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IN FOCUS

Absence and Afterlives: Unwatched, Undistributed, Lost, and Inaccessible Media

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Cameras are everywhere, media files can be saved in the proverbial cloud, and images emerge and circulate at an alarming pace. We often characterize our collective relationship with media in terms of access and overload. From the thousands of photographs we have taken on our smartphones, to the constant flow of streaming content, to the ever-changing social media feed, there is just too much media to attend to. At the same time, online digital media have given us the sense that media artifacts are endlessly available and accessible. Search engines help us to find media we want to see, and algorithms are poised to pinpoint the most relevant content. Our gaze has been trained on the particular media artifacts that are available to us or are easily discoverable, turning our attention away from more obscure media.

In this In Focus dossier, we seek to exhume artifacts that have been lost, buried, or otherwise overlooked in the morass of media. We note a methodological conundrum in which our analytic eyes have been trained on what is already apparent rather than what has been overlooked, often systematically so. We argue that, collectively, these media are not disappearing or lost or unwatched because of mere oversight, or by conscious choice, but because of
structural obscurity. In other words, we wish to call attention to the structures that condition what we do not encounter.

We ask, what can we learn from media that just do not circulate? What might it look like to attend to the labor and reception of making and sharing such media? And how might we do so in ways that value the presence underlying the apparent absence? What implicit values are indicated in the act—willful or not—of obscuring certain media from view? What methods might account for the lack of access to or exclusion of certain media?

The essays included here encourage scholars and students of media to value the unwatched and unseen as they consider the production and status of existing but not necessarily accessible media artifacts and archives. We take an ambitious approach, spanning a range of media practices and technologies across geographies and time. Whether focusing on newsreel outtakes filmed in semi-colonial Shanghai, defunct websites run by southern US border vigilantes, retired domestic violence photography files, rarely seen YouTube videos, collections of African American home movies, or undistributed feature films, each essay contends with the factors that structure the relative obscurity of its artifacts and the implications of their absences.

While media scholars have long attended to media that go unseen, the focus has generally been concentrated more on viewer or curator decisions rather than on the structures that obscure artifacts or practices. In the collections On Not Looking: The Paradox of Contemporary Visual Culture and Unwatchable, various authors explore the reasons why viewers find certain content difficult to watch or not worthy of watching. And while literature on structured obscurity of media exists in the study of online media, such scholarship tends to focus more on the invisibility of production labor than on the artifacts themselves. While we are also interested in media labor and production practices, our aim is to stress the structures that occlude artifacts. Other texts have considered the ways copyright law structures the politics and practices of archival institutions when they digitize and share artworks that have no traceable owner or have been abandoned by their owners, such as Claudy Op den Kamp’s The Greatest Films Never Seen: The Film Archive and the Copyright Smokescreen and Dan Streible’s work on orphan films. Meanwhile others, such as Giovanna Fossati, have concentrated on the ontology of media artifacts themselves to discern how we can even begin to make sense of what we are looking at before we analyze it.


Of course, there are many reasons that a media object goes (largely) unseen. Sometimes, copyright issues determine whether it can be (easily) accessed. In this dossier, Jaimie Baron draws our attention to the absence of an important but seldom-seen film by Shirley Clarke—*The Cool World* (1963)—which was novel for employing a collaborative and participatory film practice that crossed racial and class lines in the early 1960s. Baron examines the reasons for the film’s limited circulation since its initial release, arguing that its lack of distribution due to the vagaries of intellectual property rights occludes politically significant resonances between the time of the film’s release and the present moment—and the historical consciousness they may yield.

At other times, algorithms, rather than intellectual property rights, make content almost impossible to find. In her essay, Lauren S. Berliner argues for attention to what she calls *digital obscura* online as she discusses how unwatched YouTube videos that have been filtered out, or simply unwatched, can help us discern the themes, identities, and production practices that escape algorithmically informed circulation and representation. These videos also make more apparent the technical systems that structure meaning about particular digital media artifacts.

Certain objects, such as outtakes, were never meant to be seen and yet they contain images that may illuminate history from a different direction than the text from which they were excised. Xin Peng elucidates the value of Fox Movietone newsreel footage titled “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes”: “an invaluable filmic record of the making of a Chinese film in an era of which the majority of films are lost.” She navigates methodological conundrums regarding the problematic status of newsreel outtakes and posits that this historically important form of unwatched media allows scholars to interrogate the historiographic and ethnographic value of moving images and the speculative potential of unedited and uncirculated footage.

Similarly, useful media such as police photographs, produced to document a crime, were never intended for broad circulation but can take on new resonance when they are unearthed by artists who see in them attributes beyond their original pragmatic functions. Kelli Moore takes a retired domestic violence police photography project as a point of departure, discovering how contemporary visual artists critically represent the iconography of domestic violence. Moore traces how artists have imagined and reimagined domestic violence, creating new forms of visual representation that underscore the resonance of such images in our collective consciousness.

Other media objects, such as home movies, also change in meaning and effect when they move from the private to the public realm, raising questions about what it means to watch a film originally produced for a limited set of eyes. In her essay, Elizabeth Patton discusses the value of archiving, preserving, and providing access to the home movies of African Americans. She scrutinizes the role that archives and archivists play in foregrounding representations that shape narratives about African American history, often emphasizing injustice and resistance but very rarely middle-class leisure and everyday activities. Her essay draws attention to the ethical considerations of making this private media public and illuminates the ways boundaries
and barriers are set by institutions, researchers, and the owners of private archives that determine what gets seen and what does not. Patton models best practices for working with media rights owners, emphasizing the importance of building relationships of trust and reciprocity.

Finally, technological obsolescence is one of the main reasons media becomes inaccessible: defunct websites, old file types, and other extant but unplayable media may proffer forms of evidence that move against the grain of established or coalescing historical narratives. The erasure of threatening texts—those that espouse hate, for instance—is a loss for historical consciousness and understanding even as this erasure ameliorates other harms. What is almost, but not-quite, erased becomes a means of seeing otherwise by fostering an encounter with the negative space left by dominant streams of media production. If we can glimpse it, this negative space holds great promise for scholarly insight. Diana Flores Ruíz makes this clear in her examination of the recently defunct website for the Mountain Minutemen, an Arizona-based nativist extremist organization that emerged in response to 9/11. Her essay puts forward methods for working across three dimensions of such a media loss: the gains made by the eradication of media that stokes racialized harm, the persistence and adaptation of discriminatory media across platforms, and the analytic value of understanding how such organizations mediate hate.

Taken together, these essays aim to activate a methodology that will hold the processes by which media artifacts fail to circulate to the light. We do not merely argue for attention to our respective artifacts. Instead, we advocate for increased attention to loss, absence, and oversight as a resistant methodology for our field.

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We have today a vast and detailed record of the past century preserved on film. Yet there are absences in this record, some of which do damage to our historical consciousness and ability to learn from the past.¹ Thousands of films are simply gone, either destroyed or never preserved.² In other cases, films are absent because public access to them is restricted, constituting an antidemocratic withholding of potential historical knowledge and understanding. The unjustifiably limited distribution of *The Cool World* (Shirley Clarke, 1963) is one example. The film tells the story of Richard “Duke” Custis (Hampton Clanton), a Black teenage boy living in Harlem, whose only

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goal is to acquire a gun so that he can become the leader of his gang, thereby attaining respect from his peers. His desire for some form of power within a racist context that has denied him any is presented in the film as both reasonable and tragic. More importantly than its specific content, however, it was one of the first films shot on location in Harlem, its cast included numerous non-professional actors who lived in Harlem, and it modeled a cross-cultural (or at least subcultural) collaborative form of filmmaking long before that was a defined concept or practice. Of the approximately 126 US feature films released in 1963, *The Cool World* was the only US film directed by a woman, and it is listed on the Library of Congress’s National Film Registry, which was founded in 1988 “to ensure the survival, conservation and increased public availability of America’s film heritage.”3 Despite all these important credentials, access to *The Cool World* is extremely limited.

Notably, *The Cool World* was produced entirely outside the auspices of the Hollywood studios. Although directed and edited by Clarke, the film was produced by Frederick Wiseman, who financed the film by recruiting numerous small investors (the same way Broadway plays are often financed). As a result, Wiseman’s production company Zipporah Films owns the rights to the film. Currently, Zipporah Films rents a VHS tape or 16mm print for educational purposes, including public performance rights, for $400.4 The Library of Congress holds the original negative and will rent a 35mm print to those who can show it.5 For those who do not have access to a film projector or a VHS player or $400, an illegal, bootleg version of the film circulates as a digital file, but its sound and image quality are low, and yellow French subtitles are burned into the file. When I asked Zipporah Films why the film has not been digitized, I was informed that they “have not had the financial resources to digitize the film yet since we are currently working on digitizing the other Wiseman films that are not available in DCP [Digital Cinema Package].”6 If the issue is indeed simply one of money, the Library of Congress or a private donor should step in and fund the digitization. Here are the reasons why.

*The Cool World* was an important early instance of collaborative filmmaking across racial lines, and its production history offers important lessons for negotiating the complexities of such collaboration. It was the first feature film not only to be shot on location in Harlem but also with a multi-racial crew and a cast that employed many non-professional Black actors living in that neighborhood, including the teenage star Hampton Clanton. Indeed, this film was an unprecedented collaborative project involving numerous people of diverse backgrounds at different stages in the film’s realization. It was, moreover, a radical act for a Jewish woman in 1963 to transform a novel about Harlem written by a white man (Warren Miller) into a film script in close collaboration with a Black man (Carl Lee), with major roles cast and

performed by actual Black Harlem residents. And, as Black writer and activist June Jordan, who worked as an assistant to Wiseman on the film, puts it, it was “the only feature film about what it means to be Black in a racist white country from 1954 to 1964 that [she could] recall.”

However, the production history of the film is also evidence of the incredible difficulty of cross-cultural, cross-racial collaboration, a project that continues to challenge filmmakers today. Indeed, Jordan was deeply conflicted about the production. In an essay called “Testimony,” she demonstrates through a montage of quotations from Clanton and the mostly white film crew that Clanton’s experience of the film—and his sense of its relation to actual Black life in Harlem—was quite distinct from that of the filmmakers and that the divide between them could not be fully surmounted. Nevertheless, Jordan regarded the film as extremely important. She writes, “That had been my goal: to get the film out, to see through birth some version of the truth of this Black and white experiment. We were all exhausted. But that felt fine: At least we had tried hard to show something real about Black life in this country.” The attempt, in short, to do something so unusual—a cinematic collaboration among Black and white people trying to convey something true—was valuable in itself.

The initial, contradictory reception of The Cool World also offers insight into ongoing debates about authenticity and representation. For instance, the question of who can narrate Black experience is integral to any understanding of The Cool World, beginning with Miller’s 1959 novel. The novel’s focalization through the experiences of a Black teenager was evaluated in vastly different ways by readers of that era, including different Black readers. The novel was seen by some Black critics as a gifted articulation of Black experience based on close observation and listening by a white outsider who lived in Harlem for many years. According to Jordan, “Warren Miller’s Duke Custis spoke his mind and his dreams in some of the most beautiful and rhythmic sentences ever printed. Miller happened to have been a writer gifted with an extraordinary, accurate, and willing ear.” In a similar vein, James Baldwin writes, “I consider it a tribute to Warren Miller, whose name was unfamiliar to me, that I could not be certain when I had read his book, whether he was white or black. I was certain, however, that I had just read one of the finest novels about Harlem that had ever come my way. The author had obviously looked at something very hard. He had felt it very deeply and was trying to tell the truth about it.” Jordan and Baldwin were conscious of the fact that Miller was white but clearly felt that he had nonetheless captured something true. Yet the accolades for the novel among Black intellectuals were not unanimous. Albert Murray regarded the novel as a form of literary “blackface”

and referred to Miller as a “white negro” who understood nothing about what it meant to be Black in Harlem.12

The film also generated important debate among Black critics about its relationship to lived truth. Alongside his critique of the novel, Murray was dismissive of the film, describing it as “a deadly serious avant garde propaganda film, which has been generally dismissed as Art but praised as realistic documentation.”13 Murray was contemptuous above all of the film’s experimental form, its didactic intent, and its reception as “documentation,” which suggests that he feared the film had been taken by some as real rather than a constructed fiction with a particular point of view. Film writer, programmer, and professor Alfred Johnson took a different tack, writing, “For all its brusque cutting, disjointed narrative, and frustrating half-glances at its characters, this is the most important film document about Negro life in Harlem to have been made so far.”14 In contrast to Murray, Johnson valued the documentary aspect of the film, its interest in the space of Harlem itself. He continues, “Clarke is as interested in the streets, buildings, backyards, and faces of Harlem as she is in her misguided young hero . . . which make The Cool World a work of visual poetry, and in sound, a tone poem of the slums.”15

Where Murray saw propaganda, Johnson found poetry—two vastly different readings of the same film by two brilliant Black minds of the time. Meanwhile, James Farmer, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality, was even more explicit than Johnson in his praise for the film. He writes, “The Cool World is as shocking as the truth: It is the truth. And I sincerely hope that this entire country will be its audience.”16 Sidestepping debates about the relationship between art and reality, Farmer saw the film pragmatically: as having the potential to shock audiences into social justice action.

Indeed, another aspect of the film that deserves attention is its impossible address. Christopher Sieving notes that the intended purpose of both the novel and film was to try to make white people in the supposedly progressive North own their responsibility for the ways many Black people were forced to live. Sieving writes, “Of primary interest to Miller was the producing of a document that would move people to ‘do something’ about conditions in the ghetto and to recognize the roots of those conditions in ‘the way all of us live.’ The screen adaptation of Miller’s novel was evidently undertaken in the same missionary spirit.”17 At the time of its release, Johnson explicitly took note of the film’s complicated address. He writes, “To Negro audiences, these lessons and images are not new . . . but to white audiences, wherever The Cool World is shown, the beautifully observed vignettes of Negroes

living calmly in an unnatural habitat . . . these are etchings of cinematic truthfulness.” In other words, although he found no revelations for Black audiences, Johnson saw a truth about Harlem that had not been conveyed to white audiences before that time. Ironically, however, white audiences were largely uninterested in the film. Sieving notes that “Shirley Clarke’s unique achievement was that she made a black film for the purpose of transforming white consciousness. The problem for The Cool World’s producers during the marketing stage lay in the task of bringing that white audience, which had never shown any interest in naturalistic cinematic representations of black American life, to the theaters.” The Cool World’s address of the white viewer who sees what Black life in Harlem is really like and decides to do something about it constitutes this film as a noble failure because this absent subject never arrives to be moved. In other words, the film was intended as a catalyst to social justice action on the part of white audiences, who, for the most part, did not show up.

It also matters that The Cool World was made by a woman and is a crucial text in the history of women’s filmmaking. Produced at a time when most women on set were limited to auxiliary roles, The Cool World, Clarke’s second feature, tackled the most contentious social issues of the time. If only for this reason the film should be widely seen and viewed as a rare example of a female director-editor making a socially and politically engaged feature film in the United States outside of the commercial Hollywood system in the 1960s.

Clarke was a dancer who began her film career by making dance films, developing an editing style based in her deep knowledge of rhythm and choreography. Soon thereafter, she signed the Declaration of the New American Cinema Group, a radical independent filmmaking manifesto in line with those of the New Wave movements in Europe and became a founding member of the Film-Makers’ Cooperative, which created a film distribution network for independent films. Her first feature film, The Connection (1961), is a self-reflexive mockumentary-style critique of the ethics of the newly ascendant direct cinema documentary movement; she may have been the first to see and articulate its greatest potential pitfalls, including the potential exploitation of documentary subjects in the name of producing truth (and drama). Her participation in these highly male spaces, movements, and debates was an act of courage and defiance that has become difficult to fully appreciate precisely because she helped lay the groundwork for our current gender paradigm in which women’s leadership roles in film are more common, if still limited.

Despite some meaningful differences, the context in which The Cool World was made and released is depressingly, maddeningly like our own.

Clarke’s film premiered in July 1964, the day before protests broke out in response to the police killing of fifteen-year-old James Powell in Harlem. The resulting Harlem protests of 1964 were not only about police violence against Black citizens, including children, but also about inadequate and poorly maintained housing, subpar schools, and false political promises. These problems remain unsolved today. As a fiction film steeped in documentary elements, *The Cool World* offers oblique traces now of what it was like to live in the Harlem ghetto just as civil discontent was rising to a boil. Clarke was a white filmmaker who in the 1960s believed that Black lives mattered and committed her filmmaking practice to demonstrating this fact to white audiences. She was an early fighter in the effort for racial justice still underway. Examining Clarke’s efforts in the 1960s, however successful or flawed, may yet yield insight to those currently working for social justice in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, a critical reason why the film should be easily accessible. Moreover, beyond its potential political utility, *The Cool World* is a unique document of Harlem at a particular moment in time. The people in the candid street footage may be someone’s father or grandmother or long dead aunt just waiting to be recognized. New generations of viewers deserve to encounter *The Cool World*. Who knows what we might see that has so far been overlooked—and what we might do with that knowledge.

**Jaimie Baron** is a writer, editor, curator, and theorist. She is the author of two books, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (Routledge, 2014) and *Reuse, Misuse, Abuse: The Ethics of Audiovisual Appropriation in the Digital Era* (Rutgers University Press, 2020), as well as numerous journal articles and book chapters. She is the director of the Festival of (In)appropriation and co-editor of the Docalogue website and book series.
In the early days, before thumbs-up buttons and YouTube TV, subscription channels, and monetization, YouTube was the primordial soup of content. Significance was determined by the individual viewer’s opinion, or by video artists such as Natalie Bookchin, whose multichannel *supercuts* of trends helped audiences notice similarities across types of posts, such as dancing or making confessions.¹ For a time, YouTube arguably captured snippets of everyday life, or at least everyday media production, evoking home video in both style and content. YouTube was a repository of everyday performance, gesturing toward connection with others rather than toward a *like and subscribe* prerogative or the hope of monetization, corporate sponsorship, or fame. As other platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook grew, the content you were likely to find and be recommended on YouTube transformed into increasingly self-conscious productions that reflected professional production styles and cultural zeitgeists. The platform also became a popular source for information searching. The unpredicted election of Donald J. Trump drew increased attention to user-produced content spread,

particularly ideology and (mis)information. Average citizens grew increasingly aware of the role that algorithms play in what they see and do not see online. In the commodified internet space, uploaded media almost always has the market potential to become the next viral video or meme. Creators and influencers, who now number more than fifty million around the world, are proprietors of the “fastest-growing type of small business,” according to a report last year by SignalFire, a venture capital firm.

With hundreds of thousands of videos now uploaded every hour, not everything can go viral. What’s more, not everything gets watched. So many production tropes and genres have proliferated globally on YouTube, TikTok, and other video sharing platforms. However, there remains a tremendous amount of media content that neither circulates nor adheres to existing categories. A plethora of YouTube videos have only a handful of views, but they will likely stay on the site in perpetuity. This material is public and indexed by search engines, but it is cast aside by algorithms in response to the video’s initial viewership or metadata, which render the content invisible in search results or viewing suggestions. It is precisely their lack of spreadability that pushes these videos further below what freelance writer and artist Joe Viex refers to as the “epidermal layer of YouTube” where the “recommended for you” content resides. In 2016, Viex coined the term the lonely web to refer to media content that exists in “the murky space between the mainstream and the deep webs. This media is public and indexed by search engines, but broadcast to a tiny audience, algorithmically filtered out, and/or difficult to find using traditional search techniques.”

I call online user-produced audiovisual media that has been uploaded online but not viewed or circulated beyond the maker and their immediate, already-invested audience digital obscura. Far from a place of lack, one assumed to be always searching in vain for an audience, digital obscura can teach us about the internet and ourselves. What might such media teach us about the themes, identities, and production practices that escape reception and representation, and how do technical systems such as algorithms and other back-end functionalities structure meaning about digital media artifacts? What is revealed by the existence and obfuscation of digital obscura

6. Viex.
7. Elsewhere I have referred to this media as “unwatched digital media” but have chosen to revise the nomenclature.
under an algorithmic penumbra? I contend that studying unwatched digital media yields productive possibilities for media research, expanding our understanding of how people are using the internet. What’s more, searching for and viewing unwatched digital media requires us to embrace different viewing practices that shed light on how current platform functionalities structure our viewing habits, social media streams, and psyches.

The content on YouTube that exists but goes unwatched is diverse. Picture a video that simply shows an arc of urine hitting the drain of a urinal from the point of view of the person urinating; a couple dancing to the melody of their Samsung clothes dryer cycle completion tune; an overexposed video of a Canadian real estate tour, set to instrumental music; a group of young men chopping vegetables together; a motorcyclist looking down into the camera in their lap in a video titled “I tried chasing the Google car”; and a close-up of a Sesame Street puppet singing a song by the Crash Test Dummies. Some look like clips taken from longer videos that exist elsewhere; others seem to have been created with hopes for wide circulation, as they gesture to existing internet memes or address a perceived audience in their description or performance. There is also a whole universe of livestreamed media that goes unwatched on other platforms. As Patricia Hernandez notes, “when seemingly everyone wants to record footage or live stream, who ends up watching the content?”

Unwatched video content sometimes conforms to generic formulas: videos that highlight happy family occasions such as a child blowing out their birthday candles or performing a monologue for an audition. But just as often, this context departs from generic conventions. Greg Wenner, who created a platform called the Lonely Web Project to foreground unwatched YouTube videos, claims that the channel is a “self-proclaimed member of the Lonely Web Club, a bit like the internet’s introvert, in a world of noise that yearns to be heard, one voice that doesn’t care if anyone’s listening.” And again, some people really do care who is listening and long to be heard. According to a 2018 article for The Verge online magazine, for streamers on Twitch who lack viewers, the notion of posting to no one exacerbated their already-existing sense of loneliness—it was “demoralizing” and “disheartening.”


We also know that some creators may post videos to test what sticks, continually posting to see what gains traction. Most notable in 2023 is twenty-five-year-old Jimmy Donaldson, also known as “MrBeast,” who has made a lifestyle and livelihood of learning what circulates based on trial and error, finding “the perfect viral recipe with his videos.”

As of this writing, he is the most subscribed YouTube creator in the United States, with over ninety-one million subscribers across his three accounts. His most successful formula for video circulation involves giving money away to strangers: for some, it’s so they can buy life-changing medical technologies, such as hearing technologies for people with hearing loss; for others, it is cash or prizes to participate in one of his challenges, such as quitting their jobs in exchange for a bag full of $100,000 or being the first person to help him change a flat tire on the side of the road for a surprise thank-you of keys to a new car.

As with all moving image media, we cannot assume that creators intend simply to have their videos be viewed, nor can we always infer a video’s provenance. Who took the video is not always the same as who uploaded it, and it is not typically clear why the poster chose to share a video from the title or description. Digital obscura bears similarities to other categories of nontheatrical media (found media, orphan films, home movies, etc.) that exhibit vernacular style and content, are produced for a very specific known audience, and may have unknown authorship. At the same time, there are several factors that make the category of digital obscura unique.

Digital obscura is difficult to find. It is present on YouTube but buried. Finding unwatched videos is a complicated endeavor, requiring patience and creative programming skills. There have been a number of concentrated efforts to search for and connect viewers with these lonely videos, including artist Yann van der Cruyssen’s PetitTube platform, Wenner’s the Lonely Web Project website, and a screening of unwatched YouTube videos that I curated with Adam Sekuler in 2013 for Northwest Film Forum in Seattle. Elsewhere I have written about the difficulty of finding videos with few to no views, and in interviews with van der Cruyssen, Wenner, and Viex, it became apparent that there is no foolproof method for unearthing them. Each of us attempted to circumnavigate the ever-changing YouTube algorithms—whether that meant searching for default video files with random numbers (Viex), prioritizing low-resolution Digital Visual Interface (DVI) camera footage (van der

12. Read, “MrBeast.”
13. Read.
14. “1,000 Deaf People Hear For The First Time,” MrBeast, May 6, 2023, YouTube video, 6:13, https://youtu.be/WT0mH6iZneg?si=_{y}
15. PetitTube.com out of France has been in existence since 2011. It began as a platform van der Cruyssen created to watch unwatched videos with his friends and arts collaborators. He later began a community practice of remaking YouTube media, sometimes sending the remakes to the original creators. PetitTube has run a program that searches for videos using random sequences of letters and then refines the list to videos that have not been viewed, are very short, and have existed on the site for longer than six months. Google has revoked the platform’s ability to search for videos, claiming that their logo is too close to that of YouTube and that they have taken a clone of YouTube without adding additional features.

Yann van der Cruyssen, interview by author, June 25, 2023.
Crussyen), using randomly selected search terms (Berliner and Sekuler), or creating an elaborate external video capture and extraction program (van der Crussyen and Wenner).\textsuperscript{16} As Viex describes it, searching for an obscure video you’ve seen before and want to re-watch can feel “as if the earth is constantly shifting below you.”\textsuperscript{17} What worked to find a video in the first instance often doesn’t work the next time around. For Wenner, who started the project in 2016, “the internet’s transformed drastically since the project’s inception. Everything’s grown—seen content, unseen content, trends, and platform diversity. Users now curate their content across numerous platforms, which is fantastic. Yet, we still lack a reliable way to unearth hidden content across platforms. There might be entire platforms full of such content, but how do we tap into them?”\textsuperscript{18}

Another unique characteristic of digital obscura is that it is at once ephemeral and lasting. While viewed by very few and imminently hard to find in a future search, they may also remain online and technically searchable forever. It is unclear how long video material is stored on YouTube, as Google completely black boxes that information, but the default seems to be \textit{in perpetuity}. This content has passed through the gauntlet of platform content moderation, which as Tarleton Gillespie has elucidated, does much of the work of providing and distributing media, adding terms and conditions that affect what circulates, what goes on the so-called back shelf, and what gets culled in the name of risk aversion and profit.\textsuperscript{19}

Finally, online video’s unique relationship to the process of becoming data online can reveal details about existing site functionalities. What doesn’t circulate has escaped the datafication of popular taste or appropriation by popular media, for example, through clips from video sharing platforms rescreened on morning television shows. Digital obscura does not fit broader cultural narratives about what is happening in the world today. Popular taste is produced reciprocally, where \textit{broadcast yourself} has evolved into a feedback loop that encourages \textit{yourself} to conform to norms. There is something raw and pure about this elusive content. It exists on its own terms, without having been framed, lifted, and re-signified by other media users or commercial media outlets seeking to profit from its circulation or cross-marketing potential. Searching for and watching digital obscura requires us to slow down our

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\textsuperscript{16} In his 2016 Fusion article, Viex explains his search process about the “lonely web” phenomenon. He writes, “one of my favorite techniques comes from /r/ imgxxxx and involves searching the default file formats for digital cameras plus four random numbers. This dredges up videos so unwanted that they were never named. In some cases, not even the person who filmed the videos seems to have watched them.” Viex, “Weird, Unfiltered Internet.” Greg Wenner described his process as “parsing YouTube links and extracting video stats, which I then stored in a modest three-table database. I even crafted an admin console to keep tabs on the videos that were captured and checked within the database, methods that only work some of the time.” Greg Wenner, interview by author, August 9, 2023. I describe my curatorial process with Adam Sekular in Lauren S. Berlinger, “Towards a Methodology of Unwatched Digital Media,” \textit{Feminist Media Histories} 8, no. 2 (2022): 219–230, https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2022.8.2.219.

\textsuperscript{17} Joe Viex, interview by author, August 10, 2023.

\textsuperscript{18} Wenner, interview.

pace of online media consumption and resist the pull of algorithmic recommendations. Viex refers to this practice as "resisting the digital routine."20

Taking digital obscura seriously requires that we acknowledge other ways of performing, filming, and editing outside of an attention economy that privileges media popularized by massive corporate players. It means grappling with content that may feel opaque or sitting with an image or experience that isn’t initially legible to us. Through digital obscura we can also become aware of niche audiences and a wide variety of experimental practices. And conversely, knowing what doesn’t get watched can help us reverse engineer algorithms to more clearly see trends in uploading and naming content and identify patterns in online media production and circulation.

In a moment in time when there is so much concern about deepfakes, AI-generated content, and other forms of digital augmentation, it behooves us to also consider the images that are already in our midst, however ethereal, and contend with how the feedback loop of algorithms and likes structures what we are seeing and not seeing. A universe of obscure content exists with lessons to teach us if we’re ready to search, watch, and listen.

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Outtakes and Lost Film: The Fragmentary Encounter between “Newsreel” Wong and the “Chinese Colleen Moore”

The newsreel archive, as with archives of mass media broadly writ, is by default “incomplete, only partially accessible, and often arbitrary in what remains.”¹ The footage itself reveals little about the history it represents. Instead, as Joseph Clark argues, “the power and meaning of newsreels lay largely in how they circulated among the publics they addressed and helped to create.”² My study takes up this insight to consider the newsreel as a system. But it deals with the distinct challenge of approaching footage that was not publicly distributed and therefore, to follow Jaimie Baron, did not contribute to the formation of historical discourse because, from a reception-centered perspective, undistributed footage was never experienced by a historical

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2. Clark, 204.

audience to be historically meaningful. Newsreel outtakes, in their fragmentary and uncompleted forms, provide important venues for media scholars to interrogate both the historiographical and ethnographical value of moving images while challenging dominant methodologies for studying mass media and visual culture that assume and rely on the production-distribution-exhibition circuit of completed work.

This essay examines the unedited and historically undistributed Fox Movietone newsreel footage titled “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” preserved at the Moving Image Research Collections (MIRC) at the University of South Carolina. Among the large amount of China-related Fox Movietone footage available for streaming in the collection, this five-minute, unedited black-and-white sound newsfilm shot on January 23, 1934, records a presumably silent film production of a nightclub scene, probably taken at the Shanghai Tianyi Studio. The footage is an invaluable filmic record of the making of a Chinese film in an era of which the majority of films are lost. The footage is also curious for its paratext available in the online database identifying the actress as the “Chinese Colleen Moore,” making her the Chinese equivalent of one of the most iconic flappers and American stars of the 1920s. More curious still, among the crew who shot the film was the legendary cameraman H. S. “Newsreel” Wong (a.k.a. Wang Haisheng or Wang Xiaoting). Most famous for his photograph Bloody Saturday (1937) shot during the Battle of Shanghai in the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945), Wong’s work was so sensational that Hearst Metrotone produced and released a news story about the “ace movie photographer” himself, titled “Chinese Cameraman Proves War Hero.” Wong contributed a vast array of images to both the US and Chinese mass media in the 1920s and 1930s, yet there remains a dearth of information and scholarship regarding this transpacific media worker.

To understand “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” as the fragment of an encounter between the “Chinese Colleen Moore” and H. S. Wong, and the historical and cultural significance of this footage, it is important to understand the context in which it was produced. Newsreel outtakes, in their fragmentary and uncompleted forms, provide important venues for media scholars to interrogate both the historiographical and ethnographical value of moving images while challenging dominant methodologies for studying mass media and visual culture that assume and rely on the production-distribution-exhibition circuit of completed work.

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“Newsreel” Wong, I navigate two methodological conundrums: the problematic status of newsreel outtakes that were never seen by a historical audience and the potentials and pitfalls of using digital archives to identify and track historical figures. My attempt to excavate the backstory of the five-minute outtakes resulted in a fragmentary tale, one that is reflective of the miscellaneous materials that I was able to gather.

The problematic status of outtakes has been discussed and debated in recent scholarship. According to Dan Streible, outtakes is a broad and not always accurate “catchall.” Yet, as Mark Garrett Cooper contends, the term is useful and necessary firstly because “modern cataloging schemes consider titles indispensable.” As an archival marker appended to the descriptive title, the term outtakes helps researchers distinguish materials that had not reached historical audiences from the ones that were included in released prints and exhibited.

But this overly general distinction can be misleading, not only because the status of circulation isn’t always certain. Outtakes can also give the inaccurate impression of the actual existence of a finished work, with the outtakes consisting of materials that were taken out. As Cooper notes, “most of the material that survives in their archives cannot be ‘outtakes’ in the strict sense [of] the term. In the most likely scenario, there never was a completed, ‘cut,’ or manifest story that might have included any given shot.” In this sense, the “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” could be more accurately described as unedited footage—“rolls shot by crews on newsreel assignment but never cut or previewed.”

Streible’s statement echoes Jane Gaines’s notion that we interrogate documentary’s complicated relationship to the real and, in particular, to see historical ethnographic filmmaking not only as the negatively defined “cinema of taxidermy” or “cinema of romantic preservationism” but also as “the genuine quest for knowledge about the totally unknown and unfamiliar.” “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” indeed might be read as an instance of “fascinated documentary looking,” an epistephilic and self-reflexive view that invites speculative inquiries not only about the profilmic event it documents, but also the production of the footage itself.

8. Cooper and Baron, 310–312.
9. Cooper and Baron, 312.
10. Streible, “Fifty Terms for Newsfilm,” 258.
11. Streible, 258.
The “Camera Man’s Dope Sheet” for “Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes” states that the footage shows “[h]ow motion pictures are filmed in China.” A document used by crew members to record what they’ve shot on an assignment, the dope sheet can be indicative of the intention behind production. The outtakes contain about twenty shots of the production of a cabaret scene in what the dope sheet calls “the China studio [sic] which is the most up to date motion picture studio in the Far East.” The shots were taken from various angles, at different distances, foregrounding the scale and modern technologies of the studio set. Indeed, the dope sheet states that “[the studio] has modern equipments [sic] with trained men to work them.” A high-angle panning shot, for instance, oversees a dancing crowd, the director, and the cameraman, while taking in the array of tall lighting equipment. The studio’s complex lighting system is of obvious importance to the newsreel filmmakers because it is also mentioned in the notation of shot 4 (“Full cabaret scene with lighting system”). The film was designed to introduce familiar, modern filmmaking practices in China to a general moviegoing audience, even as its potential appeal derives from a sense of so-called authentic exoticism—a peek behind the scenes in a movie studio in the “Far East.”

The semi-colonial Republican Chinese urban culture is embodied in the studio replica of a cabaret, the fashionable young men and women on set, the dancing bodies and movements, and the jazz music. Out of all these elements, the figure of the Chinese Modern Girl stands out. “With its painted face, bobbed or permed hair, fashionable qipao, and high-heel shoes,” the Modern Girl look, as Madeleine Y. Dong has argued, “had become a passport to opportunity and a dress code of necessity for young female city dwellers” by the 1930s. The Modern Girl look pervades and is unmistakably celebrated and fetishized in the newsreel outtakes. The most aesthetically stunning shot in the outtakes may be the low angle, close-up of a woman’s high-heeled feet and calves under her hemline in the foreground, while the busy dancing legs and flowing drapes of other figures shuttle in the background of the shot. Almost half of the shots revolve around an actress identified in the dope sheet as “Miss Grace Nee known in China as the Chinese Colleen Moore” performing different intimate relationships with men.

No information pertaining to a “Grace Nee” exists in the archive. While Colleen Moore was immensely popular with Chinese audiences, I have found no other record that compares a Chinese star with her. As with any research

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15. The dope sheet records eighteen shots, obviously counting the shot interrupted by camera stops as one single shot.
16. “Camera Man’s Dope Sheet.”
18. The practice of comparison is common in Republican Chinese movie magazines. See, for instance, “Zhongmei mingxing duizhao biao” [A table of comparisons between Chinese and American stars], Yingxi Shenghuo [Movie weekly] 24, in which Hu Die is compared with Janet Gaynor, Ruan Lingyu with Renée Adorée, Lin Chuchu with Mary Pickford, and so on.
endeavor, luck is a necessary element. And I am in luck because “Nee” or “Ni” is not a terribly common surname in Chinese. Using different keyword combinations in the Chinese Periodical Full-Text Database (1911–1949), I was able to locate a few actresses surnamed Ni during the 1920s and 1930s. Finally, a photo of Ni Miaoyu published in the illustrated paper *Movie Pictorial* on July 6, 1927 appears to be identifiable with the actress in the unedited footage. This exciting find only leads to more puzzles, however. For instance, Ni seems to have been active only in the years of 1927 and 1928, with newspapers reporting her appearance in three films produced by Tianyi Film Company. To complicate matters further, I found that Ni Miaoyu might have been the “society star” Ni Ailian, whom in one English caption in a 1928 *Peiyang Pictorial News* also is called “Miss Alice Nie.”

Chinese high-end illustrated magazines or pictorials from this era routinely published photographs of socialites, courtesans, and fashionable girls without supplying much background information about the subject. Yet for consumers as well as scholars of Republican Chinese mass media, these women remain of interest as types. Falling short of a coherent narrative of the person herself, Ni’s photos are typical Modern Girl views—snippets added to the already fragmentary and fleeting moving images of the newsreel out-takes, emblematic of a kaleidoscopic modernity that embraces the design aesthetics of fragmentation and discontinuity. Rather than identify the actress in front of the camera, the naming of Ni as the “Chinese Colleen Moore” leads us to the cameraman who likely left this trace in the dope sheet.

H. S. “Newsreel” Wong achieved fame as a photojournalist for documenting major historical events. However his repertoire encompasses an array of genres such as scenic landscapes, ethnographic photo essays, celebrity culture, and even location shooting in China for the Hollywood production *The Good Earth* (Sidney Franklin, 1937). Existing accounts of Wong’s early career are extremely elliptical, largely anecdotal, and oftentimes contradictory. Having cross-referenced multiple sources, I was able to confirm that around 1923, Wong joined an American excursion team to the highland Northwest of China, from Inner Mongolia, through Gansu, Xinjiang, to Tibet. The arduous journey lasted more than two years and might have been the starting point of his career in photojournalism. The photos of deserts, snow land, mountains, exotic animals, peoples, and cultures as well as Wong’s own weathered and rugged figure were brought to readers of the newly founded pictorial the *Young Companion* in 1926, along with his narration written in half-literary, half-vernacular Chinese. Targeting a Chinese urban

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19. *Yingxi Huabao* [Movie pictorial], July 6, 1927.
21. *Beiyang Huabao* [Peiyang Pictorial News], August 13, 1927; December 5, 1928.
23. “Wangjun tanxian ji” [Adventures of Mr. Wang], *Liangyou* [*The Young Companion*], no. 4, May 15, 1926, 10–11.
readership, Wong frequently drew on discourses of modernity, masculinity, and orientalism not unlike cameramen from the West.  

Wong may have made the acquaintance of Ariel L. Varges during this excursion, who was also a regular contributor to high-end Chinese pictorials under the Chinese name Fan Jishi. Varges allegedly arranged this "trip to Mongolia . . . [during which] he crossed the great Gobi Desert, where white men have hardly ever set foot." Sometime after Wong returned from the excursion, Varges hired him as his assistant and interpreter and together they reported the Northern Expedition in 1926 for International Newsreel. By 1934, MGM-Hearst Metrotone hired Wong as a staff cameraman, and he worked as a member of a crew named Orient No. 3. From 1929 to 1934, Hearst partnered with Fox to produce twice-weekly sound newsreels distributed through MGM. During the five years of partnership, Fox-Hearst produced simultaneously Hearst Metrotone News and Fox Movietone News. The negatives were frequently developed and stored by Fox Movietone offices in New York, which explains why, although Wong was an employee of Hearst Metrotone, the "Chinese Motion Picture Studio—outtakes" could be found in the Fox Movietone collection.

Tracing Wong’s career up to the point of the making of the newsreel, I propose the possibility of Mingxing (Star) Motion Picture Company to be the studio featured in the footage. Wong had previous connections with Mingxing when he filmed Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford’s 1929 visit to Shanghai and their tour of the studio. Wong also filmed Anna May Wong’s trip to Shanghai in 1936, during which the Chinese American star visited the shooting of Jingangzuan (Diamond, dir. Xu Xinfu, 1936) at Mingxing. Similar
art deco production design and the mise-en-scène of the cabaret dancing sequence appear in the extant all-star Mingxing production *Nüer Jing* (Bible for girls, Cheng Bugao et al., 1934). Might the film shoot recorded in the out-takes be a rehearsal in which Ni served as a stand-in for other major stars? Or maybe the production itself was never completed, just like the newsreel story? These questions may be unanswerable, but the processes of excavation and speculation expose us to the infrastructures of film and celebrity culture—the environment of the studio, behind-the-scenes crew, uncredited actors, and journalistic activities—that are oftentimes never seen on-screen. The reward of this circuitous journey is thus not the miraculous recovery of a supposedly lost narrative feature film—the cherished object of film history—but the fragments of encounters picked up on the search for answers across multilingual, multimedia, and transnational archives. The methodological challenges this historically unseen and unedited footage presents push us, as media scholars, to pursue new approaches to hermeneutics and historiography and to embrace the contingency that initiated us on this journey in the first place.

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32. I want to thank Yuqian Yan, Ai Qing, Shi Chuan, Zhen Zhang, and Yongchun Fu for discussing these materials and possibilities with me.
During the 1990s, the Polaroid Evidence Project (PEP) distributed Polaroid cameras among police in the Nassau County suburb of Long Island to document domestic violence. Patrols produced instant photographs of overwhelmingly female victims of male abusers—often these abusers were spouses—sending the images to court officials for case processing. The images were intimate in nature and represented a growing caseload in a wealthy township. Making legal knowledge about domestic violence has long been a coalitional affair between police and medical and social service agencies. Affiliated with the Nassau Coalition Against Domestic Violence, which had been photographing abuse victims for years, the PEP professionalized police work and lawmaking by mimicking the often unremarked-upon practices of social services.

While the term *project* attests to the experimental, local, and perhaps temporary status of 1990s police evidence collection due to its dependence on coalitional grant funding, expanded institutionalizing efforts were planned for other counties. Ultimately, the PEP helped usher in a national police practice whereby photographs of victims’ injuries are sought as evidence of domestic abuse in criminal court case files and prosecutorial arguments. Today, image production remains part of national domestic violence investigation protocols.

While the public has a right to see criminal court case files and copies of visual evidence attached therein, case records (including photographs and video) are not as accessible as they might seem. Original images are largely unavailable to the public due to the tendency to destroy, cancel, annex, amend, or revoke evidence over time. The history of these bureaucratic techniques is well documented by Cornelia Vismann and others. The PEP is not


a well-known set of records. It consists of a lost archive of unknown size and breadth. But what makes the trove of difficult-to-look-at Polaroids challenging to assess is that the photos disappeared or were destroyed by the normal record-keeping/destruction practices of criminal courts. Images from the PEP were used in 13 percent of Nassau County’s domestic violence complaints.\(^2\) We do not have access to the total number of images taken during the project—context that would make this percentage meaningful. Moreover, pressing questions, such as what made PEP photographs viable in one case and not another, are virtually impossible to answer. Decades later, such details in the afterlife of the PEP evidence are gone. But a detail about the previous *use* of the PEP photos points to an important example of its evidentiary afterlife.

The PEP was one of several bureaucratic processes that victims of domestic abuse could enlist to their cause, including obtaining an order of protection, calling for an abuser’s arrest, or instigating divorce proceedings. PEP photographs were discovered to be powerful therapeutic tools when returned to victims and circulated to abusers receiving treatment for their behavior. Acting as a mirror stage, victims saw the injuries they sustained in the photographs, while abusers looked at the harm they inflicted. Evidence became a significant tool for victims and abusers alike to confront minimizing behaviors—victims commonly downplay their abuse under a variety of social, cultural, and economic pressures, and abusers diminish the seriousness of what happened.

Showing and discussing PEP evidence of domestic abuse with victims and batterers in treatment is not part of the public’s right of access to court case-files. Debriefing victims and abusers using evidence is part of the anecdotal culture of social service provision and the confidential discourse of therapy, both of which are private. This raises questions about the transformation of victims and abusers in relation to visual tools, including synthetic materials such as photographs. The specific details in these disappeared images, such as the shape and shadow of faces, limbs, and wounds, remain elusive. And yet violent intimacy has an iconography that is part of the cultural imaginary. How can we study the afterlives of domestic violence’s visual evidence when the evidence itself is difficult to come by?

As legal historian Katherine Biber observes, “criminal evidence gives rise to new uses and interpretations, new concepts and questions, many of which are creative and transformative of crime and evidence, and some of which are transgressive, dangerous or insensitive.”\(^3\) This principle—the promotion of new interpretations and conceptions in the study of criminal evidence—is my point of departure with the PEP. When addressing the afterlives of this evidence, it is no longer necessary to focus on (1) the specific artifact and (2) its professionalizing and therapeutic role with police and court respondents. Evidentiary afterlives, in other words, need not pertain to the specific artifact. Some forms of evidence have achieved the iconic status of *a look*, precisely through mechanisms like the PEP. This explains how such a small

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number of domestic abuse images with limited circulation such as the PEP reappear publicly via popular media and art. They become iconic—a crucial function in the semiosis of evidence. During the early days of prosecuting domestic violence, artwork incorporating domestic violence themes grew alongside the PEP’s effort to delimit how battered women’s experience circulates, officially and legally. That art continues to be produced to this day.

To examine how the look of a battered woman migrates to social media art, it’s crucial that we expand Biber’s concept of cultural afterlives of evidence. Take the art of Eleanor Macnair and Laetitia Ky as examples. They at times use domestic abuse imagery in their respective works, magnifying the signs of abuse frequently recorded by police. Both work in sculpture, documenting their work through photography. Layering photography onto sculpture, synthetics, and social media, these artists challenge the stability of singular media forms, making form playfully difficult to discern. Combining the hustle culture of creating economic and career opportunities online with self-produced content on human rights themes, they contribute to evidentiary afterlives of domestic violence photography.

Macnair’s and Ky’s artworks nod to puzzles of material constitution in Western philosophy, a lively discussion of the distinctions between part and whole objects dating back at least to Aristotle. Imagine a lump is a portion of clay. The puzzle of the Statue and the Clay queries what portion of the lump constitutes the statue. Like similar puzzles, the Statue and the Clay puzzle ponders whether distinct objects may occupy the same space and time and in what way distinct objects can share matter. The puzzles are semantic games demonstrating the transitive nature of parthood and wholes (e.g., “gunk,” like Play-Doh, is considered an object with no proper part). Successive puzzles result in new concepts productive of solutions to old puzzles and the creation of new ones. Macnair’s photographed sculpture contributes to the puzzles from the women’s sphere, and Ky’s work is more explicitly from a Black Afropolitan woman’s sphere. The result is an expansion of the aesthetic registers we can use to describe domestic violence by remaking the look of visual evidence for popular consumption.

Macnair’s artwork, for its part, centers the tactile engagements we construct through photography and our (dis)interest in the photographic original. The sculptures last a short time, only long enough for Macnair to photograph them before disassembling and returning the color putty to respective containers. The Play-Doh iteration of Nan Goldin’s Nan One Month After Being Battered (1984) makes possible logical formulations akin to puzzles.

of material constitution, particularly in the way the puzzles are experiments of destruction through effacement. As a result, all sculptures contain past sculptures and their iconic photographic referents within them.

Macnair uses the ephemeral to construct a long-lasting memory of the photographic original, thereby attempting something between verisimilitude and artistic license with iconic photographs. In 2015, Macnair recreated Goldin’s self-portrait for a series titled *Photographs Rendered in Play-Doh*. Her interpretation of Goldin’s image (which trades on the iconic image of domestic abuse victims) sets artistic judgment literally into motion; the viewer sees the Play-Doh creation and likely sets out to retrieve Goldin’s original by either remembering or physically calling up the image on their mobile phone. The presence of smartphones and social media during the moment of apprehending the artwork is a novel situation of poiesis/production. Smartphones expand not only our ability to view art; the technology affords immediate (re)production of the artwork by the viewer and their dashboard. Macnair’s *Photographs Rendered in Play-Doh* assumes a spectator has a computing device on hand during the encounter with her sculptures. As she reproduces Goldin’s photo, Macnair comments on the philosophical ideas of surface, form, matter, and substance and on the analytical maneuvers theorists deploy to establish ontology. *Artist* is not a category Macnair claims for herself, though she has shown her work in gallery settings. Her idea of the art world centers the online public of her Tumblr account. The display of her work is accompanied by its unseen destruction, performed privately at Macnair’s London flat.

What’s more, the method in *Photographs Rendered in Play-Doh* lumps the particular work within the whole, heightening the ambiguity of artistic originals. The question must be asked: Is Macnair’s work in itself transgressive, or does it merely transgress Goldin’s self-portrait? Does the work achieve both, or neither? In a certain sense, the photograph does more and less than point to the artistic original and its relationship to derivative works. With respect to Goldin’s original self-portrait, Macnair’s Play-Doh version threatens, on the one hand, a facile rendering of the confrontational ambush and hard-core sensibility of Goldin’s image (or even the PEP). Yet, on the other, Macnair seems to want to defamiliarize the original, writing, “so many are familiar with [Goldin’s portrait] but haven’t really looked at it closely or have glanced at it (almost like it had been sanitized by familiarity) that I wanted to try to get viewers to read the caption and really look at it.” Still, it remains the case that Macnair’s Play-Doh rendition could appear to some less available or immediate in its effect compared to the gravitas and criticality of Goldin’s self-portrait.

I would propose a different way of looking at Macnair’s Play-Doh version. It establishes a circuit between Goldin and Macnair, extending from the gravitas of the original to the frivolity of the rendition, and thereby disrupts the preoccupation with the visual proof of domestic violence. After all, the


8. Eleanor Macnair, personal communication with author, August 2023.
garish red lipstick in Goldin’s self-portrait offered its own ironic play with art’s promise of cathexis that is not actually guaranteed. And Play-Doh—associated with children’s creative space, lurid colors, and popular culture—recalls the kinds of arts-based therapeutic techniques used for eliciting testimonial evidence from children about abuse. Macnair demands that we look again.

Laetitia Ky’s hair sculptures, by contrast, are grounded in Black African women’s craft cultures, specifically around hair practices. Guided by Jasmine Nichole Cobb, who addresses “the sensation of blackness on the surface as construed through coiffure,” my belief is that Ky opens a site of poiesis both ancient and inventive, traditional and futuristic, incorporating Black coiffure into contemporary art from a Black woman’s sphere.9 Lorna Simpson, Alison Saar, David Hammons, and other artists draw upon Black hair as a medium with political history in freedom struggles. Black hair is part of racialized gender differences in the semiosis of accumulating and making fungible Black captivity and exploitation. These differences are apprehended tactilie, not merely visually.

Born in Côte d’Ivoire, Ky is a polyvalent artist and social media influencer. With a recent exhibition in Berlin and book—Love and Justice: A Journey of Empowerment, Activism, and Embracing Black Beauty—collecting her photos, Ky is on the cusp of social media stardom and art world success.10 She is a recent winner of a Jeunesse Francophone 33.35 award for Digital Influence and Media Technology and a finalist for Elite Model Look contest.11

Ky’s multimedia works embody what Cobb calls “haptic blackness on the pictorial surface,” evoking the vocabulary of architecture and engineering.12 Using wire and synthetic hair in addition to her own, she forms sculptural works that are beyond hairstyle and mere shape. Rather, Ky is staging theatrical scenes both on her head and through her flesh, hair being part of the epidermal whole. Often untitled, Ky’s sculptures require the viewer to put what they see into words. The works are primal scenes—and here the colonial primitive/civilized dynamic energizing the word primal is provocative. As Ky strikes a scene using hair and other wiring materials, she establishes the skin organ as a theater stage.

Issues of immigration, ethnicity, and aspiration are also present in the way Ky’s coils build value into her sculptures, which are exhibited mostly online. The artwork discloses Afropolitan imaginaries, whose ascendance, Achille Mbembe observes, is conditioned by mobile phone technology.13 Ky’s hair formations are photographed and circulated online; occasionally they are sculpted online live. While Cobb finds that Black women artists

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“depicting Black hair in works that invite touch intertwine the particular histories of touching Black coiffure and the modern museum’s prohibition on patrons’ contact with artworks,” Black women artists also interweave histories of touching Black coiffure and digital online publics’ well-established misogynoir structure, an online court of public opinion that is the context for Ky’s activism.14 Several recent books and essays by Black feminist scholars Catherine Knight Steele, Moya Bailey, and André Brock demonstrate the racial logics organizing platform publics, inherited from legacy media institutions.15 These scholars draw attention to the ways Black folks continue Black freedom struggle online in extralegal contexts of social media. These platforms function as courts of public opinion through which we form our own counter-publics, enclaves of respectable and ratchet, hip-hop feminist and misogynoir critique.

Many of Ky’s images respond to violence against women, human rights, and police brutality. In a domestic violence–themed sculpture (untitled), Ky uses wire, extensions, her own hair, needles, and sewing threads to shape a woman in profile with a teardrop falling down her cheek.16 The sculpture is captured by digital photography in which the artist stands with/as the work in front of a yellow background. Wearing a trendy one-shoulder tank top, jeans, and a septum ring, Ky strikes a confident expression, arms crossed. Vulnerability and strength are projected, responding to the different forms and affective registers through which evidence of abuse may appear. Through Ky’s art, hair visually transitions into African fractals we call a style and then into a theatrical scene. But Ky’s work also contributes to puzzles of material constitution and the nature of what philosophers call parthood. By incorporating synthetic hair into her photographed sculptures, the artist gestures to Anne Cheng’s idea of “synthetic personhood” in the production of women’s social roles.17 The figures are reminiscent of black stick figures used in simple drawings, but they are also figures referring to Black peoples. The inclusion of kente cloth in the sculpture locates a sexual assault scene in the African diaspora. It is a move encapsulating Mbembe’s observation that Africa “tends to refer to a geoaesthetic category.”18

In this and other works, each scene, including one depicting police brutality, is rendered through interwoven Black and synthetic hair, gesturing to a still vibrant economy between Asian female hair growers, white industrial producers, and global consumers. One must listen for visual and sound critics Tina Campt and Kevin Quashie for their respective ideas of sonic frequency and Black quiet since Ky’s Black hair sculptures gesture toward listening to a

range of affecting sounds within the photograph. These sounds add force to the apprehension of hair scenes such as the falling teardrops and the physical blows of domestic violence in a global context. Ky’s hair reconfigures which part of the flesh (epidermal matter) and the role of photography—a synthetic—we use to confirm wounding.

The question of what survives of clay once it is called lump and then transformed into a statue is reoriented by Ky’s and Macnair’s sculptures to include domestic violence. These artists invite us to consider the evidentiary afterlives of domestic violence not only within legal apparatuses but also within popular media. Their work asks about the nature of victimization and survival in the self, community, and world. Looking to social media–based art depicting domestic violence themes drifts away from official, legal forms of evidence as exemplified by the PEP and toward popular and creatively expressed forms of evidence circulating online. Though still concerned with the image, Macnair and Ky interrogate the visuality of domestic violence by asking us to regard anew its iconic looks that lie outside law and the privacy of therapeutic milieus.

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Elizabeth Patton

Unveiling Private Histories: Ethical and Theoretical Implications of Transforming African American Home Movies from Personal Keepsakes to Public Artifacts

One summer afternoon, I had the privilege of conducting a dynamic and constructive phone interview with Ms. Williams, whose family’s private home movies are a part of the Great Migration Home Movie Project at the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC). The project is a public program for digitizing analog audiovisual media. Ms. Williams’s collection comprises over thirty home movies, predominantly shot on 8mm and 16mm color film during the 1960s and 1970s. At first, she had

1. As requested, I am using a fictitious name to protect her and her family’s privacy.

approached the NMAAHC to digitize and preserve her fragile 16mm films to ensure their longevity. Many of the films offer a fascinating glimpse into spaces of leisure, relaxation, and celebration, providing a window into the African American experience during a time when segregated recreational spaces were prevalent. Since its founding in 2016, the NMAAHC has gathered and conserved a substantial number of these African American home movies. Donated by families to the NMAAHC, many of these films, like those of Ms. Williams, provide a valuable historical resource.

As one of many children featured in these moving reels, Ms. Williams deeply appreciated their emotional value. These films chronicled special occasions such as birthdays, holidays, and memorable family vacations to the beach. They represented more than individual memories; they depicted slices of African American life, offering insights into traditions and leisure activities rarely highlighted in mainstream narratives of the civil rights era. She also recognized their potential significance in shedding light on African American history. Initially, she was reluctant to donate the films because of privacy concerns; however, with careful consideration, she generously agreed to donate them to the Center for the Digitization and Curation of African American History at NMAAHC. There was one crucial condition. She wanted to limit their circulation by retaining the ability to grant permissions for their use in research or public display. As most of the adults depicted in the films were now deceased, she carried a mix of nostalgia and ethical concern—a desire to preserve their memory while also being conscientious about the implications of sharing their personal experiences with the world. Historical research and public exhibition, she believed, could open the potential for misinterpretation by researchers and public audiences. My initial conversation with Ms. Williams shifted my perspective on agency, privacy, and interpretation in using home movies as historical sources. Prior to considering this case, I had not considered the ethical tightrope I must walk as a media historian—respecting her family's legacy while navigating the responsible use of these rare cinematic glimpses into African American history.

Ms. Williams’s home movie collection typifies the concept of orphan films—those cinematic materials that are often unwatched, undistributed, inaccessible, or lost. In this essay, I consider the ethical and theoretical implications of viewing, understanding, and writing about content that is often undistributed, lost, or inaccessible to the public. These home movies, as intimate portrayals of life, are brought out of their original contexts, raising questions about the nature of personal memory, the production of history, and the role that home movies can play in bridging the gap between the two. On an ethical level, transforming private memories into public narratives brings to the fore ethical dilemmas relating to representation and interpretation.

Despite their deeply personal and veiled nature, home movies “are shaped by the public conventions of the image” and “shared social and cultural understandings.”3 Despite shared understandings and representational conventions, publishing African American home movies originally intended for private consumption for public viewership and critique involves a complex process of transformation that “changes viewers into spectators who cannot participate in their original meaning and will see the films in a different light.”4

Consequently, media historians must consider their interpretative power over these sources. The context that originally framed these narratives might be lost or misunderstood, which can risk essentializing Black leisure culture through a lens influenced by dominant white narratives and perspectives. In the specific context of African American life, essentializing Black leisure culture can erase nuanced lived experiences and neglect the diverse cultural intricacies that these home movies often represent. One cannot fully appreciate the depth of these narratives if we do not question the “broader context of discourses on blackness and film that take the white gaze as the unquestioned and rigid norm.”5 This underscores the importance of approaching these films with a deep awareness of how historical biases and power dynamics can shape interpretation. Such misinterpretations, unintentional or otherwise, can contribute to an incomplete or skewed understanding of African American history, thereby reinforcing preconceptions and undermining the importance of these personal narratives in the broader historical discourse.

Home movies are vital for filling the gaps and absences in African American history, especially concerning leisure spaces and practices. Historically, the experiences and contributions of Black communities have often been marginalized, overlooked, or belittled in official historical records. As a result, the history of African American leisure is sparsely documented or largely absent from institutional archives. In the absence of historical records, such as newspapers, advertisements, postcards, and travelogues, media historians can draw on these moving images to gain insights into the dynamics of leisure spaces and practices. Furthermore, home movies contribute to the broader narrative of African American history by showcasing agency and resilience. Home movies demonstrate how in the face of adversity and marginalization Black people actively created and sustained spaces of leisure, fostering a sense of identity, unity, and cultural pride.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans began establishing vacation communities, hotels, and boarding houses in places such as Martha’s Vineyard, enclaves which still exist today. The less-known narrative of Black resorts in New York State’s Catskills coexists with the region’s widely recognized history as a hub for Jewish resorts, famously known as the Borscht Belt. Among the early Black boarding houses was

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Jessie’s Manna Farms, located in Roxbury, New York, and owned by acclaimed Black baritone and Broadway artist Jules Bledsoe, who also appeared in the 1929 film version of *Show Boat* (Harry A. Pollard). Bledsoe announced the opening of Jessie’s Manna Farms as a summer resort in a 1930 *New York Amsterdam News* advertisement.6 Two decades later, in 1952, the Peg Leg Bates Country Club in Kerhonkson, New York, was opened by Black entertainer Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates. It grew to be one of the best-known Black resorts in the Catskills, accommodating three hundred guests and offering a variety of recreational facilities, including a casino with top-tier entertainment, two swimming pools, a roller-skating rink, tennis courts, and a miniature golf course.7

Despite their vibrant past, these resorts no longer exist today. Many have become abandoned buildings, and the land where they once flourished is up for sale. Remnants of this vibrant era are scarce, making it challenging to piece together their histories. Traditional archival evidence of these resorts is sparse, often limited to a few newspaper clippings and postcards. However, home movies—like Ms. Williams’s collection that documents similar places—can offer valuable insights into these historical spaces, serving as a form of visual archaeology. These personal films can fill in gaps left by conventional archival resources, providing intimate glimpses into everyday life at these resorts and illuminating this crucial yet underappreciated aspect of middle-class African American leisure history.

Drawing on Nadia Allyson Field’s insights into the value of affective viewing and informed speculation, it is clear that home movies, despite their potential limitations, hold substantial value in historical research and narrative construction when faced with gaps in archival records.8 As repositories of memory, home movies elicit affective responses. As articulated by Marita Sturken, modern media such as home movies function as “technologies of memory.”9 They are “not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides” so much as they are “objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning.”10 While home movies can stimulate recall and give memories meaning, they are often limited by their very nature. Home movies are subjective portrayals of personal experiences shaped by the perspectives and choices of those behind the camera and may not present a comprehensive account of events or accurate depiction of everyday life. Therefore, the true power of these films lies not just in the events and places they depict but also in the emotions and narratives they facilitate and invoke. Consequently, media historians who study home movies must contextualize

10. Sturken, 9.
their subjective interpretations, draw connections to the broader historical and sociocultural landscape, and collaborate with community members, when possible, to gain deeper insights. Interviewing community and family members—as I have—and incorporating their narratives can offer a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the leisure spaces and activities represented in the films.

The ethical considerations involved in making these films public must extend beyond legalities such as copyright and consent. As interpreters and presenters of these home movies, media historians should strive to engage with these materials with a sensitivity that upholds the privacy and acknowledges the subjectivity and agency of the individuals within these films—a task made more critical given the historical marginalization and misrepresentation of Black narratives. Studying Ms. Williams’s home movies has allowed me to establish deep connections with individuals who have become collaborators in our shared mission to document the history of these influential spaces of African American leisure. Ms. Williams was initially hesitant to participate in an interview, but an archivist at the NMAAHC helped forge a connection between us, affirming my sincere interest and vouching for my ability to research and write on this topic. In communications with Ms. Williams, I emphasized my commitment to a respectful collaboration on her terms, especially when using family home movies to examine the experience of African Americans vacationing during a time of de facto segregation in the North.

Striving for transparency in all our interactions, I made sure to communicate openly about my intentions and research goals, ensuring that Ms. Williams felt informed and involved at every stage. As our relationship developed, it became clear that building trust was a reciprocal process. While I made sure to prioritize her voice and agency, she provided valuable insights and feedback that enriched my understanding and approach. She shared her memories while watching the films, provided personal documents, and answered probing questions, clarifying the absences within the archive. Respecting her privacy, I agreed not to identify her family or publish any images from the home movies. Also, per her wishes, I will not disclose any identifiable details about the films I had the privilege of viewing in any publication. Instead, I will share Ms. Williams’s perceptions and opinions on the significance of the films along with my own reflections on watching these films as an outsider. Holding to these terms hasn’t hampered my research. It has made me strive to contextualize the limited historical documents I’ve managed to uncover, thereby explaining the significance of these historical leisure spaces and practices.

For example, one intriguing question I sought to understand was why Ms. Williams’s family chose to document their time in the Catskills. Beyond the fact that her family owned a camera and desired to preserve memories for personal and familial recollections, what was the aim here? As we watched the home movies together, Ms. Williams shared that her parents believed that documenting leisure experiences through moving images held a profound significance for Black families. First, it was a means of asserting their presence, humanity, and middle-class status during a time when society often
denied these attributes. Second, her parents believed that the home movies themselves were a powerful testament to their resilience and pursuit of joy and rest in the face of systemic racism. These films showcased their ability to carve out spaces of relaxation, enjoyment, and community-building even in oppressive times. By documenting their leisure experiences, families like the Williams left an invaluable visual record not only for future generations of their family but also for scholars to research and learn about this significant period of American history.

The Great Migration Home Movie Project at the NMAAHC includes over 825 home movies and oral histories from 1940 to the early 2000s. The mission is to preserve and provide public access to African American personal narratives, offering unique insights into African American history and culture. While a portion of the collection has been digitized and made available to the public online, access to the full archive is open to registered researchers. The possibilities for scholarship rooted in this collection are extensive, such as the evolution of amateur filmmaking techniques, media history, the intersections of media and place, and the role of media in everyday life. But beyond merely utilizing this material for scholarship, I urge researchers to engage with this collection to foster ethical practices toward the archive. An unwavering commitment to transparency, a thoughtful respect for privacy, and a focus on promoting agency and active collaboration are essential. Rather than acting as detached observers, let’s forge genuine partnerships with the institutions and families whose histories we chronicle and represent. By doing so, we can collectively contribute to a richer, more nuanced understanding of African American media history.

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I’ve often wished for many of my objects of analysis not to exist. As one might expect, scouring digital footprints of white supremacists yields rather disturbing material. But last year, when I returned to study the image gallery of a long-standing nativist militia group, I was perplexed to find the home page redirecting to a network domain advertising an Indonesian beach. I refreshed the page: same cerulean waters. I re-typed the address and confirmed: adios to the clunky, xenophobic website of the Mountain Minutemen with its front-page call to donate and share posts. This Southern California–based nativist extremist organization emerged from the Minutemen Project movement as part of the anti-immigrant mobilization following 9/11, which fueled a new security paradigm rooted in the idea of homeland. Throughout my research, which took place from 2016 to 2021, I took screenshots from the photo gallery to analyze particular photos. I had always counted on the ability to access the full gallery depicting scenes from 2005 to 2015. The Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine had steadily crawled the site but didn’t capture nested pages beyond the home page. The images were gone.

Now that this page was no longer accessible, what about the hundreds of lost photos that told the story of how these “counter-narco terrorism” vigilantes recruited members or trained their “Patriot Point Posse” to hunt people

on the move? At the same time, I found it incontrovertible that removing access (by any means) to live platforms that disseminate and enshrine Far Right ideologies is something to celebrate. So herein lies the paradox and the strange sting of my unexpected wish fulfillment: as a scholar of racialized violence and media infrastructures, how was I to parse the implications of losing this archive that materially contributed to harm yet was full of objects of analysis that unlocked critical junctures of inquiry? For all my desire that these images never exist in the first place, losing access provoked an uneasy realization about my sense of analytic claim over them. How might I distance myself from seeing this as a personal research tragedy and instead zero in on the generative qualities of this disappearance?

This essay examines the afterlives of inaccessible, discriminatory media through the lens of reference rot, or the breakdown of active or functional website components. Writing in *Scientific American* in 1995, Jeff Rothenberg first warned of the “imminent danger” of losing digital information. Reference rot refers to the process of losing access to websites, hyperlinks, or source data needed to make a site run properly. The term encapsulates the precarious nature of digital material from unanticipated equipment failures, terminated domains, inactive servers, and degraded data within the context of ever-evolving web formatting and technical standards. On top of these components, Marisa Leavitt Cohn considers the labor contingencies in the construction of software itself: “the moral economy of software work also applies to its aging and obsolescence.” Given these various processes and reasons for digital decay, scholars have developed ways of picturing and describing the inability to archive all data. The ideas of a “digital dark age” and of “link cemeteries” connote a large-scale, mournful loss, while “digital heritage” suggests preservation practices with analog equivalents for cultural workers across film and media industries. Potential solutions to curb reference rot include Google vice president Vint Cerf’s notion of a “digital vellum,” which would index both content and operating system to create “an ecosystem able to remember what bits mean over long periods of time.”

As cultural workers know all too well, the politics of preservation have long been asymmetrical and contested, based in value-laden questions about what’s worth saving, why, and for whom. With this background I ask, What about data that endangers? Reference rot might just as easily encompass

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anti-racist digital mediations that are worth holding onto. However, the archival impulse to preserve hateful media produces more complex considerations. How can media scholars usefully frame the disappearance of discriminatory online discourse that should be left for dead? Let’s consider the recently defunct website for the Mountain Minutemen to put forward methods for working across three dimensions of media loss: the gains made by eradicating media that stoke racialized harm, the persistence and adaptation of discriminatory data across media and platforms, and the role of precarity in shaping digital forms of cultural remembering and amnesia.

When it comes to combating white supremacists online, reference rot is an accidental hero. The unplanned nature of disappearing links or erased files serendipitously advances the larger project of removing white supremacist material from the internet, but it makes for a much less gratifying story. We’re not talking about savvy hackers infiltrating digital territories claimed by hateful bigots. This isn’t about artists or activists deploying counteroffensives to derail platform vitriol. Reference rot is seemingly random, and media scholars are specially equipped to spell out the potential gains of this phenomenon. We need grounded analyses that clarify the significance of discriminatory media’s removal and contextualize the historical processes shaping digital life’s impermanence. Given the various socio-technical processes that engender reference rot, media scholars can productively situate the political implications of disappeared discriminatory data.

Such an approach is familiar ground in the field. For decades, feminist film scholars have recalibrated the methods by which archival gaps and erasures can be taken up as starting points of inquiry, speculation, and oppositional reading. New media scholars have charted the political affordances of digital structures and the predictive patterns between online power and profit. Critical archive scholars have theorized the role of discrimination in projects of collective memory.


These theories and historiographies frame the unpredictable qualities of reference rot within a mediated continuum of material, historical, economic, and political contingencies. Building on this work, media scholars can pinpoint the productive capacities of eradicating discriminatory data.

Studying the Mountain Minutemen’s website helped me better understand how they promoted physical and digital border patrol. The images and the surrounding discourse on the site accounted for the development and weaponization of visual tropes that strengthened their vigilantism. For instance, they posted a series of photographs depicting abstract markings in sand to raise alarm about the counter-detection technology of migrants wrapping carpet or foam around their shoes. 10 Other images zoomed in on trampled flora in the paths of clandestine crossings, framing broken stems as desecration of the American homeland. They took photos of hateful, slur-filled notes they placed in areas migrants commonly used to rest along the journey. They posed with their guns and imitated shooting migrants in jovial scenes at their base camp. In these images and more, the Mountain Minutemen had crafted a powerful, enduring call to bring boots on the ground and eyes on the border in ways that flaunted their alluring sense of impunity. 11

Though I had to cut my intended research short due to reference rot, it’s far more important that these images no longer circulate in their original context. Though each image and link is only a single droplet in the ocean of toxic online hate, their removal makes impossible any future use of such discriminatory data. Responding to Lisa Nakamura’s recent call for media scholars “to become familiar with [right-wing] culture’s iconographies, its visual preoccupations, its citational practices,” I can situate this lost object of analysis as a broken link in the supply chain of nativist citation resources. 12 Becoming familiar with rotted, inaccessible data means researching across qualitative and quantitative methods in order to sketch the structural contours of endangering data’s life and afterlives. In the absence of the photos I once studied, I can analyze the bright lines between their ideological aspirations and the motivations of contemporary nativists’ emergent media tactics. These photos made an indelible mark on anti-immigrant visual cultures, and I can locate the source and context of media they inspired. In their inaccessibility, I can chronicle one less data set poised to lend any semblance of historical veracity to white supremacist Great Replacement conspiracy theories. In other words, reference rot cut short our access to these images, but the longevity of their impact can still be analyzed. That includes contact tracings, which supports a twofold approach to mapping out the infrastructures of discriminatory data and creating archives that cull hateful media from their original context for study.

Emergent digital platforms have altered the spread of information among nativist vigilantes such as the Mountain Minutemen, but, of course,

11. “Mountain Minutemen.”
xenophobic fearmongering is neither new nor exclusive to networked digital contexts. Media scholars can use their training to contact trace or find points of contact with discriminatory media in order to map out its reach and permutations. By invoking this pandemic-era practice at the threshold of care and surveillance, media scholars can track the material and ideological viral load of absent media. Contact tracing for digital information spread differs from quantitative practices such as studying metadata in the form of traffic logs, taking up the qualitative work of comparing and historicizing rhetoric. Distant and close readings trace the virality and the vectors of spreading discriminatory data. New historiographies can emerge from mining and connecting the afterlives of discriminatory data.

With the Mountain Minutemen’s website down, I needed to look elsewhere for their media impact. My contact tracing was nonlinear, leading me to several more dead ends. The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) had written about the rising prominence of the Mountain Minutemen and the dangers of their online outreach, but an obsolete Adobe Flash Player prevented me from viewing the embedded videos on their site.13 A disturbing snuff film alluded to in SPLC’s reporting had been picked up by local Mexican and US news outlets, but 404 errors prevented me from accessing reporting about the video.14 From here, contact tracing brought me further into nativist echo chambers.

Knowing that the Mountain Minutemen would have capitalized on any press as good press, I turned to right-wing news aggregate blogs and forums that might have concurrently reported on their activities, albeit in a more positive light.15 Through these sites, I eventually found direct links to YouTube channels that had posted the disturbing, first-person-shooter style videos. These stakeout videos imitate a night vision scope and play out the scenario of what the diegetic voice-over calls “cockroach hunting [sic]” before discussing a plot to dispose of the migrants’ bodies.16 These videos were initially claimed by the Mountain Minutemen, then rebuked, and finally admitted as staged by the head of the organization.17 The videos displayed a set of visual choices familiar to me from the website image galleries, deploying what I call the aesthetics of detection. Long before AI deepfake controversies or fake

15. These include powerlineblog.com, captainsquartersblog.com, patriotwebsites.net (now defunct), stormfront.org, and immigrationbuzz.com.
news discourse, the ability to track connections and aesthetics across media provided a strategy for accountability: in this case, contesting the nativist videographer’s claim of innocence (since the video was staged) by contextualizing this video as a calculated media ploy to inspire deadly force.

To return to Nakamura’s manifesto, I was motivated by the idea that “scholars must move to create their own visual archives of [right-wing] material—a job that we have been trained to do.”18 The controversy around the video’s veracity ignited right-wing debates about the power of free speech and the utility of what we might now refer to as fake news in producing a media spectacle.

Contact tracing the dead ends of the Mountain Minutemen’s website led me to their tactical shift from coverage of real events to releasing fantasy footage of imagined lethal violence. In my newfound attention to the unruly qualities of reference rot, it has become critical to take on the simultaneous work of actively archiving discriminatory media while creating the capacity to further trace its potential dead ends. Contact tracing the Mountain Minutemen’s defunct website allowed me to begin piecing together the foundations of cross-coalitional, anti-immigrant digital media infrastructures along the US-Mexico border. Their media shed light on particular methods of uniting the Right roughly a decade before the spectacularly visible tactics emboldened by the Trump presidency.

In her study of neo-Confederate forums, Tara McPherson analyzes how “Internet communities signal a new level of awareness about public perception and battles over public spaces. . . . These sites understand that successful publicity now requires an evasion of questions of race and racial representation.”19 Contact tracing of discriminating data and their reference rot can unveil attempts to recalibrate white supremacy into more covert or palatable forms. Through this method, media scholars can demonstrate the permutations and adaptability of more historically and legally recognizable forms of hate.

*The internet is forever.* This adage seems to dictate many of our decisions about what we post online. However, Safiya Noble has theorized the ways in which “memory making and forgetting through our digital traces is not a choice, as information and the recording of human activities through the digital software, hardware, and infrastructure are necessary and vital components of the design and profit schemes of such actions.”20 Fighting reference rot by renewing domains, paying hosting fees, and keeping up with compatible software and hardware all require time, labor, and money. Which organizations and individuals can afford to safeguard their digital footprint or work against them? What historical and social mechanisms nurture the afterlives of inaccessible media after reference rot? Through the example of a nativist organization’s downed website, I have explored

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the precarity of digital records in assessing, historicizing, and countering or securing the afterlives of discriminatory media. Amid recent congressional hearings about platform moderation and popular concerns over disinformation, trolling, doxxing, and plots to enact violence, the risk of permanence seems to urgently outweigh the costs of oblivion.\textsuperscript{21} As media scholars, we can maintain the importance of such urgency while bridging it with necessary forms of remembering and structural analyses. We can advocate for ways to “value the presence in the absence,” as Lauren S. Berliner does in reframing the contributions of understanding unwatched digital media.\textsuperscript{22} Reference rot can happen to nearly any link or data bit, but its impact does not fall evenly in the context of nativist, white supremacist media. In lieu of an impossible one-size-fits-all solution to complex digital archival practices and technological standards, we can reject accepting reference rot as a neutral phenomenon and instead reformulate how to make use of existing and deleted traces of discriminating data.

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