Television history is more dependent on alternative archives than is film history. A range of factors place TV outside the parameters of conventional archival practice. The live broadcast of television in its early years and the ongoing liveness of some forms of TV have posed a technological challenge to the institutionalized archiving of programs, as have changing formats of videotape and the disintegration of tape itself. The domestic reception of TV, along with its commercial funding structure in many parts of the world, has also ranked television low in cultural hierarchies, and thereby low in priorities of preservation. The dismissal of most television for much of its history as inartistic, or as pandering to a “lowest common denominator,” has led many to devalue TV programs as historical artifacts and as objects of critical analysis.

One of the clearest cases of this conventional archival neglect is the US daytime television soap opera. Soap operas transitioned to US television from radio in the early 1950s, broadcast daily episodes live into the early 1960s, and were subsequently shot on (sequential formats of) videotape. To many, the soap opera epitomizes the characterization of television as commercial, domestic, and unartful. As a result, few involved in the production, distribution, or preservation of television have found soap opera to be an object worthy of or viable for preservation. This situation is compounded by the voluminousness of soap opera texts—many daytime serials air daily for decades—as well as soaps’ associations with women and other marginalized audiences such as children, the elderly, and the unemployed, who are assumed to be home during the day with “nothing better to do.” The historiography of the soap opera may seem impossible given these constraints.

My own research has taught me that soap opera is an object with a rich and rewarding history but one that necessitates alternative approaches to the study of moving images and to archival resources. It also requires time and money, which enable access to travel, research assistance, consumer goods, and digital technologies. Despite such costs, my experience convinces me of the crucial need to embrace alternative archives and alternative research practices more broadly. This is especially urgent for the study of marginalized cultural forms, whether marginalized by medium, by funding structure, by social positioning, or by cultural status. In this essay, I focus on these alternative practices while keeping in mind the temporal and economic resources that facilitate them. I will first discuss alternative ways to approach conventional, institutionalized archives, by which I mean what questions to bring to such archives, what data to seek out, and how best to make the formal archival structure serve an inquiry into that which the archive may not highly value. I will then turn to a discussion of alternative archives, emphasizing the ways that informal, “underground,” or unconventional sources can and should feed our research. While my examples come from the history of US daytime TV soap opera, they inform other histories, especially those of television or other devalued media and those of cultural forms associated with women and other marginalized groups. In this way, my work is in dialogue with Sukhai Rawlins’s essay in this dossier, which examines the alternative archive of Instagram as a repository of Black and queer experience.

Key to alternative uses of conventional institutional archives are strategies for mining their collections in ways suited to your project. As with any research endeavor, the questions we bring shape our findings. Marginalized media forms, or attention to marginalized identities and experiences within more legitimated media, may be fruitfully approached with multi-perspectival questions. By this, I mean that scholars might approach conventional moving image archives, manuscript archives, and published materials with questions that address various aspects of their cultural circulation, attending not only to textual features of audiovisual style but also to narrative and character. Such inquiries also benefit from attention to production practices and contexts. A range of forces may shape media production: the experiences of individuals, the structures and economics of institutions, the affordances and limitations of technology, and tensions within the broader society. Our research benefits from insights into all of these forces, many of which are visible in the correspondence, memoranda, and other documents available in the manuscript collections of creators, both individual and corporate. The kind of multi-pronged, cultural studies approach I am advocating also invites attention to practices, affects, and contexts of reception or use. Manuscript archives as well as published materials such as fan magazines and newsletters can point us toward patterns and inconsistencies in these spaces.

Even if we have access to materials that have been collected by conventional archives, we need particular strategies in selecting what we attend to.

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In my experience, there are two conventional archives with substantial collections of television programming: the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Film and Television Archive and the Paley Center for Media in New York City. While there are other archives with some television materials, the patchy history of TV preservation in the United States made these two sites particularly significant for my history of the daytime soap opera. The limited kinescopes of episodes from the live broadcast era meant that I was able to watch all of the materials each archive holds from the 1950s. But the spotty selections of such material posed its own challenges, given the serialized storytelling of soaps. I relied on alternative archives to contextualize what I was seeing, such as fan-targeted books like *The Soap Opera Encyclopedia*, which includes summaries of characters and major plotlines, and online message boards where fans reminisce about the soaps’ pasts.2

The UCLA Film and Television Archive holds a fair number of episodes of soaps from the early videotape era of the 1960s and 1970s, including most episodes of the soap *General Hospital* (ABC, 1963–present) from its debut through the program’s first eight years. Like other programs from this period, these episodes are preserved on defunct tape formats and must be transferred to DVD or another, digital format for viewing. Some holdings are too fragile even for that, leaving them unviewable; additionally, the archive has limited funds for the transfer process. My solution to this challenge was to request transfers of episodes in weeklong increments, so as to be able to see how stories progressed sequentially. I selected weeks primarily from ratings “sweeps” months, when network-era series typically peaked their major stories. These transfers offered some access to viewers’ experience of these programs as they originally aired. My archival viewing practices also included attending to contextual materials, such as commercials, announcer voice-overs, and credits, to help me further understand the environment within which the episodes were originally produced and viewed.

Even though the official moving image archive for soaps is somewhat sparse, the conventional manuscript archive is rich, as many writers, some directors, and some sponsors or networks have left collections. These manuscript collections appear in a wide array of archives, often in collected papers of individual creative workers, and occasionally in those associated with organizations such as Procter & Gamble. 3 There are many more manuscript collections available than there are moving image collections. In addition to the memos and correspondence that provide insight into production practices, these collections also include a large number of scripts. As with soap episodes more broadly, it would be impossible to read all of the scripts available for the decades of episodes of multiple soaps. Instead, I used these script collections strategically, zeroing in on particular story lines and particular plot

3 While these manuscript and script collections are scattered across many archives, a few places with multiple collections each are the Wisconsin Historical Society and the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming, UCLA, Northwestern University, and the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania also have key materials.
moments when I did not have access to actual episodes. In these cases, I knew in advance the general parameters of the plots (usually from the alternative archives of fan-targeted books, online fan discussions, or plot summaries in fan magazines) and turned to the scripts to see how events played out. In so doing, I was able to make discoveries such as exactly how Erica Kane Martin advocated for her abortion on *All My Children* (ABC, 1970–2011; The Online Network, 2013) in 1971 or how Ellen Lowell Stewart reunited with her adult son in the late 1960s on *As the World Turns* (CBS, 1956–2010) as he learned why she had given him up for adoption as a baby. Because many of these stories played out over months, I learned to scan the cover pages of scripts for the characters appearing in that episode to know if it warranted my attention, helping me to review many scripts quickly.

Manuscript collections can also be mined for evidence of audience reactions. The papers of soap writers often include letters from viewers as well as fan mail reports that tally letters received and offer select quotes. Erin Meyers’s entry in this In Focus details the specific challenges to accessing the popular magazine *Us Weekly*; her journey is similar to mine in seeking out soap opera fan magazines as another source for uncovering audience experience. I was able to pair the traces of audience in manuscript archives with letters to the editor and opinion pieces in fan magazines such as *Soap Opera Digest* and *Daytime TV*. Like *Us Weekly*, these magazines can be found only in a handful of US libraries, but in accessing them, I was able to trace responses to some stories and trends, expanding the picture I could offer by attending to how audiences engaged with the programs amid particular industrial and social contexts.4 This exploration of fan perspectives and practices may not be the kind of inquiry typically posed to institutionalized archives, which is why it is crucial to ask alternative questions of such spaces.

While alternative approaches to conventional archives are essential, my research also relied upon informal, unconventional archives. My moving image archive depended heavily upon my personal collection and those of fan networks. As a soap fan since the early 1980s, and as a scholar who’s been interested in studying soap opera since the mid-1990s, I have been recording broadcasts off-air—first to videotape, later to DVD, and then to digital files—and saving notable soap episodes for decades. That my 2010s self was able to rely on episodes I archived in the 1990s felt both remarkable and inevitable. While some fans have shared past soap episodes and “story edits” (compilations of scenes that make up a given story line) online via user-generated platforms such as YouTube, these are sometimes flagged as copyright violations and removed. The more valuable fan archiving thereby takes place off-line, in the trading of personal collections between fans. While some soap fan-archivists may be engaging in digital file-sharing, I typically encountered fans making DVD copies of episodes or story edits and sharing these physical copies, usually by mail.

4 The only libraries where I have found substantial collections of soap opera fan magazines are at Michigan State University and Bowling Green State University. The US Library of Congress has a small selection of some publications.
"Watergate" has been on all week. John Dean is testifying. I think he's cute. So are Senators Howard Baker and Edward Listerly. The other senators are Sam Ervin, Daniel Inouye, Herman Talmadge, Joseph Montoya, and Lowell Weicker. It was getting kind of interesting lately. It was boring before. Dean says Nixon knew about the cover-up. Dean's wife is very pretty.
These collections normally cover the 1980s on—the home videotaping era—and are the only way I have found to track continuing episodes of a soap over weeks, months, or years. No institutional archive holds such collections, and, for the most part, soap operas have not had commercial VHS or DVD releases or syndicated reruns.

Fan archivists were also crucial to my research in terms of their stores of knowledge about soap history. Fan blogs and message boards scattered, and sometimes abandoned, across the internet often helped me to piece together the parameters of a soap plot and sometimes to pinpoint exact dates for narrative events, as some fan-archivists carefully date the episodes or episode summaries they preserve. Much of the digitally accessible fan knowledge covers the era of the World Wide Web, with most information about soap stories covering the 1990s on. Yet some soap fans use blogs and social media to share older information and artifacts; one Twitter user has posted scanned images from her 1970s diary about her adolescent soap viewing, and there are Tumblr blogs and Pinterest boards for cover images and article scans from pre-Internet era magazines (see Figure 3).5 As Meredith A. Bak notes in this dossier of the archival traces of circus figurines, material objects may be rich resources for vestiges of soap opera audience-hood. My research has included objects from fans’ personal collections and online marketplaces, where I have found vintage magazines, publicity photos, and other memorabilia. Given the scant library collections of soap magazines, these sites are important archival tools for a historian like me. Such spaces helped me acquire hard copies of a number of materials that I could then analyze and use as illustrations in my book.

Soap fans’ activism as archivists and collectors challenges assumptions about who the soap opera audience is. For example, despite industrial and cultural assumptions that soap audiences are mostly white, middle-class housewives, I have found many men active in soap preservation practices. Black women, too, are visible in the community not only as fans but also as archivists and collectors, making evident the robust soap opera viewership in African American households. My research into historical soap audiences through the range of sources I have discussed also makes clear that working women, men (gay and straight), people of color, and kids and teens have all participated in soap fandom during various historical periods. Indeed, part of the story of my book Her Stories is that “her stories” are “our stories” and that a wide array of viewers—wider than industry priorities allow—have connected meaningfully with the daytime TV soap opera across its history.

My experience shows me that fans and collectors are the most vital archivists of media that are more valued by audiences than by institutions; their passion and their generosity make research into such subjects possible. Combining alternative archives such as fan magazines and the output of fan archivists with alternative approaches to the conventional archive unlocks historical treasures. Using such strategies has reinforced my commitment to topics that may seem challenging to access but nonetheless

5 For diary entries, see Jane (@jam6242), Twitter, https://twitter.com/jam6242.
help us address pressing questions about creators, texts, and audiences that are otherwise overlooked. Thinking creatively about archives, both those housed in formal institutions and those found in alternative loci, can enable just this sort of endeavor.

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