will attend a lecture by Prof. Christa Hämmerle – organized by the Centre for Historical Studies – on the topic of “Will you write me a little love letter? Please?! Violence and Love in Couple Correspondences of World War I and II’. In this lecture, Hämmerle will present some of the outcomes of her ongoing project on “(Writing) About Love”, i.e. couples correspondences of the 19th and 20th century, which mainly come from the “Sammlung Frauennachlässe” (Collection of women’s personal papers).

In order to enhance the interactive character of this workshop, we want to encourage participants to bring along sources that they are themselves working with to discuss these during the workshops. For PhD students, it is possible to obtain credits for participating in this workshop through the Graduate School for Humanities (GSH).