

Travels with Frances Densmore: Her Life, Work, and Legacy in Native American Studies.* Joan M. Jensen and Michelle Wick Patterson, eds. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. 464 pp.

Reviewed by Alex Golub

Most anthropologists will know the pioneering American ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore from the famous photo of her playing recordings on a gramophone for Mountain Chief, a Blackfeet Indian. The image is a compelling portrait of the conflicted but also collaborative relations Indians and anthropologists share—it is so compelling, for instance, that it featured on the cover of the widely-read 2003 volume *Voices of Modernity* by Baumann and Briggs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). But this image has become so emblematic that the lives of the actual human beings in it receive far less attention than they deserve. This volume edited by Joan J. Jensen and Michelle Wick Patterson seeks to rectify this situation by providing the most exhaustive account of Frances Densmore to date.

The volume is divided into two parts. The first six chapters of the book are a biography of Densmore—the first full-length biography published—with chapters written either by Patterson or by Jensen. The second half of the volume features six chapters that focus on different aspects of Densmore’s work, each written by a different author. Two of these chapters are reprints of earlier articles, and all of them tend to be highly focused and short. Chapter eleven, for instance, details the challenges museum staff face playing back Densmore’s cylinder recordings at the correct speed.

The volume is well researched and carefully written. Patterson and Jensen’s passion for their topic shines through very clearly. In a case such as this, I’d usually write that such a volume will be welcomed by scholars working on Densmore. In this case the situation is a bit different, since this book includes practically every scholar who works on Densmore—it not only is for Densmore scholars everywhere, it *is* Densmore scholars everywhere! For those with an interest in Indian life, ethnomusicology, or the history of anthropology, then, this volume will become an important reference point on a figure who has otherwise been largely overlooked. Indeed, Jensen and Patterson go out of their way to document the location and quality of archival holdings of Densmore’s correspondence. Clearly, the goal is not only to create a lasting scholarly volume documenting Densmore’s life and work. In addition, the authors seek to grow the community of Densmore scholars by providing recommendations on where and how to conduct more research.

But there is much else of value in the volume beyond just an expert study of single figure. Densmore lived from 1867 to 1957, a period which coincides with the institutionalization of disciplines such as anthropology, folklore, ethnomusicology, museum studies—and indeed, the rise of the modern museum itself. Informed by a deep knowledge of the broader literature on this era, Jensen and Patterson demonstrate how Densmore’s choices as a writer and researcher reflect broader trends in this period, a time when women like Densmore attempted to reconcile their interests with the often-confining roles that were considered acceptable for them. Indeed,

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Densmore not only fought against the restrictions of nineteenth century womanhood, she also had to deal changes in American culture as the country moved through the Gilded Age, the Twenties, the Depression, and two great wars.

In particular, Jensen and Patterson are interested in how people like Densmore gainsay much of the traditional narrative of anthropology and folklore. The best parts of this volume are where they focus on people whose stories have not been told. This includes women such as Densmore, but also her many Indian collaborators and translators. Although none of the authors in this volume have a strong Indian voice, Jensen and Patterson describe in depth the concrete people with whom Densmore lived and worked. This goal of bringing the moment of fieldwork back into focus and understanding its complicated cross-cultural dynamics and politics is one of the best parts of the book.

Densmore carefully prepared an archive of her work before she passed away in an attempt to manage future perceptions of her and her work. This could have led to a simplistic acceptance of the corpus Densmore preserved, or it could have encouraged a transgressive, reading against the grain of her work. But Jensen dodge both of these bullets, producing instead a thoughtful account of her archival strategies, as well as the role of archives in shaping the reception of a scholar's life work. As a result, the volume thoughtfully and carefully contributes to broader debates about the role of museum collections in shaping intellectual history.

In sum, this book brings a tremendous amount of care and attention to bear on the life of a scholar that few remember. By providing this rich account of Densmore's life, times, and thought, the volume contributes more than just a biography of a single scholar. A thoughtful meditation on how intertwined lives are made, remembered, and forgotten, it deserves to be read by anyone interested in the history of anthropology or museum studies.

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