
Lori Merish’s *Archives of Labor: Working Class Women and Literary Culture in the Antebellum United States* is an ambitious work that recovers texts by and about women, labor, and working-class experience. Merish examines texts that consider a diversity of women, including “Lowell mill women, African American ‘free laborers,’ Mexicana mission workers, urban seamstresses, and prostitutes” (10). This book both performs the work of recovering texts left out of literary history and analyzing the subject positions of the diverse women represented in them. Moreover, it approaches class and labor from many critical perspectives, including Jameson’s dialogical framework and identity-focused theoretical paradigms from gender and sexuality studies, race, class, and disability studies.

In *Archives of Labor*, Merish first presents her mission and critical approaches. The next two chapters consider the working women of the New England mills. Here Merish examines a variety of pamphlet novels and factory-sponsored publications like *The Lowell Offering*. In chapter 3, she focuses on seamstresses, sentimental fiction, and labor reform moving from workers in the factories to the needle trades. Chapter 4 takes Wilson’s *Our Nig* as the central text with references to additional novels set in the South, examining the complex north-south divide alongside race and labor. Chapter 5 focuses on E. D. E. N. Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand*, arguing that melodrama is in service to social critique. This chapter offers the most sustained analysis and could be used in an advanced undergraduate or graduate course.

Chapter 6 returns to race and region in Mexicana testimonios, as well as Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton’s *The Squatter and the Don* and *Who Would Have Thought It?* and extends her analysis of American imperial expansion. *Archives of Labor* closes with a brief postscript that considers the difficulties of studying working-class texts. First, texts targeting poor and working-class women were usually cheap and disposable, so likely to degrade over time and to be dismissed as “trash,” if they did survive. Second, American “exceptionalist skepticism about class generates uncertainty about the existence of class (as) culture” (247).

*Archives of Labor* is a valuable addition to the scholarship on working-class women. Merish brings lesser-known texts into circulation again and models responsible recovery practices that follow from her commitment to intersectionality. She also defines literature broadly – to include memoirs, pamphlet literature, song lyrics, and illustrations.

However, *Archives of Labor’s* overcrowded construction diminishes its value. Since the book
has so many commitments, each chapter is awash with critical approaches and texts that are not fully explored. Off-loading some of the briefly mentioned texts to an annotated bibliography or extended bibliographic essay in an appendix would make room for deeper analysis in the chapters. Additionally, I got bogged down in Merish’s discussion of others’ scholarship. I would have liked to read more of her informed analysis with necessary references and explanations pushed into the notes.

Merish leaves us with a call-to-action. Since stories by and about American working women have largely appeared in cheap formats that were deemed unimportant, there is a lack of scholarship on working-class women. Merish takes the first steps, but urges that we all need to find these texts before they degrade further or are destroyed and digitize them so they can be preserved, recovered, and studied.

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