IN FOCUS

Alternative Archives

160  Introduction, or The Things We Did Not Lose in the Fire
     Diana W. Anselmo

168  Toying with Early Cinema: Media Studies in the Children's Archive
     Meredith A. Bak

174  Alternate Archives in US Daytime TV Soap Opera Historiography
     Elana Levine

181  “Only in Us!”: Celebrity Gossip as Ephemeral Media
     Erin A. Meyers

187  Toward a Global Film Preservation Movement?
     Institutional Histories of Film Archiving in Latin America
     Rielle Navitski

194  Archival Interventions: Instagram and Black Interiority
     Sukhai Rawlins
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.

Traffic 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 Hallett, 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.3 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.4 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-

---


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, safekept, 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 dubious 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 national-
istic 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 regu-
lated—it is impossible. Most physical sources are barred to media research-
ers, 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 historiogra-
phy 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

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.
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 nonmale 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.

Diana W. Anselmo is assistant professor of film and media history at Georgia State University. She has published in JCMS, Journal of Cinema Studies, (formerly Cinema Journal), Screen, Camera Obscura, and Film History, among others, and is the recipient of the 2019 Screen Journal Award. Her book on queer female reception is forthcoming from the University of California Press.
Researchers whose work falls under the multidisciplinary umbrella of childhood studies are accustomed to thinking creatively. “The traces of childhood found in archives and special collections,” Karen Sánchez-Eppler notes, “may tend toward the ephemeral.” Sánchez-Eppler also acknowledges the difficulty of finding the child’s perspective in the archive, pointing out that “[r]ecords of childhood and records made by children have been housed in archives and library special collections all along, although they have usually been classified in a manner that tends to obscure rather than highlight their presence.” Childhood studies has much in common with certain areas of media history. For instance, many scholars of childhood and practitioners of media archaeology contest teleological models of history that conform to a kind of “developmental paradigm,” and researchers in both fields maintain similar orientations to the archive as a repository to be interrogated and reinterpreted for missed perspectives. During the research for my book on nineteenth-century optical toys, I became used to venturing into archival spaces that did not register immediate or obvious connections to cinema

2 Sánchez-Eppler, 221.

and media history. I spent a month at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts—an institution that endeavors to collect “everything printed in what was once British North America before the year 1877.” Yet their outstanding children’s literature collection includes several intricate movable and novelty toy books, which adapted pre-cinematic visual effects and gestured to experiences of spectacle and spectatorship that cinema would further institutionalize.

Optical toys appear in the collections of such institutions as the Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, New York, the Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood in London, and the Cotsen Children’s Library at Princeton University, where they are not typically or primarily regarded as objects of media history but for their relevance to the history of childhood. These objects’ inclusion across such varied collections demonstrates Sánchez-Eppler’s assertion that classificatory systems can conceal some associations just as much as they can illuminate others. Excavating the significance of optical toys as toys required archival encounters that sought these artifacts embedded within the visual and material worlds of childhood rather than within networks of meaning that prioritize the optical effects they produced (which have served as the primary basis for their link to the invention of cinema). Resituating these toys in this way opens up opportunities to view their functions as instruments of perceptual pedagogy, not as oppositional to the pleasure they afforded in play but as closely linked. If evidence of film and media’s longer history is distributed in such diverse archival contexts, interwoven with other narratives, to what other unexpected sources might we turn to trace histories that have remained under-considered? Moreover, can familiar texts in cinema history be reread to point us to previously overlooked forms of evidence?

A new research project on the history of toys that come “to life” brought me to accounts of the origins of stop-motion animation and to a passage in Albert E. Smith’s 1952 memoir, Two Reels and a Crank. Smith recalls making a film called The Humpty Dumpty Circus in 1897 or 1898—shortly after he and James Stuart Blackton founded Vitagraph studios: “Vitagraph made the first stop-motion picture in America, The Humpty Dumpty Circus. I used my little daughter’s set of toy wooden circus performers and animals, whose movable joints enabled us to place them in balanced positions. It was a tedious process inasmuch as movement could be achieved only by photographing separately each change of position.” The film is not extant and may never have been made at all. If the film had been made, Donald Crafton hypothesizes, it was

---

7 Albert E. Smith and Phil A. Koury, Two Reels and a Crank: From Nickelodeon to Picture Palaces (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952), 51.
not until later, between 1902 and 1905. Smith’s claim to have made *The Humpty Dumpty Circus* in 1898 is not widely believed by animation historians (and indeed, it can be disproven). However, his statement also raises an intriguing link between early animation and children’s play culture. This unexplored connection suggests a striking historiographic oversight and is thus an example of the tendency in animation history to disavow the form’s associations with childhood (often through the declaration that animation is more than kids’ stuff). Smith’s recollection that his daughter’s playthings inspired an early animated film presupposes that certain animation techniques were made possible *because of* kids’ stuff. In addition to this association with triviality, toys—like other historical sources referred to in this dossier—are ephemeral, primarily meant to be used during a particular phase of life, then cast aside. Smith’s reference to his daughter’s toys points to an alternate archive by raising the question: “What toys?”

The Humpty Dumpty Circus playset was made by Philadelphia-based toymaker Albert Schoenhut beginning in 1903 (i.e., after the 1898 date in Smith’s memoir) and was a bestseller through the 1920s (Figure 2). The toy line included a wide range of posable figures, such as a ringmaster, clowns, a lion tamer, and acrobats, and a large menagerie of posable animals. Accessories, including a tent, circus ring, chairs, and ladders, helped to set the scene. Expansion sets included characters such as Max and Moritz and Teddy Roosevelt in Africa. Schoenhut’s toys do appear in several early animated titles: there is a brief cameo in Vitagraph’s own *The Haunted Hotel* (J. Stuart Blackton, 1907) as well as an extended sequence in Arthur Melbourne-Cooper’s *Dreams of Toyland* (1908). These cinematic appearances indicate that although Smith’s dating was inaccurate, the link he draws between Schoenhut’s toys and early animation is verifiable.

The connection between animation history and Schoenhut’s toys yields two related insights concerning possibilities for expanding media studies’ archive. First, as objects relevant to the history of cinema, toys point to collections and sources of knowledge that media historians may not have considered. Hallmarks of American toymaking, Schoenhut’s circus figures are held in museums and widely collected privately. There was an exquisite collection of circus figures at the Philadelphia History Museum, which closed for financial reasons in 2018, and an extensively illustrated forty-eight-page promotional pamphlet at the Library Company of Philadelphia, two institutions that mark the toys’ importance in relation to the city and its innovations. More extensive, intimate knowledge of the Schoenhut figures and their materiality circulates in private collecting communities. As Elana Levine’s contribution to this dossier demonstrates, the enthusiasm and in-depth knowledge of these communities can be of greater aid to researchers.

---

than encounters with similar sources in institutional contexts. Schoenhut’s circus figures are actively sold on auction sites such as eBay at price points ranging from under one hundred to thousands of US dollars (for larger lots or complete sets). The Schoenhut Collectors’ Club is an active organization that holds an annual convention, maintains a comprehensive identification guide to Schoenhut toys (including playthings such as musical instruments and dolls), and publishes a full-color quarterly magazine. I am not a collector myself, yet I may look to the collecting and conservation practices of collectors’ communities for in-depth insights about these objects. For instance, Schoenhut collector Jim Sneed offers “restringing” and “respringing” services to repair the internal armatures of rubber, metal, and string that hold the circus figures’ limbs together—labor that suggests a wealth of knowledge about the figures’ inner workings.¹¹

Such intimate familiarity with these toys’ material attributes—indeed, expertise in how these figures move—may hold vital implications for understanding the role of objects in film and animation history. Only in recent years have scholars begun to rethink the hierarchies that cast as peripheral media’s material cultures (such as licensed merchandise and action figures related to franchises such as *Star Wars* [George Lucas, 1977]).¹² Philipp Dominik Keidl, for instance, argues that action figures themselves might be better understood

---


as forms of media. In contrast to narrative or thematic inspiration, the circus figures’ posability made them suitable for stop-motion production; their material qualities thus informed moving-image aesthetics and technique. The fan and collecting cultures that animate Schoenhut’s historical toy box may thus offer surprising material and conceptual perspectives to contemporary research in areas such as media industries and fandoms.

Second, a discovery that highlights the centrality of toys within early animation points to a new vein of material culture inquiry in film history research more broadly. Research on the Humpty Dumpty Circus sets is a distinct permutation of what Jonathan Gray calls “off-screen studies.” While Gray’s formulation emphasizes the pivotal role of film and television paratexts for promoting and making meaning with media franchises, Schoenhut’s circus figures suggest rich possibilities for researching materials not inspired by media but that have inspired media production. Regarded thus, Schoenhut’s circus figures function similarly to paratexts in that they “condition . . . passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiat[e] or determin[e] the trajectories among” text, audience, and industry. Yet the role of Schoenhut’s figures in early animation is difficult to classify: Are they characters? Are they props? In her critical investigation of one of the falcon statuettes featured in *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), Vivian Sobchack argues that the prop “partially constitutes what we call ‘film history’ [and] it also props up and supports an immaterial yet consequential structure of more general and labile cultural affects, meanings, and functions,” much like the role of Gray’s paratexts.

Similarly, Paul Gansky traces the history of the oversized scissors prop used in a sequence in *Spellbound* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1945), contending that props can, among other things, aid in “a unique historical reconstruction of below-the-line cinematic” labor. Extant Schoenhut circus figures are probably not the actual objects that have appeared onscreen—unlike the Maltese falcon statuette and *Spellbound’s* enormous scissors. Nor do they bear the singularity of other “paracinematic” objects, such as Colleen Moore’s Fairy Castle, which, as Amelie Hastie has demonstrated, serves as a key material component of Moore’s archive and legacy. It is unlikely that we can determine whether any extant Schoenhut figures actually appeared onscreen (in *The Humpty Dumpty Circus* or any other film). They are not Smith’s figures, but for all purposes, they are identical to those used in early animation. In this way, the circus toys reveal how material objects offer new forms of evidentiary utility in film history. In contrast to the scissors in *Spellbound* or one of the statuettes in *The Maltese Falcon*, existing

---

15 Gray, 23.
Schoenhut circus figures are a material inventory of potential actions. They do not necessarily disclose what any individual user did with them (although they could, for instance, in traces such as bite marks). Nevertheless, their physical affordances indicate all the possible ways that historical users may have manipulated them. Identifying onscreen objects beyond basic descriptive details can help researchers speculatively imagine not only the meanings with which the objects may have been invested (such as connections to childhood and play) but also how their associations and material attributes may have informed filmmaking aesthetics and techniques.

Schoenhut’s circus figures demonstrate that archives of media history can be found in unlikely places. In some instances, historical texts such as Albert E. Smith’s apocryphal story also offer clues about where to start looking. This particular case gestures to possibilities for opening up materialist inquiry beyond investigating singular or authentic objects to the study of the mundane, mass produced, or ephemeral. While toys such as pre-cinematic optical devices have historically appeared at the periphery of media history, their under-considered status as ludic objects points to new directions in historiographic work. The Humpty Dumpty Circus reaffirms the rich potentials of embracing considerations of play and playful objects as the practices and materials of media production. Intersections between media studies and related fields such as childhood studies can reveal shared critical commitments, novel methodological insights, and evidence that has been overlooked—or that can be looked at through fresh perspectives.

Meredith A. Bak is assistant professor of childhood studies at Rutgers University–Camden. She is the author of Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture (MIT Press, 2020).

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.

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. 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.
Figure 1. Fourteen-year-old Jane Marsh chronicled her thoughts about both the Watergate hearings and daytime soap operas in the summer of 1973. In her June 28 entry, Marsh describes the “characters” of the hearings in terms similar to her writing about daytime soap opera characters on previous days. Photo by author.
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). 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.

Elana Levine is professor of media, cinema, and digital studies in the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. She is the author of *Her Stories: Daytime Soap Opera and US Television History* (Duke University Press, 2020) and co-author of *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (Routledge, 2012).
“Only in Us!”: Celebrity Gossip as Ephemeral Media

The field of celebrity studies is grounded in the notion that studying celebrity offers insight into discursive constructions of the self and identity within a particular cultural moment. This idea of “what it is to be human in contemporary society” emerges from the tensions between the public and private selves of stars as constructed and circulated through media. Investigating the cultural power of celebrity, then, necessarily entails a study of how celebrities are represented and their images circulated in mass media at a specific historical moment. In short, understanding celebrity culture means understanding media cultures, and vice versa.

New forms of media and celebrity have appeared throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and nuanced investigations of the complex relationships between celebrity, media, and audiences have helped establish the field as a legitimate area of cultural inquiry. Textual analyses of tabloids, such as Su Holmes’s and Rebecca Feasey’s keen analyses of British celebrity glossy heat; examinations of narratives on celebrity gossip blogs by Kirsty Fairclough and me; and more recent explorations of the rise of social media celebrity by Anne Jerslev and Susie Khamis, Lawrence Ang, and Raymond Welling all focus on the reciprocal relationships between celebrity and media cultures in shaping and reinforcing discourses of identity and authenticity in contemporary culture. Other studies highlight the myriad and complex


ways in which audiences engage with and share celebrity gossip media in their everyday lives. Though some cultural critics continue to bemoan the pervasive influence of celebrity content across media, conducting scholarly research into the role of media within celebrity culture presents unique challenges. Celebrity media industries and cultures are largely ephemeral and ahistorical, with gossip media industries, in particular, priming audiences to value the latest dish or the newest trend over any engagement with the past. Because celebrity culture seems to be everywhere, accessing and archiving even very recent celebrity culture is beset by multiple roadblocks rooted in its transitory nature. This short piece details my experience seeking archives of celebrity media texts that are both industrially and culturally ephemeral in order to document and analyze the discursive construction of social meaning through celebrity images.

My recent book, *Extraordinarily Ordinary: “Us Weekly” and the Rise of Reality Television Celebrity*, aims, in part, to recognize the value of celebrity gossip media for understanding celebrity culture. It traces the role of American celebrity gossip weeklies, specifically industry-leader *Us Weekly*, in the transformation of reality television participants into celebrities through coverage of their private and public lives. It frames this transformation as a key shift within celebrity culture toward ordinariness as the core of fame. In the early twenty-first century, *Us Weekly* dominated the American celebrity weekly market, finding economic and cultural success even as the wider print media industry was in decline. Under the editorial leadership of Bonnie Fuller and later Janice Min, *Us Weekly* set the tone for the “girly template [of] bubbly pastels . . . embroidered with lots of over narration about stars’ foibles and mortality” that was widely copied across the genre and remains standard today. Heavily reliant on images, particularly paparazzi photographs, *Us Weekly* highlights the “feminine” concerns of romance, family, beauty, and fashion in ways that connect the glamorous world of celebrity to readers’ everyday lives and concerns. Even the name of the magazine speaks to this imaginary community between stars and readers, connecting “us” to the stars through weekly glimpses of their personal lives. Cover stories, frequently hyped as “Only in *Us*,” promise an exclusive inside look at the private side of stars rather than stories about their professional endeavors. A hallmark of this

---


focus on lifestyle over talent is *Us Weekly*'s regular (and much copied across the industry) paparazzi photo-based feature titled “Stars—They’re just like US!” This weekly feature depicts stars engaged in the often banal activities of daily life, reassuring readers that stars, despite their glamorous clothes and lifestyle, are actually “just like us.” To fill pages and stake its claim to greater exclusive access to celebrity culture, *Us Weekly* inserted reality television participants into these feminized lifestyle narratives beginning in the early twenty-first century. In the process, the magazine helped expand celebrity culture to include those who are famous for just being themselves, or “like us.” The goal of my study was to unpack this coverage of reality television celebrities, not simply in terms of their increased presence in the magazine but in order to ask how the fame of these “ordinary” individuals reinforced broader norms of identity in contemporary society. A close examination of the physical magazines from the early 2000s was thus a necessary component of my research, but the challenge of accessing even these fairly recent texts was informed by the ephemeral status of celebrity culture and gossip media.

As other contributors to this dossier have asserted, the goal of an archive is not simply to preserve texts as objects but to present those objects as a means to understand wider practices of media production and consumption. In the case of celebrity gossip, the lack of gossip media archives speaks to larger problems of studying celebrity culture. First, despite a broad subfield of research into its social significance, celebrity culture is often decried in both popular and academic circles as fluff and distraction, with celebrity gossip, in particular, dismissed as the province of frivolous feminine cultures. Celebrity-watching audiences themselves frequently frame their engagement as a guilty pleasure, reinforcing the notion that celebrity doesn’t matter beyond entertainment. As Andrea McDonnell reports in her study of readers of celebrity gossip magazines, women readers “often seek out the magazines when they appear in public places, such as the staff lounge, the doctor’s office, or the nail salon; they also pass copies through friends.”

Readers value the ability to easily pick up and put down gossip magazines, using them to pass the time or connect with others by discussing the latest celebrity sagas. These magazines are not seen as permanent texts, even by those who read them. Although celebrity gossip may be ephemeral, the in-the-moment experience of engaging with a gossip magazine is nonetheless decidedly material. While my project was not an audience study, access to a print archive remained a central research goal, as it would enable me to engage in the act of flipping through the magazines, which was a central part of the experience of reading celebrity gossip during the time frame covered by my study. More importantly, physical access would offer me a more complete view of how the magazine framed celebrity culture at a moment when *Us Weekly* not only defined the print gossip market but also had a profound influence on the style and form of the burgeoning digital gossip media industry.

Given *Us Weekly*'s ephemeral status, finding back issues of the physical magazine presented a significant challenge. Few university libraries subscribe

---

7  Meyers, *Extraordinarily Ordinary*. 
to celebrity gossip magazines and even fewer archive them. My home library at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, does not even include this title in its current popular magazine holdings and has no access, either physical or digital, to back issues. The University of Michigan, a large research institution nearby, subscribes to *Us Weekly* for its current popular magazine holdings but typically does not archive back issues for more than two years. Alex, the University of Michigan research librarian I spoke to during early phases of my project, said this title often “walks away” from the library while in the current popular media collection, which makes it impossible to archive.\(^8\) That copies of *Us Weekly* disappear from the library could suggest that celebrity media has a strong resonance with the university’s readers, driving some to “walk away” with issues that detail their favorite stars. However, given that celebrity gossip is devalued “as having low culture value,” such theft could also be motivated by a desire to hide one’s interest in celebrity culture.\(^9\) Sofia Johansson’s study of gossip readers notes that many readers, both male and female, internalize the dominant perspectives on celebrity gossip as “pointless” and a “guilty pleasure” that one should not admit to enjoying.\(^10\) Thus, even those who find pleasure in these magazines may feel a need to hide their interest by secreting these titles out of the public space of the library.

However, I argue such theft is more likely motivated by the community aspect inherent to celebrity gossip, with readers seeing celebrity magazines, like celebrity gossip itself, as something to share with others. In her study of tabloid readers at a museum in suburban New York, McDonnell points to the communal reading sessions that took place in the staff lounge and other common areas of the museum as a way for the women to connect with one another, passing the magazine around or sharing specific stories in order to foster group ties.\(^11\) Similarly, library patrons may “walk away” with gossip magazines because they see the physical magazine as a conduit to a social activity rather than a permanent object for preservation. Whatever the reason, lack of institutional permanence made it challenging to assemble a complete physical archive. Interestingly, the University of Michigan does maintain online access to an archive of *Us Weekly* dating back to 2000, but this digital archive is text only. Given the primacy of images to the magazine’s style and its ideological framing of celebrity, an online archive of text articles only offers a very partial impression of its coverage of celebrities.

The celebrity media industry also does not consider celebrity gossip magazines to be worthy of preservation, which is not particularly surprising given the genre’s focus on current trends and gossip. Since Wenner Media purchased the general entertainment magazine *Us* in 1985 and then relaunched it as *Us Weekly* for the celebrity gossip market in 1999, it has been through multiple corporate owners, including the Walt Disney Company (which owned a majority stake from 2001 to 2006) and American Media Inc. (which purchased the title in 2017). None of these corporate entities maintains a

\(^8\) Alex, personal interview, June 19, 2018.

\(^9\) Johansson, “‘Sometimes You Wanna Hate Celebrities,’” 348.

\(^10\) Johansson, 348.

publicly accessible archive of the magazine, even for their years of ownership. Savvy internet searches can turn up a few archived articles from the *Us Weekly*'s online portal, but, crucially, these are typically not the same articles that appeared in the magazine. Wenner Media launched the website in 2006 at a moment when the magazine industry was threatened by the increasing popularity of digital gossip forums, such as celebrity gossip blogs. However, the portal generally served to lure readers back to the print magazine by offering teaser articles or bonus content rather than a complete digital reproduction of the magazine. Digital media research is itself beset by multiple material and methodological challenges of archiving, including the issue of how to wade through the overwhelming (and ever increasing) amount of digital media that exists and the fragility of “digital content [that] is so prone to disappearance and loss” due to changing technological affordances and modes of social engagement. Thus, I argue, access to print versions of celebrity weeklies remain an important point of entry into the symbolic power of celebrity during this historical moment and beyond. That is, while celebrity gossip has gone digital in many ways, *Us Weekly*'s initial hesitant entrance into digital gossip spaces reaffirms that print gossip remains a powerful but ephemeral force within celebrity culture.

Additionally, the idea of creating alternative archives drawn from fans’ personal collections was not a viable option for my project. Elsewhere in this dossier, Elana Levine and Meredith A. Bak discuss how soap fan-archivists’ VHS and digital recordings and private toy collections, respectively, facilitated their research. While fans of a particular star may collect media devoted to that star’s image, I found no clear networks of fans collecting a specific gossip magazine title. Even my own personal archive of gossip magazine back issues from the early 2000s were centered around a particular star (Britney Spears) and cut across titles rather than offering a deep back catalog of *Us Weekly* that would support this particular project.

Fortunately, the popular culture periodicals archive at the Ray & Pat Browne Popular Culture Library at Bowling Green State University in Ohio houses an almost complete archive of *Us Weekly* beginning from March 27, 2000, which was just after Wenner Media’s relaunch of the title as a celebrity weekly. According to the BGSU library catalog, the archive is missing several individual issues and one entire volume of archived issues. These issues may have also “walked away,” again pointing to the challenges of archiving popular media, but nevertheless this collection is the most complete print archive of *Us Weekly* available to researchers. The Browne Popular Culture Library does archive other celebrity weeklies, namely *Star* and *In Touch Weekly*, but these archives are much less complete. That *Us Weekly* was chosen, among all possible celebrity gossip weekly titles, to be more fully archived speaks to the magazine’s centrality within contemporary celebrity and media cultures and the library’s goals of legitimizing and documenting those cultures. Unprecedented access to a print archive of *Us Weekly* enabled me to trace changes

---


over time and offer a more complete picture of how the coverage of reality celebrities in *Us Weekly* served its industrial and economic goals as well as disrupted traditional conceptions of stardom. Such analyses are critical to unpacking the cultural resonance of celebrity as a marker of social identity within a particular historical moment as well as how such framings continue to reverberate in current celebrity culture.

**Erin A. Meyers** is associate professor of communication at Oakland University. She is the author of *Extraordinarily Ordinary: “Us Weekly” and the Rise of Reality Television Celebrity* (Rutgers University Press, 2020) and *Dishing Dirt in the Digital Age: Celebrity Gossip Blogs and Participatory Culture* (Peter Lang, 2013).
Upon its founding in 1938, the world’s oldest organization dedicated to audiovisual preservation announced its global ambitions in its choice of name, the Fédération internationale des archives du film (International Federation of Film Archives, FIAF). Yet only European and US institutions participated in its creation, namely the United Kingdom’s National Film Library (now the British Film Institute), the Cinémathèque française, Germany’s Reichsfilmarchiv (shuttered in 1945), and the Film Library of New York’s Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). US and European members still dominate FIAF’s ranks today despite initiatives targeting Global South archives, including its School on Wheels, which traveled to several locations in Africa and Latin America between 2002 and 2015, and the editions of the Film Preservation and Restoration Workshop held in Mumbai, Pune, Chennai, Buenos Aires, and Mexico City between 2015 and 2020.1 As of 2020, under a third of


FIAF’s members and associates were based in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Middle East. This essay makes the case that media scholars must attend to both the structural inequalities and the mutually beneficial exchanges that mark the global history of the film preservation movement—a history that has long been framed in Euro-American terms—in order to understand their reverberations in the present.

Long-standing global imbalances within the archiving movement fuel regional disparities in preservation, compounding social and environmental factors. These include climate (heat and humidity accelerate the deterioration of film emulsion and magnetic media such as videotape) as well as periodic institutional crises due to financial precarity and political shifts. As I was drafting this text in summer 2020, Latin America’s largest audiovisual archive, the Cinemateca Brasileira, teetered on the brink of closure. The archive had yet to receive any of its yearly budget due to the federal government’s abrupt termination of its contract with the nonprofit charged with administering the Cinemateca, the Associação de Comunicação Educativa Roquette Pinto (ACERP). In August, the Brazilian government took possession of the Cinemateca’s facilities, symbolically confiscating the keys in the presence of federal police. Shortly thereafter, the archive’s forty-one remaining staff members were summarily dismissed. ACERP never received the funds for their wages—they had gone unpaid since early April—and it seemed clear no agreement would be reached. While the government announced it would award a temporary contract to the Sociedade Amigos da Cinemateca (Society of Friends of the Cinémathèque) to administer the archive in December 2020, at this essay’s press time the contract was still unsigned and the Cinemateca remained closed. Unmistakably a manifestation of the right-wing Bolsonaro administration’s onslaught on the cultural sector, which included dissolving the Ministry of Culture and freezing state subsidies for Brazilian film production, the Cinemateca’s state of emergency was partly due to decades of inadequate financial support and precarious infrastructure, which contributed to the nitrate fires that struck the archive in 1957, 1969, 1982, and 2016.

Considering how earlier moments inform these contemporary dilemmas, I identify the archives that emerged in post–World War II Latin America as a key site for examining the successes and limitations of the film preservation movement’s internationalization, given that Latin American institutions were the first outside the United States and Europe to participate in the movement’s expansion. Over a dozen cinémathèques were founded in the region between 1945 and 1965, typically through close contact with FIAF and with the organization’s secretary-general, Henri Langlois of the Cinémathèque française, in particular. In addition to shedding light on long-standing disparities within the film preservation movement, attending to this institutional history can help us incorporate the values and practices of working archivists into academic discourse on “the archive.” Although they have

offered important correctives to approaches that treat archives as neutral repositories, media scholars often give short shrift to the theory and practice of professionals in the field, instead favoring sweeping declarations about archival configurations of knowledge and power.

My research takes film archives’ internal documents as points of departure for critical reflection on the institutions themselves. I explore the ideals of early Latin American film archivists, their adaptation of preservation methods in challenging conditions, and the role of transnational connections in shaping both the organizational models and the everyday practices of cinémathèques in the region. The records of these archives’ relations with FIAF are dispersed across two continents, most notably at FIAF’s own archives, the Cinemateca Uruguaya, and the Cinemateca Brasileira. In recent years, FIAF has begun to catalog its files, making some available online, and opened its headquarters in Brussels to researchers. My materials tend toward the mundane and even bureaucratic, including conference proceedings, meeting notes, yearly reports, and correspondence. These documents shed light on archives’ interior workings, their contacts with their counterparts, and their negotiations with stakeholders ranging from local and national authorities to supranational organizations such as FIAF and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. My sources document a largely untold history of the film preservation movement beyond its Euro-American manifestations.

The rapid postwar emergence of Latin American cinémathèques, like the history of Global South archives more broadly, has received minimal attention from English-language scholars since early histories of film preservation were written in the 1990s, though two monographs in preparation, Juana Suárez’s Audiovisual Moving Image Archives, Cultural History and the Digital Turn in Latin America and Bliss Cua Lim’s The Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema, promise to partially address these gaps in the field. A handful of scholarly books on individual cinémathèques have also appeared in Spanish and Portuguese. Inasmuch as Euro-American discourse on film preservation has addressed Latin American institutions at all, they are typically framed in terms of radical otherness. Most notably, Janet Ceja Alcalá argues that film archiving in the region was a highly politicized practice that drew its inspiration from the leftist New Latin American Cinema, an interpretation that largely holds true for the period she examines—the late 1960s and 1970s—but not for the nearly two decades of archival efforts that preceded it. Focusing on Guatemala’s Cinemateca Universitaria Enrique Torres, Caroline Frick offers a more nuanced

take that emphasizes Latin American archives’ historical and present-day commitment to access over and above physical preservation in many cases. Yet in insisting that the activities of Latin American cinémathèques thus constitute an “alternative preservation practice,” she presents their work as out of step with or actively resisting the international consensus in the field. In fairness, she stresses that this stance is largely due to archives’ economic precarity and the need to raise their profile and that of their collections in order to ensure the survival of both.⁶

In contrast to these readings, I contend that early Latin American film archives fail to fit neatly into prevailing narratives in Euro-American film studies, which tend to frame the region’s film history in terms of social commitment, political resistance, and opposition to Hollywood, hallmarks of New Latin American Cinema. Rather, the region’s cinémathèques participated in reciprocal exchanges of cultural prestige and institutional influence with FIAF, suggesting the strategic uses of conceptions of film as art both for international organizations and Latin America’s emerging middle classes. Early archivists in the region had close links to the film society movement, which sought to create alternative spaces for viewing and discussing films deemed to be classics or contemporary works of art cinema. Participating in a broader postwar legitimation of the medium, film societies offered a sense of social distinction to their participants at a moment of economic growth and upward mobility for many Latin Americans.

In leveraging the international prestige attached to film classics to reinforce social hierarchies, early Latin American film archives proved less “alternative” or counter-hegemonic than prevailing Euro-American perceptions of film culture in the region might lead one to expect. Moreover, these institutions did not initially seek to valorize domestic film production in the face of perceived cultural colonization by the United States and Europe. In fact, they showed little interest in either physically preserving or constructing the notion of a national film heritage—which Frick identifies as the guiding principle of early US and European archives—until the mid-1950s.⁷ Rather, they were created in order to participate in noncommercial exchanges of film prints, a practice that FIAF sought to monopolize in order to minimize competition with commercial exhibition and film industry backlash. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Langlois encouraged film society organizers he encountered in France—including Brazilian and Cuban students Paulo Emílio Salles Gomes and Germán Puig, Argentine critic Andrés José Rolando Fustiñana, and Catalan bookseller Luis Vicens—to create archives, if only on paper. This allowed their organizations to receive prints in compliance with FIAF regulations that limited their circulation to exchanges between members.⁸

These institution-building efforts advanced FIAF’s efforts to expand and regulate the noncommercial circulation of films internationally while also bolstering Langlois’s influence in the organization, since establishing new archives provided him with ready-made allies within the membership.9 For their part, Latin American archivists took advantage of their links to the broader film preservation movement to advance their institutional goals. Since these organizations often sought archival prints in order to circulate them to the film societies that supported them financially, borrowed cultural capital literally bankrolled the region’s early film archives in some cases.10

Members of the FIAF leadership thus viewed their Latin American counterparts as useful partners in expanding the dissemination of film heritage on a global scale. As early as 1948, the organization had explored creating a shared repository of prints that members would contribute to and borrow from, an idea initially proposed by Iris Barry of MoMA’s Film Library.11 Acting as a preservation safeguard by multiplying existing copies of films, this circulation pool would also help meet growing demand from archives and associated film societies for prints by supplementing existing archive-to-archive exchanges.12 The mechanism of the pool also promised to redress the disadvantages faced by small archives within FIAF, since bilateral exchanges were difficult to establish when organizations had few titles to offer their counterparts. At the 1957 FIAF congress, Langlois affirmed, “The goal of the pool is to help incipient archives obtain programming. It is absolutely certain that M. Vicens in Colombia, or M. Roland [Fustiñana] in Argentina, and tomorrow someone in Karachi in India [sic] can obtain programming, the archive movement will gain momentum.”13 In Langlois’s view, facilitating access to prints was a crucial step for generating interest in film heritage and thus building archival capacity globally. Latin American archives and archivists were recruited as pioneers in this process.

During the mid-1950s, FIAF experimented with decentralization by creating a regional section known as the Latin American Pool in English, the Sección Latinoamericana in Spanish, and the Seção Latino-Americana in Portuguese. Once again, the initiative originated with Langlois.14 Despite holding four regional conferences between 1955 and 1960, the Latin American Pool’s local activities never gained momentum. Its existence is a tes-
tament both to FIAF’s investment in global expansion and to its failure to adequately address the structural imbalances that marked the organization’s functioning.

The Latin American Pool was intended to foster intraregional cooperation in the preservation and circulation of film materials while also addressing institutional practices that disadvantaged cash-strapped Latin American archives. Revealingly, FIAF congresses were held exclusively in Europe between 1946 and 1968; one would not be held in Latin America until the 1976 meeting in Mexico City. Attending them was thus an expensive prospect for Latin American archivists. In theory, members of the Latin American Pool would meet collectively and then delegate a member to attend the conference as their joint representative, but this proved difficult in practice. Tellingly, the Latin American Pool’s initial report to FIAF, slated for 1955, was never delivered.\(^{15}\) Similarly, FIAF members were required to pay their dues in first French and later Swiss francs despite unfavorable currency exchange rates for Latin American archives, which worsened during a period of rapid inflation in the early 1960s.\(^{16}\) FIAF agreed these institutions could pay half their dues directly to the Latin American Pool in order to mitigate this issue somewhat, but few actually did so. Challenges surrounding travel and the nonpayment of dues are recurring themes in the correspondence between the Latin American Pool and FIAF, suggesting an impasse in the latter’s efforts to fully include its Latin American members and these members’ ability to meet FIAF’s institutional standards given their financial circumstances.

Due to a lack of funds, customs barriers, and catastrophic events such as the 1957 fire at the Cinemateca Brasileira, the Latin American Pool never managed to circulate a single film program among its members.\(^{17}\) However, it served as a precedent for later regional cooperative efforts, including the Unión de Cinematecas de América Latina (1965–1984) and the Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Archivos de Imágenes en Movimiento, founded in 1985 and still active today.

As this brief account of early Latin American film archives’ relations with FIAF suggests, these institutions were not radically “other” from their Euro-American counterparts, since they also viewed preservation and access through largely depoliticized notions of film as art. Nor were they simply instruments of cultural colonization, although they enlisted the aid of foreign institutions as a source of prestige. Rather, these cinémathèques participated in mutual exchanges of cultural capital and institutional influence with FIAF and its members, their existence attesting to the organization’s internationalism and desired global reach. Ultimately, the history of the Latin American Pool offers something of a cautionary tale for present-day

\(^{15}\) Meeting notes, 1956 Sección Latinoamericana de la FIAF Congress, 5–6, Arquivo Histórico, Cinemateca Brasileira.


efforts to globalize film preservation, highlighting the structural barriers that continue to shape their impact.

Rielle Navitski is associate professor in the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at the University of Georgia. She is the author of Public Spectacles of Violence: Sensational Cinema and Journalism in Early Twentieth-Century Mexico and Brazil (Duke University Press, 2017).
Long before I began my research on Black studies and new media, my first encounter with a Black archive was in my second-grade classroom during Black History Month. Sitting cross-legged among a cluster of students, I waited to hold one of the worn artifacts my teacher was circulating to supplement her lesson. The item was a photograph: an image of a bright burning cross flanked by big men in white sheets. Clutching the photo between my fingers, I listened to my teacher explain that in 1963, men like this had bombed a Birmingham church, killing four young Black girls.1 Her words created an impenetrable shadow. In that darkness, my conception of temporality became increasingly unstable. Time began to seep out from the clock’s careful confines, both expanding and elongating and contracting around my small body, threatening to turn me to ash just like the Black girls in that church basement.

Although white men were the ones dressed up like ghosts, within the academic archives I encountered, it was Blackness that was spectral, legible only through death, generalizations, and perceived offenses. In Black studies, canonical historiographers such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson consistently reflect upon the hierarchical circumscription that constitutes

---


historical production. Much of the work of Black archivists likewise seeks to address a system of valuation in which anti-Black violence subsumes Black humanity. While Black archives chart the Black experience, though, we must be careful to expose the multitude of complex power relations hidden under the surface of Black representation. In this regard, Black texts with traditional archival purchase feel deeply conversant with my encounters with contemporary digital archives. In an effort to interrogate the crosscurrents of power, this essay briefly traces the form and function of traditional Black historiographical methods alongside the “alternative” Black and queer repositories of Instagram.

As Lauren McLeod Cramer argues, in the face of political economies that attempt to repress Black life and imagination, scholars need to ask research questions that expose the ethics and ideological commitments of the archives they study and also open up new ways of visualizing Blackness. Following their lead, I analyze the relationship between Blackness, queerness, pleasure, and value production on Instagram. Specifically, my research on the profiles of Black queer people shows how this community configures queer horizons through the circulation of photographs, captions, and videos, as well as a variety of other media.

Black people in the United States have participated in various forms of archival production since the onset of slavery. From authoring hymns that recounted the brutality of captivity to the Harlem Renaissance and the construction of jazz, performative expressions of Black social life have long constituted a critical modality of Black historiography. Although Black communities have integrated writing practices into these archival processes, the majority of the Black people who survived the transatlantic slave trade emerge from the oral and improvisational shibboleth of the Yoruba people. Demonstrative customs such as music, poetry, and theater thus inform past and present modes of Black record-keeping. In many ways, the legacy of Black archival production reflects a dominant form of Black historiography that refuses to divorce education and ethics from the personal and performative.

While a large part of Black historiography is grounded in a genealogy of performance, written text has accompanied the Black demonstrative tradition from as early as the 1800s, with formally established Black historiographic method taking shape in the early nineteenth century. Du Bois and

---

8 See Monica Weis, “Olaudah Equiano at Sea: Adrift in White Culture,” CEA Critic 63, no. 1 (2000): 21–26; and “Historians and Historiography, African American,” in Ency-
Woodson spearheaded systematic Black archival theory; they proposed an intimate archival intervention that emerged from the genealogy of Yoruba record-keeping and Black demonstrative tradition, wherein historiography is inextricable from personal and cultural contingencies. In Black schoolhouses across the United States, Woodson helped to institutionalize Negro History Week, an annual holiday akin to Black History Month.\textsuperscript{9} During these seven-day celebrations, students of all ages explored their cultural heritage through the performance of folklore, Negro spirituals, and canonical Black poetry; they were also given the opportunity to showcase original works of art.\textsuperscript{10} For Woodson, enacting personal and political expressions of Blackness was ancillary to historical production, a sentiment that reverberates with the intellectual offerings of Du Bois, who mines the space of the personal for movement into the space of the public. In the words of the literary historian Arnold Rampersad, Du Bois’s cultural and aesthetic work “gave voice to his private thoughts,” emphasizing “the depth of his soul-searching and the dignity of his motives.”\textsuperscript{11}

Positioned within this lineage, my research on Instagram turns to the performative and personal as key factors in Black knowledge transmission and social change. The interiority of archival interventions such as Du Bois’s and Woodson’s contrasts constructively with the apparent sterility of the dominant archive. Implicitly alluding to the benefit of this disjunction, Woodson explains how modern education processes may seem untainted by personal bias but are, in actuality, underwritten by white supremacy: “[M]odern education . . . does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed [Negro] peoples. . . . the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching.”\textsuperscript{12} When I consider the system Woodson describes, I can’t help but think of my younger self, ushered toward the vast sea of Black subsistence only to be handed a picture of men who wanted me dead.\textsuperscript{13}

My work on Black-authored social media spaces understands individually crafted social media archives as critically subversive. While mainstream Western historiographers may claim objective methods for archival production, I follow Woodson’s analysis and argue that examining personal Instagram profiles continues a tradition of Black historiography that understands objectivity as a regulatory fiction underlining white supremacy. The vernacular archi-
val production potentiated by Instagram can be positioned within a greater genealogy of the academic Black archive, in an attempt to shed light on the politico-cultural formations constituting the very concept of historiography.

Contravening the necropolitical visual imaginary of Blackness, wherein the Black body doubles as a potential corpse, Instagram functions as an archive for the self-authored exhibition of pleasure by Black queer people. Observing Black queer users’ Instagram feeds evidences instantiations of what Jafari S. Allen terms “erotic subjectivity” and helps address the way performing pleasure on social media can “construct . . . new kinds of publics based on deeper understandings and compulsions of the body and soul.” These posts enact erotic subjectivity within the contexts of Black American digital reality, Black American resistance, trans* feminism, and African American culture and politics. They suggest that Instagram provides marginalized subjects with the means to work out their position in the shadow of slavery and social death, to construct “their racial, gendered, and sexual subjectivities according to deep longings” for a future of living beyond survival, a self-crafted future composed of queer utopianism, belonging, and community.

In contrast, and as Woodson suggests, one can see “regulatory norms” instantiated through mainstream archival imaginaries that circumscribe Black history to brutalization and bondage. While Judith Butler explains performativity as coercively reproducing these norms, she also argues that performance holds a radical potential for reimagining. From this perspective, Black queer Instagram users’ exhibition of pleasure and identitarian alterity can be seen as a practice with the potential to bend time and reshape our ideas of attainable realities. By performing and documenting moments of sexual pleasure and interiority, Black queer Instagrammers labor to decenter white heteronormativity in archival production while helping to visualize Black freedoms.

Instagram operates as an interstitial archive. Because its profiles are always in the process of being cultivated, the archives Instagram assembles are permanently ongoing, unfinished, and open-ended. As a citational visual economy with boundless circularity, Instagram endows pictures with a “social life.” By offering the possibility for ever-liminal archival construction, Instagram profiles contravene what José Esteban Muñoz refers to as “straight time,” or the assumed reproduction of the same repressive structures of gender, class, and race, which can also be understood as the temporal expansion of the present’s repression. In contrast, the queer profiles on

15 Lane, “Bringing Flesh,” 635.
Instagram are never finished and therefore permanently gesture toward a future of unknown possibilities. By chronicling submerged histories and conversing with imminent futures, the performances circulated on Instagram may be employed by users to push up against traditional history’s chrononormative continuum and push toward queer utopian futures.\(^\text{20}\)

A brief analysis of the Instagram account of the Black genderqueer barista and self-proclaimed “butch bottom” Sasha (@sasha_in_newmexico) from the years 2016 to 2019 foregrounds the erotic subjectivities and alternative temporalities afforded by the archives of Black and queer Instagrammers. Sasha’s Instagram profile is a litany of discordant visuals. In one photo, Sasha’s partner chokes them sensually while licking their outstretched tongue.\(^\text{21}\) In another, Sasha is featured sitting on a bed with their father next to them; he is holding their foot the way a mother might cradle her newborn baby. In his hands are a pair of tweezers. The picture is captioned, “my father getting a splinter out my foot ~ I’m his little bull dyke.”\(^\text{22}\) On Sasha’s Instagram, image sequences like these are commonplace, such that salacious imagery consistently ensconces their pictures of familial intimacy.

From posting a picture of their pubic hair to performing semi-naked foreplay with their partner, Sasha’s profile consistently pushes at the limits of Instagram community guidelines, which prohibit sex and nudity.\(^\text{23}\) Intermittent posts remind Sasha’s followers that most of their family members are blocked from viewing their profile. One screenshot of a text from their mother reads, “Wowww, I am absolutely amazed at your lifestyle.” Responding to the screenshot, a follower of Sasha’s comments, “omg, your mom is so sweet, I’m jealous!” and Sasha responds to their follower by clarifying, “don’t be jealous, she’s saying this with the utmost disdain [sad emoji face,] that’s why shes blockt.”\(^\text{24}\) In these cases, Sasha makes it clear that their family is “amazed” at their life choices but not in a good way.

Nevertheless, Sasha remains intractable in their depiction of a lifestyle that bucks the guidelines of respectable subsistence; on their profile, there is no splitting the sexual, the somatic, and the platonically sentimental. On Sasha’s Instagram profile page, photos of them hugging and caressing their partner’s bare body sit between smiling pictures of their unperturbed

---


21 Sasha (@sasha_in_newmexico), “y’all niggas better report this since apparently y’all can’t have nice things,” Instagram photo, April 4, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BhJs6I2B216/?igshid=1nvks9bj7hao.


23 See, for example, @sasha_in_newmexico’s posts of January 15, 2018, and October 21, 2016. See also Gretchen Faust, “Hair, Blood and the Nipple: Instagram Censorship and the Female Body,” in Digital Environments: Ethnographic Perspectives across Global Online and Offline Spaces, ed. Urte Undine Frömming, Steffen Köhn, Samantha Fox, and Mike Terry (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 159–170.

24 Sasha (@sasha_in_newmexico), Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/p/BP34LK8Dv3P/. (photo has since been deleted.)
parents. Within this context, queer sexual precocity and familial kinship are not bifurcated but overlap in referentiality; both allude to a future when the erotic subjectivity is smiled upon.

With its nearly conterminous picture borders, Sasha’s Instagram feed gestures toward a critical confluence between the brash “butch bottom” who wraps their fingers around the throat of their partner and the “little bull dyke” who needs their father to remove a splinter from their foot. On their social media playground, Sasha invokes a future replete with familial acceptance and care that is inextricable from sexual and somatic freedom. Even if Sasha must block their blood relatives from engaging with their images, their Instagram imagines a utopia where their nuclear family stand as beaming spectators. Sasha’s Instagram assembles what Muñoz refers to as “the field of utopian possibility,” where “multiple forms of belongings in difference adhere to a belonging in collectivity.” By challenging the limits of their present and enacting a virtual reality of collective belonging, Sasha gestures to a queer dynamism that is not quite here, but could be.

When describing the status of Blackness in archival production, Frederick Douglass reflects, “The slave is a subject, subjected by others; the slaveholder is a subject, but he is the author of his own subjection.” Given this social condition, the modus operandi of traditional Black historiography asks how the Black subject enters into conversations about themselves—their whole selves—in a fragmented and hierarchical anti-Black social order. Since the transatlantic slave trade, traditional Black historiography has engaged intimate forms of performativity toward a gestalt switch on the dominant archival valuation of Black life. Throughout this essay, I argue that Black and queer Instagrammers further Black demonstrative traditions that use the personal to illuminate Black subjects as multiply determined and regimented by racial-sexual-ecological enclosures. I argue that by engendering various forms of erotic subjectivity on the platform of Instagram, Black and queer Instagrammers push against linear and teleological notions of time, illuminating a critical temporal structure that looks backward while also imagining salient forms of Black futurity.

Although social media platforms such as Instagram provide a raft of critical performance capacities and queer utopias, at the same time, it is important to acknowledge the insidious processes of value extraction I observe unfolding within this sphere. Instagram is not only an archive but also a corporation fueled by the drive toward extraction that constitutes late capitalism. The radical Black gestures circulated by queer Black Instagrammers are simultaneously reterritorialized and commodified by this platform, since Instagram is made for interminable user expenditure. Furthermore,
by obfuscating its for-profit agenda, Instagram obscures how the limitless mobility and creative freedom it advertises work to uphold racialized and capitalist logics of commodity fetishism. If, as Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers argues, Black is vestibular to culture, then the abounding aesthetic content trafficked by Instagram can be largely seen as the fetishized product of Black cultural labor.

Sukhai Rawlins is a PhD student and teaching assistant in women’s, gender, and sexuality studies at Emory University. Their research interests include new media, posthumanisms, pleasure activism, and Black trans feminism.

29 Mukherjee, 340.