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Wednesday, March 11, 2020

Sydel Silverman: A New Virtual Finding Aid for a Scholar Committed to Anthropology's Legacy

by Diana Marsh and Katherine Christensen



Photo: Photographs of Sydel Silverman, undated, Series 9, Sydel Silverman Papers

Last March, a giant in the field of anthropology passed away. Sydel Silverman (1933-2019) was a scholar of Italian and other (as she called them) "complex" societies, as well as the history of anthropology. In her doctoral work and first book (*Three Bells of Civilization: the Life of an Italian Hill Town* 1975), she combated stereotypes of rural communities through her ethnography of Montecastello di Vibio, a small Umbrian hilltop town.

Photo: Photographs of Sydel Silverman, undated, Series 9, Sydel Silverman Papers.

Silverman advocated for anthropology throughout her career. At the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center in the 1970s, Silverman argued that anthropology was an "essential" discipline, [convincing Margaret Mead to join her fight](#). Robert J. Kibbee, then CUNY's Chancellor, proposed a restructuring plan that would eliminate the anthropology departments in a number of CUNY's colleges. As a result of

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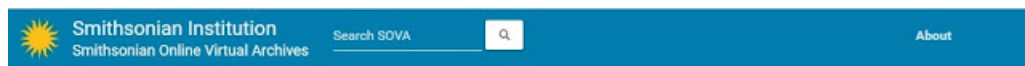
Silverman's activities, when the restructuring occurred in 1976, no anthropology departments were affected. In so doing, she resurrected the anthropology program at CUNY, turning it into one of the top ten anthropological doctoral programs in the U.S.

Silverman's perhaps most influential contribution to the field was her leadership of the [Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research](#), anthropology's most prominent funding organization, where she served as President from 1987 to 1999. Through Wenner-Gren, Silverman built anthropology's intellectual community and reach. She championed unity among all four of anthropology's often disconnected fields—archaeological, biological, cultural, and linguistic anthropology. She also published on the field's scholarly process, reflecting in her writing about its networks and conferences (see [The Beast at the Table: Conferencing with Anthropologists, 2002](#)).

Photo: Sydel Silverman Papers in the National Anthropological Archives pod, Museum Support Center, Suitland, Maryland.

Silverman was also a major proponent of preserving anthropology's legacy through archival records. She helped to found the [Council for the Preservation of Anthropological Records \(CoPAR\)](#), which published works on the topic and created a registry of anthropologists' archival papers. As Silverman said in 2014, "Those of us who created CoPAR had as our primary objective to save the unpublished field notes and other primary documents of field research for the benefit of scholars, members of the subject communities, and others with serious purposes for consulting this material" (Personal correspondence). For more on her foundational CoPAR work, see this 2012 blog post. In 2015, Silverman participated in a workshop to revitalize CoPAR for the digital age, which initiated the development of new working groups and a [new website](#) (Marsh et al. 2019).

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Guide to the Sydel Silverman papers



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Summary

Collection ID: NAA.2011-11
 Creators: Silverman, Sydel
 Dates: 1939-2010
 bulk 1949-2010
 Languages: English
 Physical Description: 24.96 Linear feet, 99 document boxes plus 1 oversize box
 Repository: National Anthropological Archives



The **Sydel Silverman** papers, 1939-2010 (bulk 1949-2010) document her field research in Italy, her work as an educator and foundation executive, and her involvement in professional organizations. **Sydel Silverman** taught at Queens College in New York, was Executive Officer of the CUNY Ph.D. Program in Anthropology, and served as president of the Wenner-Gren Foundation. Her primary fields of research have been agrarian communities in Italy and the history and practice of anthropology. Materials in the collection include field notes, journals, correspondence, calendars, published and unpublished writings, conference papers and lectures, teaching files, student files, photographs and slides, and sound recordings.

Photo: Screen shot of the new Sydel Silverman Papers finding aid on sova.si.edu

This month, the NAA published a digital, keyword searchable ('encoded', in archives-speak) [finding aid](#) (created by Katherine Christensen) to Silverman's collections. The collections are made up of about 25 linear feet of material documenting Silverman's fieldwork in Italy, educational and administrative roles, participation in research networks, and vast collection of informal observational notes taken throughout her career. Media include field notebooks and journals, correspondence, news clippings, unpublished writings, meeting notes, teaching files, photographs, slides, and audio recordings.

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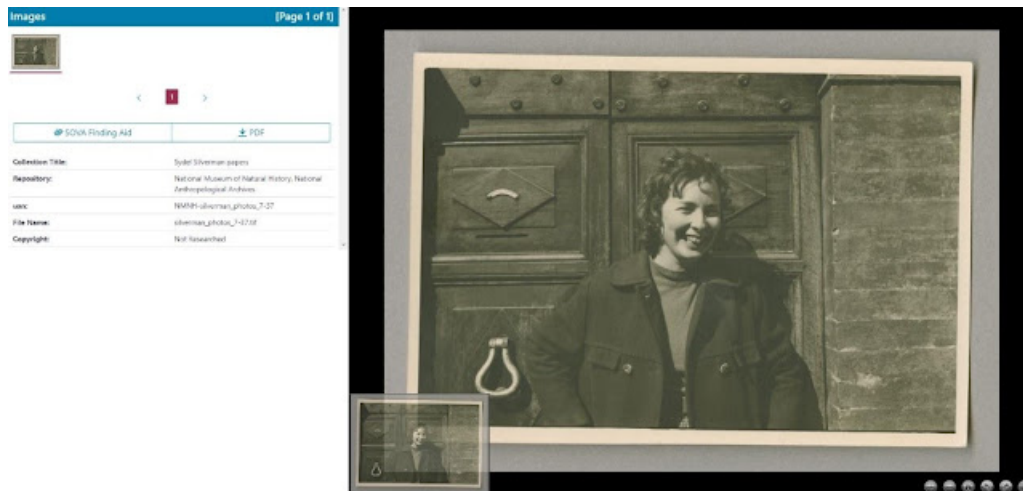


Photo: Screen shot of archival image of Sydel Silverman from the new online finding aid

Given Silverman's interest in anthropological legacies, we look forward to seeing how Silverman's legacy—archival papers now more easily searchable online—are used and repurposed by the field's next generation.

The finding aid for the Sydel Silverman Papers is available online at <https://sova.si.edu/record/NAA.2011-11>

Acknowledgements

Funding for the processing of Sydel Silverman's papers was provided by a grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation; processing was completed by Christy Fic. Funding to convert pdf and Word finding aids to encoded finding aids was provided by the FY2019 Collections Information System (CIS) pool. With this funding the NAA has recently added 6 other finding aids to SOVA for the papers of Anthony Leeds, Richard L. Hay, Marvin Harris, Ethel Cutler Freeman, Richard Lynch Garner, and Chris Gjording.

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