

Editors' Introduction

Why We Curate Feminist Film Archives

What do we, as feminists, need *right now*—from cinema, from archives, from our communities? How can filmmaking, film festivals, and social movements of the past inspire or befuddle us today? And what is at stake in selecting and presenting archival works by women to create new forms of community? Whether we hold space together in a movie theater or a virtual screening room, we cannot help but draw connections between the unfinished past and the open-ended present. Forging these links is the rallying cry of the feminist film curator. In this tenth-anniversary double issue of *Feminist Media Histories*, we argue that everyone can contribute to the collective project of archival film curating. Unrealized feminist histories pave the way to unforeseen social possibilities. In that spirit, please join our cabal of *feminist archival film curators!*

We build on the labor, commitment, and imagination of many scholars before us. Writing forgotten women and other marginalized “makers” back into film history has been an energizing endeavor for feminist historiography, evinced in works by Jennifer Bean, Giuliana Bruno, Jane Gaines, Usha Iyer, Debashree Mukherjee, B. Ruby Rich, Shelley Stamp, Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, Patricia White, Yiman Wang, Zhen Zhang, and many others.¹ The problem of systemic erasure requires speculative and unorthodox strategies to fill the void, or to “feel” it, as Barbara Zecchi redresses the blight of “archival dispossession” in her videographic essay on Helena Cortesina’s lost silent film *Flor de España* (1922).² Saidiya Hartman lovingly fabulates the unwritten lives of radical Black women in her “archive of the exorbitant” in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, which has

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emboldened feminist embraces of “speculative” methodology, exemplified by Allyson Nadia Field’s 2022 *FMH* double issue.³ The wager of always asking *what if?*—“often borne out of the necessity of exhaustion—or unsustainability—of other approaches,” as Field remarks, encourages us to “stutter and wander,” Katherine Groo urges, and “respond creatively to the flames and cinders [we] find” in the pockmarked, unfinished archive.⁴ In fact, “we conceive of incompleteness as constitutive of women’s film history at a number of levels,” declare Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon in their double-duty introduction AND manifesto to *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*.⁵ Simply put, feminist futures reside in what’s simultaneously absent and present in the archive.

It is the task of the feminist curator to cull those wayward fragments and unleash them onto the emergent, utopian impulses of the present. Feminist curators work in the gaps that feminist archivists and theorists have salvaged from the dustbins of the canon. Together we decide what to save, when, where, and for whom, and how best to frame these tantalizing outtakes for new communities dedicated to raising a ruckus through the resurrection of cinema.

Feminist film curating exceeds traditional methods in academic scholarship. Examples run the gamut from digital networks (*The Women Film Pioneers Project*, *Kin Theory*, *Rise Up!*, *Edited By*, and *New Directions in Film Historiography*), through archival film festivals (*In Visible Colors Remediated*, *Orphans Film Symposium*, and *FIC-Silente*) and DVD/Blu-ray releases (Kino’s *Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers*, *Pioneers of African-American Cinema*, and *Cinema’s First Nasty Women*), to online compendia (Another Gaze’s *Another Screen* and Maya Cade’s *Black Film Archive*) and gallery exhibitions such as HKW’s *No Master Territories* and BAMPFA’s *The Future Is Feminist*. These projects often involve speculative forms of academic labor that question university hierarchies and what “counts” as research in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Toward that end, feminist and queer filmmakers—such as Cecilia Barriga, Zoe Beloff, Zeinabu Irene Davis, Assia Djebar, Zackary Drucker, Tourmaline, Cheryl Dunye, Azza El-Hassan, Su Friedrich, Barbara Hammer, and Karen Pearlman—draw on the remains of the archive to envision lost or impossible counterhistories of cinema and thereby to curate new feminist film futures.

To invoke Karl Marx, historians *interpret* the past; the point, however, is to *change* it. The twenty essays included in this double issue rally for political change by conjuring excluded archives and creating unruly spaces for their

readmission in the present. Many of the essays are cowritten, collaboratively convened, and collectively voiced. They offer practical tools, instructive case studies, radical contexts, and pedagogic provocations for navigating the vast, scattered terrain of marginalized film archives as feminist curators.

The issue begins with three peer-reviewed feature articles that propose novel feminist methodologies. Then follow three roundtables, inviting us to partake in crucial conversations with Black feminist filmmakers, silent film curators and musicians, and precarious racialized educators. Up next, a trifecta of short takes imagine lively forms for reincarnating the absent archive. Finally, we include eleven individual case studies of feminist archival film curating.

That is the order of our table of contents—now let us tell you more about the methodologies of our madness, which are materially messy and incisively decolonial. Claire Cooley models this commitment in “Gathering Despite Scattering: A Feminist and Decolonial Method of Curation,” which finds inspiration in the Arabic word *mutafarraq* (to scatter, be scattered) in order to break from colonial curatorial practices rooted in hierarchy and extraction. Cooley thus gathers the scattered archives of Egyptian filmmaker, actress, and musician Bahiga Hafez, weaving them together in a tapestry modeled on the narrative style of Lebanese filmmaker Heiny Srour. For Marisa Hicks-Alcaraz, archives can be reclaimed against colonial scattering, silencing, and erasure through resistant practices of collaborative audiovisual remixing. “Home Movie Remezcla: ‘Doing Good Relations’ as an Approach to Archival Healing” does just that, drawing on Latina feminist practices of multimedia testimony to pursue “transformative resistance and healing from historical oppression and injustice.”

Kendra Preston Leonard opts for the metaphor of recuperation to document the lives of three female accompanists—Charlotte Stafford, Mildred Fitzpatrick, and Marie Lucas—and composer Lily Strickland. “Imagining Women’s Archives of Silent Film Music” starts from “a thirst for the unmade,” to invoke Beeston and Solomon’s *Incomplete* manifesto.⁶ For Leonard, this is the only possible inroad to theorizing the “gender and loss” that run roughshod over the archive of incomplete, nonextant, and unrealized works by women composers and accompanists. While many of these cue sheets disappeared over a century ago, you wouldn’t expect a film festival from the 1970s to vanish with hardly a trace. The first Black women’s film festival in the world “left a particularly thin archive,” observes Hayley O’Malley in her speculative historiography of the 1976 Sojourner Truth

Symposium, published in a previous issue of this journal.⁷ After sleuthing out and interviewing many of the original artists and participants from the initial event, O'Malley, Field, and filmmaker-curator Monica Freeman organized a screening series and symposium to honor the legacy of 1976. In March 2023, they moderated a roundtable with Ina Archer, Cheryl Chisholm, Jennifer Lawson, O.Funmilayo Makarah, and Yvonne Welbon—we are proud to include an edited transcript of their expansive conversation here.

An animating impetus for coediting this journal issue was our own forays into curating as codirectors of *Cinema's First Nasty Women*: a 4-disc DVD/Blu-ray set spotlighting feminist slapstick rebellion and queer gender play across ninety-nine films made between 1898 and 1926—all with original, new music. What's amazed us most about this project has been its contagious spirit of feminist collaboration. So we wrangled twelve of our “nasty women” contributors to participate in a freewheeling Zoom roundtable (moderated by *FMH* editor Jennifer Bean) about the nitty-gritty of curating, teaching, scoring, producing, and contextualizing the collection.

Rounding out our trifecta of feminist roundtables, Apryl Berney and Florencia Marchetti organized a series of conversations about radical pedagogy and precarious labor in higher education in the wake of their retrospective, “Not Your Model Minority: The Art and Activism of Renee Tajima-Peña.” Opening with the provocation, “What pisses you off?,” Berney, Marchetti, Rosanna Alvarez, Soma de Bourbon, and Susana L. Gallardo conjure Tajima-Peña's radical anger in films such as *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987), *My America . . . Or, Honk If You Love Buddha* (1997), and *No Más Bebés* (2015). They find archival outlets for simmering affects of rage, anxiety, fear, and depression—but also joy and resistance—across crises spanning anti-Asian violence, lethal pandemic illness, and the adjunctification of academia, while seeking energy and community in the pedagogy of feminist film curating on campus.

Frustration “fuels a desire to bring stories and injustices to the realm of the visible,” remarks Marchetti. Reporting from the front lines of archival erasure, *Feminist Media Histories* journal founder Shelley Stamp attended the 2023 FIAF Symposium in Mexico City, devoted to “Women, Cinema, and Film Archives.” Only 1 percent of filmmakers whose work is collected in FIAF archives worldwide identify as women, notes Stamp, while “a host of unnamed and invisible women,” as one FIAF panelist put it, remain “trapped

in our databases.” Kate Saccone offers a provocative rejoinder to the archive’s feminist death trap in “‘Wrath, Witches, and Wonderous Women’: A Curated Program of Lost Films,” in which she delivers on the promise of her title. Drawing on WFPP profiles and avant-garde curation strategies, Saccone concocts a three-screening series (with musical guidance and program notes) of lost silent films directed or written by women from Peru, Croatia, Egypt, China, Mexico, Poland, and the United States. To rewrite film history means daring to “curate differently,” as the vast majority of silent film prints remain irretrievably lost today.

Happily, many films do survive—and curating them with a feminist eye does not have to exclude ambivalently feminist works, such as pre-Code Hollywood sex comedies or 1910s Danish tragic melodramas. For Pamela Hutchinson, “Curating Young Cinema” involves breaking down the barriers between screen history and the archival present. Hutchinson demystifies the misnomer of “old cinema” to resurrect a moment when the medium was “bursting with possibilities.” Toward that end, she invites us to “dance like the censor isn’t watching, and watch like film history remains unwritten.”

And what is a feminist dance without an enlivening refrain? Say it with us: “2-4-6-8 / History Is Never Straight!” In their “messyfest,” “Dragging the Archive: A Club Des Femmes Messyfest,” So Mayer and Club des Femmes revive the energy of their playful curation of Leontine Sagan’s queer cult classic *Mädchen in Uniform* (1931), accompanied with drag performance by Georgeous Michael, to pull “the erotic play of stockings and nightgowns out of film history’s closet.” Like *Mädchen*, which was filmed in the grips of Nazi will-to-power and homophobic whiplash in late Weimar Germany, queer feminist film curation responds to transphobic neofascism with lesbian camp, embodied queer theory, and collective provocations to imagine otherwise.

We can always imagine otherwise, but *from where* shall we do so? More than anything, fantasy is “a setting for desire,” as Linda Williams reminds us in her pivotal essay on body genres.⁸ Enter *feminist elsewheres*: an International Women’s Film Seminar in Berlin that celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in October 2023. Cocurators Elena Baumeister, Fiona Berg, Charlotte S. Eitelbach, Sophie Holzberger, and Arisa Purkpong reflect on “*feminist elsewheres*. A Making(-)Of Three Festivals in the Making” across its recurring iterations in 1973, 1997, and 2023. They theorize and thereby decenter the meaning of “elsewhere” as a plurality of “not yet fulfilled promises” by interrogating what (if anything—if not everything) has changed since 1973 and

1997 in the world of collective feminist filmmaking. Dayna McLeod, Ylenia Olibet, and Alanna Thain locate that change in an independent artist-run center in Montreal “dedicated to the promotion of videos created by women (in its most inclusive definition).” Their cowritten multimedia essay, “Curation as the Cure for the Archive: Groupe Intervention Video’s *Vidéos des Femmes dans le Parc*,” elaborates on GIV’s feminist curatorial practices to fuse together the archive and everyday life, converging on their annual event that exhibits feminist video art and helps cement community in times of loss, illness, and financial precarity.

Or worse: snatched from the hellmouth of war and colonial occupation, archives safeguard fragile documents that testify to everyday resistance against unending subjugation. In those cases, their very survival demands nimble tactics in film restoration. Mathilde Rouxel presents the Jocelyn Saab Project, devoted to “Restoring and Curating Jocelyne Saab’s Cinema of Middle East Struggle,” spanning twenty documentaries that Saab shot on 16 mm in Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Algeria from 1974 to 1989. “A collective restoration process to reclaim the memory of history,” carried out autonomously in Beirut, the project’s cache of Saab’s political cinema can now be programmed all around the world. But what do you do when the object of archival repatriation is implicated in the very structures of violence and oppression that simultaneously exclude its visibility? Regina Longo thoughtfully navigates this enigma in her nuanced case study of Albania’s first woman filmmaker, “Complicating Legacies: Restoring and Re-releasing the Films of Xhanfise Keko.” Longo reflects on her own role as an archivist and curator of the Albanian Cinema Project to redress silences about the atrocities of the country’s brutal dictatorship. As she argues, aesthetic commitment does not always align with historical reality when restoring and curating the works of an important overlooked female filmmaker.

Feminist archives are nothing if not messy and contradictory. Sometimes it is a feminist gesture in itself to provide context for the significance of those archives to ongoing struggles today. Other times, feminist archives wear their political commitments on their sleeve (or their emulsion, if you’ll indulge the mixed metaphor). This was precisely the case for Freude, a Bay Area filmmaker and distributor of 1960s–1970s independent and experimental women’s cinema. Films about sexual liberation and sexuality were among the most popular subjects in her catalog, observe Tanya Zimbaro and Antonella Bonfanti in their evocative case study, “Serious

Business: Freude and Feminist Film Distribution.” Gabriela Yepes-Rossel similarly unsettles dominant paradigms of Peruvian film historiography in “Curating Disruption: Reflections from Peru on Feminist Film Archiving.” Inspired by the Women Film Pioneers Project, Yepes-Rossel launched and curated *Rebels and Braves (1913–2019)*, the first exhibition to establish the extensive participation of women in the history of Peruvian film production. She thoughtfully recounts her archival work, selection criteria, and the euphoric sense of community and possibility that emerged at the event.

How do we choose what to save, especially when that choice imperils the survival of our own experiences and collective memories? Laura López Casado chronicles the formation and activity of Eskelera Karakola (EKKA), a self-organized feminist social center in Madrid, Spain—whose “accidental archives” were discovered in a closet in 2022. “Building a Feminist and Activist Archive: Challenges, Discussions, and Reflections” hashes out the debates that ensued about how and where to preserve the miniDV tapes, VHS cassettes, DVDs, and other print materials documenting the activist history of the center. Out of the closet and into the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, low-budget Canadian lesbian feature film *Dreamers of the Day* (1990) took a circuitous route from Kingston, Ontario, to the 2024 ReelOut Queer Film Festival. Tamara de Szegheo Lang, Dan Vena, and Prerna Subramanian present the film as a text for archiving queer collective praxis in “*Dreamers of the Day* and the Living Archive of 1990s Lesbian Cinema in Canada.” As they show, strategies of collaboration are what make queer art possible.

Collaborative curating can indeed take many forms, often affective as much as archival or logistic. Hieyoon Kim looks at digital networks of intimacy and creativity in “The Work of Care: Purplay’s Curation of Women’s Cinema in South Korea.” The country’s first feminist streaming platform, Purplay is devoted to curating Korean films made by (and for) women across genres, formats, and social contexts. Kim immerses herself in Purplay’s vast catalog, finding traction in the intersections between the platform’s digital accessibility and the senses of solidarity it fosters. From the virtual cloud to a queer dive bar in Montreal, Iris Pint was “left dumbfounded” by the excitement for a screening of transmasculine cinema—an event difficult to replicate due to the archival acrobatics involved in curating ephemeral trans cinema. Cut to 2023, when Pint discovered the Otherness Archive, the first free, open-access, streaming

library of transmasculine film and video. “Making Trans History through the Otherness Archive and Curating Transmasculine Film” meditates on the meaning of *otherness* in the age of self-performing identity and offers powerful insights into how archival practices continue to shape all our histories.

In that spirit, we hereby call on you, feminist readers, to take up the mantle of curators and join us in a rising movement to transform and reimagine film history through the liberation of unseen, obscure, badly preserved, long-lost, mutilated, marginalized, and even mischievously counterfactual moving image archives. To curate from the archive is to decide whose history matters in the present. ■

NOTES

1. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra, eds., *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Jane M. Gaines, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); Usha Iyer, “A Pedagogy of Reparations: Notes toward Repairing the Film and Media Studies Curriculum,” *Feminist Media Histories* 8, no. 1 (January 1, 2022): 181–93, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2022.8.1.181>; Debashree Mukherjee, *Bombay Hustle: Making Movies in a Colonial City* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020); B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Shelley Stamp, *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Jacqueline Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Patricia White, *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Yiman Wang, “The Art of Screen Passing: Anna May Wong’s Yellow Yellowface Performance in the Art Deco Era,” *Camera Obscura* 20, no. 3 (60) (2005): 159; Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937*, Cinema and Modernity (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

2. Barbara Zecchi, “Filling (Feeling) the Archival Void: The Case of Helena Cortesina’s *Flor de España*,” *Feminist Media Histories* 9, no. 4 (October 1, 2023): 14–27, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2023.9.4.14>.

3. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019); Allyson Nadia Field, “Editor’s Introduction: Acts of Speculation,” *Feminist Media Histories* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2022.8.3.1>.

4. Field, “Acts of Speculation,” 1. Katherine Groo, “Let It Burn: Film Historiography in Flames,” *Discourse* 41, no. 1 (2019): 31, <https://doi.org/10.13110/discourse.41.1.0003>.

5. Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon, eds., *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*, Feminist Media Histories (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

6. Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon, "Pathways to the Feminist Incomplete: An Introduction, a Theory, a Manifesto," in *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*, ed. Alix Beeston and Stefan Solomon (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023), 6.

7. Hayley O'Malley, "The 1976 Sojourner Truth Festival of the Arts: A Speculative History of the First Black Women's Film Festival," *Feminist Media Histories* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 129, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2022.8.3.127>.

8. Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1212758>.