I am touching a strip of film from the 1910s. Composed of sixteen frames, it
depicts a man on horseback, galloping down a woodsy trail. In all likelihood,
the motion picture these frames belonged to does not exist anymore; it is
estimated that only 14 percent of US silent features survived time, neglect,
floods, and fire.¹ And yet this piece of sepia nitrate rests in my hands, avail-
able despite early cinema’s rampant ephemerality. Its survival is due to one
movie-loving girl, Eleanor G. Fulton, who decided to assemble a hundred-
page scrapbook honoring Jack W. Kerrigan, one of the first screen heart-
throbs. Between 1913 and 1917, the twenty-something fan had access to Holly-
wood’s sprawling lots, so it is possible she gathered the discarded filmstrip
herself, on one of her trips to the new Universal studio; there Fulton met
her idol at least twice. In addition to the filmstrip, the personal scrapbook
includes a snapshot of Kerrigan awkwardly standing by a trailer, the girl fan’s
shadow cast by his feet. A proud declaration of authorship is penned under
the vernacular reproduction: “Warren Kerrigan posed for this picture at
Universal City, October 12 1915. I took it with my Kodak,” Fulton notes, sign-
ing off “EGF.”² An autographed headshot is also preserved among hundreds
of Kerrigan-related newspaper clippings and memorabilia. The blue ink
scrawled across the star’s face is glossy, as if perpetually wet (Figure 1).

Access and ephemerality are the key terms framing this dossier on “Alter-
native Archives.” I have access to Kerrigan’s snapshot and handwriting—to

¹ David Pierce, The Survival of American Silent Feature Films: 1912–1929 (Washington,
DC: Council on Library and Information Resources and the Library of Congress,
² Eleanor G. Fulton, movie scrapbook, 1913–1917, author’s personal collection.
Figure 1. Jack W. Kerrigan’s autographed headshot in Eleanor G. Fulton’s annotated movie scrapbook (1913–1917). Photo by author.
a material piece of his largely lost filmography—because of a female fan’s archival labor and the knowledge exchange abetted by the World Wide Web. Fulton’s movie scrapbook found me in 2014 through an auction advertised on the online marketplace eBay. Without the portal of mass communication and commerce that is the internet, this peephole into early film reception and celebrity would have remained unavailable to me, and by extension to academic scrutiny.

Trafficking in transience, fan artifacts from the silent era have a low survival rate. Most material sources conferred institutional protection and discursive currency have originated from within capitalistic enterprises, functioning to legitimize the systems of power that afforded their production; scrapbooks crafted by no-name screen-struck girls rarely qualify. Pushing against the erasure of female labor in early Hollywood, Janet Staiger, Shelley Stamp, Karen Ward Mahar, Amelie Hastie, Mark Garrett Cooper, Hilary Halllett, and Richard Abel, among many others, have shed light on how women helped implement a lucrative star system as directors, producers, screenwriters, columnists, patrons, and players. However, with their credits systemically unpreserved, female legacies of film authorship and agency continue to flirt with oblivion.

Silence constitutes an invisible form of violence since it is difficult to mount a historical argument in the void of material evidence. Digital preservation has greatly contributed to the expedient diversification and accessibility of media history. Projects such as the Media History Digital Library, Lantern, Women Film Pioneers Project, and Early African American Film are research-based, non-profit databases that offer open access to (mostly English-language) productions, periodicals, and biographies of workers from the silent and sound eras, spotlighting women and people of color who have not received sufficient attention in scholarly and popular debate. Leveraging archival data to increase public awareness of diverse media histories, these databases are extraordinarily useful, particularly to instructors and students.

Nonetheless, knowledge of early female moviegoing remains circumscribed to secondhand reports found in the periodical press and the mem-

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oirs of film personalities, resources framed by commercial intent. That intent drives content, which drives exclusion through copyediting bias, market research, and consumer expectations. Black and queer people, for example, are seldom identified in these industry-sanctioned sources. Though undoubtedly part of the heterogeneous connective tissue comprising early US audiences, their first-person responses have not been documented, safeguarded, or highlighted in the official record established by movie fan magazines, trade papers, production files, and star autobiographies. Therefore, access to archival sources—even when eased by large-scale, free, searchable, and themed online databases like those mentioned above—provides only partial insight into the histories that can be told. Others exist in the margins, in the blind spots, in the weeds, necessitating alternative archives and alternative historiographies to come to the fore.⁵

Following Jacques Derrida, this dossier conceives of “the archive” as an unstable, promiscuous, and plural construction that benefits from being expanded along the intersectional lines of gender, race, class, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality.⁶ Concerned with diversifying the ways we think and write about media histories, the five scholars showcased here introduce overlooked archives, artifacts, and users to help us grapple with questions of media access, knowledge, and marginality, the stories we tell and those that slip away.

In her contribution to the extensions of the early cinema archive through the examination of toys and early animation, Meredith Bak tracks the intersections of childhood, material culture, and historiography. She proposes that toys found in the archival collections of the Philadelphia History Museum and the Library Company of Philadelphia connect nineteenth-century optical devices with early-twentieth-century screen culture. Bak not only positions these playthings within municipal archives but also contends that toys’ centrality within early animation reveals material culture study to be an underutilized avenue of exploration in film history.

Elana Levine considers the archive for US daytime soap opera, beginning with the transition of the genre from radio to television in the late 1940s and early 1950s and carrying through to the present. She surveys the competing forces at work in the archiving of this genre’s programs and texts, as well as its production and reception histories. It is only possible to historicize the soap opera, Levine argues, thanks to user-generated “alternative archives” that are dubiously positioned vis-à-vis intellectual property law and cultural legitimacy, circulated both privately and online.

Engaging the history of celebrity magazines in the twenty-first century, specifically *Us Weekly*, Erin Meyers probes the historiographic challenges posed by gossip cultures. Considered “trash” and “fluff,” most university libraries do not subscribe to or preserve gossip magazines, while online


databases often hold spotty or text-only archives, completely disregarding the importance of visual images to these media texts. To reclaim a valid space in media cultural history for these feminized and ephemeral texts, Meyers turns to the Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University, one of the few places that maintains a nearly full print archive of Us Weekly.

Embracing an institutional analysis that takes archives as objects of study rather than as repositories to be mined for materials, Rielle Navitski charts the early history of cinémathèques in Latin America, the first region where such organizations took hold after originating in Europe and the United States. Fostered by European archivists, particularly Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque française, these early Latin American archives promised to fulfill the global ambitions of the film preservation movement coordinated by the Fédération internationale des archives du film (International Federation of Film Archives, FIAF) yet were persistently marginalized by FIAF’s policies even as they themselves often promoted a Eurocentric (rather than nationalistic or politicized) notion of film heritage.

Similarly concerned with questioning the limits of so-called traditional archives, Sukhai Rawlins looks at the image-sharing digital app Instagram to assert the importance of Black erotic subjectivity in archival production. Surveying images generated by Black queer users, Rawlins proposes that Instagram proffers an ephemeral site for alternative Black self-fashioning, while interrogating the structural violences intrinsic to minority self-documenting in for-profit social media platforms.

When this In Focus was first conceived in 2018, the current events besieg ing the global stage did not register as a possibility. If issues of diversity, scarcity, and impermanence guided the initial drive to gather contributions engaging media archives that strained naturalized notions of official history, institutional knowledge, material proof, and white patriarchy, the happen ings of 2020 brought into relief that history is a living process of storytelling, both plastic and fragile, urging all hands on deck.

In material culture research, touch has always been hazardous. For many decades, archivists and museum curators have protected objects from being overhandled, the acids in human skin corroding film, paper, fabric. However, in a year dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic, touch is not just regulated—it is impossible. Most physical sources are barred to media researchers, as brick-and-mortar collections shut down indefinitely to avoid becoming sites of contagion. Many of the scholars featured in this dossier would find their work unfeasible now due to unsafe travel conditions and inaccessible archival holdings. The internet, a wellspring of immediate connectivity and informational accessibility, proves of little help; you cannot always find that one unaired soap episode, rare turn-of-the-century toy, or early film sequence online, not unless someone already did the archival legwork for you. And even then, your findings are filtered by someone else’s judgment (what to upload, what to transfer, what to leave out), your media historiography potentially shaped by a third party’s heuristics. The lack of experiential consultation thus forestalls discoveries that three-dimensional and in situ engagement may more reliably supply. That is not to suggest that history will
become an undisputed, fixed narrative if one gets close enough to primary sources. Rather, the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown a stark light on issues of accessibility, vulnerability, and inequality, as much as it put pressure on how we, as global citizens and individual researchers, relate to immediacy, intimacy, and endurance—things we demand of the things we conserve and retrieve from those we discard.

The scrapbook I am touching now is only on hand because I own it. Purchased sight unseen from an online auction, Fulton’s one-of-a-kind paper repository survives as part of my collection of fan-made scrapbooks. That same personal archive foregrounds my forthcoming book on moviegoing girls and queer fan reception in early Hollywood. To discuss accessibility and survival of primary sources hence begets a discussion of privilege and vulnerability. Handling items like Fulton’s scrapbook is always a privilege, but more so during a global pandemic, when lengthy shutdowns prevent direct contact with archival holdings. Personalized access remains dangerous though—the moisture in my house can decay alum pulp at an accelerated rate, and my eyes, like my feminist approach to media history, are bent to my biases. It is a conundrum familiar to many collectors: in granting objects survival, private ownership forecloses public access.

Still, as Saidiya Hartman heeds in her excavation of young Black women in the early-twentieth-century United States, experiences lives outside. Experiences lived outside white heterosexist supremacy tend to persevere in fringe sites, such as family albums, amateur snapshots, tabloids, thrift stores, the miscellaneous tag in institutional collections. Incomplete, scattered, and at times anonymous, materials from marginalized people exemplify an alternative media archive that demands of historiographers an openness to conjectural storytelling, a zeal for the ephemeral, the vulnerable, the affective. To some, amassing private collections becomes an act of stewardship then, of delayed reparation and sheltering, heritage and advocacy. In my work I argue that, together with biographic data culled from public records, personal fan documents should integrate the toolkit media historians employ to broaden understandings of film production, exhibition, reception, and preservation. I term the first-person artifacts crafted by young female moviegoers “alternative archives” because, with few exceptions, they have not been included in silent film scholarship. But to acknowledge that “alternative” is a qualifier born of subjective vantage points is essential, for it means accepting the fluidity of its scope as the precariousness of its utility.

The recent (re)turn to materiality further evidences that an anxiety of disappearance sits at the core of media studies, prompting researchers to devise historiographical methods grounded on the hardware of moviemaking: the film projector, the reel, the stock. Seemingly standardized, these

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8 Examples include Hastie’s *Cupboards of Curiosity* and Abel’s *Menus for Movieland* surveying, respectively, a silent actress’s personal collection of film ephemera and a girl fan’s movie scrapbooks from the 1910s.

9 See Ben Singer, “Early Home Cinema and the Edison Home Projecting Kinetoscope,” *Film History* 2, no. 1 (1988): 37–69; Heather Heckman, “Burn after Viewing, or, Fire...
infrastructural objects invite investigations that sidestep overreliance on screen representation or star texts, dilating conversations about which working parts of moviemaking are allowed to be seen and which have been deliberately concealed. Genevieve Yue’s work on the testing image of the “China Girl,” for instance, proposes that the mechanics of film production cannot be separated from “a gendered logic of materiality,” the disposability of non-male and nonwhite bodies long underlining US cinema’s structural functionality. To find physical remnants of those deemed expendable can fuel an overvaluing of the material then. Yet to recognize that media infrastructures, like institutions, are not immune to subjectivity is halfway to accept that, as a field, media historiography deals in the agita of being human: in its corpus, the uneasiness of death, loss, and oblivion constantly faces off with the desire to connect, to preserve, to remember.

In the end, what makes media historiography messy—both rich and slippery—is less the process of academic discovery and more the inevitable realization that its substratum is fertilized by systemic acts of violence. The histories we tell are only as illuminating as the information we have, and herein lies the anxiety of media history: its incompleteness is indivisible from cruelty, being that engineered by white patriarchy or doled out by natural disaster.

In the following essays, longing for alternative archival knowledge contends with the elusiveness of memory, touch, and access. Bak, Levine, and Meyers all ponder the challenges and rewards of getting your hands on an antique plaything, an unaired TV script, a decades-old magazine. Likewise, Navitski and Rawlins address archives as aspirational sites where discrete acts of acquisition and preservation play central roles. Digital or physical, vernacular or institutional, fleeting or durable, the media archives these scholars discuss derive force from the promise of providing Black and Latin American people with the means to curate their own cultural heritages and audiovisual self-presentations. Complications arise, Navitski and Rawlins claim, when cumulative platforms or institutions fall out of touch with the equitable principles they purported to promote.

A movie scrapbook compiled by a well-off white girl who lived in Los Angeles during the Great War may have seemed nugatory once. But in 2021,
faced with a pandemic that echoes the one Eleanor Fulton witnessed in her youth, and confronted with limited access to artifacts, people, and places, this scrapbook extends comfort by suggesting that not all that is human is so easily lost. Individual objects, passions, and accomplishments can weather the hardships of linear time and endure beyond their historical moment; they can survive even when institutional support is not readily granted. Fulton’s movie scrapbook, like the essays convened here, encourage media researchers to draw the negative space around the extant, to use what survives to prospect what is missing, to locate resources that flesh out marginalized loss and experience. It also encourages us to engender methods that help challenge the prejudiced value judgments that allow certain media objects, and by extension their creators and consumers, to be treated as unimportant, lowbrow, dispensable, and thus unworthy of an afterlife beyond the era in which they were made.

Many thanks to Erin Meyers for inviting me to be part of “Hidden Histories: Researching Feminized and Delegitimated Media,” a roundtable at the 2019 Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference that sparked the creation of this dossier. Warm acknowledgment of all the labor the JCMS team dedicated to this dossier, especially Caetlin Benson-Allott.

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