

Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking

An Anthology

Edited by

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Series in Cinema and Culture



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Introduction

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Abstract

To introduce our anthology we present the critical essays and interviews chosen to represent filmmaking as feminism, not just in its subject matter but also in its technique and production. We give an overview of the historiography of women's film to present our choices for a body of contemporary films and filmmakers, who are almost all from outside the US and who have all encountered difficulties in funding and finding opportunities for their practices. We also provide the questions we asked each filmmaker, detail the specific focus we welcomed from the individual directors and share some of their wisdom that best exemplifies the stories, struggles and successes recounted in their interviews.

Keywords: anthologies; biography; feminism; filmmaking; funding; historiography; interdependency; queerness; representation; taboos

Conceiving the anthology

The idea for this anthology was first conceived three years ago, in December 2018, after an overflowing screening at the Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano in Havana.¹ We packed in amongst the crowds that had come to see the premiere of Patricia Ortega's *Yo, imposible* — each night the movie showed, droves of people lined the streets of Havana as the setting sun

¹ Since 2017, Wegenstein has been taking her graduate students in Latin American Media Studies to the Festival Internacional del Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano in Havana as part of an exchange program with CASA Havana.

drenched the city.² Vendors pushed stale popcorn, warm beer and murky Cuba Libres on movie-goers while they waited to be admitted. As we entered the theatre, we checked the newsprint festival schedule distributed each morning in the lobby of the Hotel Nacional de Cuba. Had we come to the correct movie showing? An audience this size, attending a visionary movie about a person born intersex in Venezuela?

After the film, we exited the theatre in silence, reflecting. Later that night, as Lauren went to bed at the Hotel Vedado, her internet card having expired hours earlier leaving her to silent communication for the night, the final words of the film ran through her head: “Yo... Yo no entiendo nada... Yo soy lo que quiero ser [I... I don’t understand anything... but I am what I want to be].”³ There was a certain aspect of the ending that would not let us sleep — it was *so* open, *so* indecisive. Lauren struggled to think of what pronoun she would use to write about the protagonist, Ariel, in her essay. Taken by late-night insomnia, Lauren turned on the side-table light, hoping not to wake her colleague Tanavi, who was sleeping in the bed beside hers. *What right did I have to be bothered that I could not place Ariel as male or female?* The basic human tendency to look for dualisms took hold — male / female, center / periphery, real / mystical, abstract / concrete.

Meanwhile, Bernadette tossed and turned at the Hotel Nacional with similar questions in mind, wondering how she might turn this unique viewing experience into something bigger, something from which students and others interested in feminist filmmaking could benefit. The next day, a beautiful sunny day in Havana, we discussed how the film informed the dual existence of self and other, a marginalized protagonist’s balance on the cusp, straddling reality and fiction, residing in the border. At that point, we did not even realize that this film provoked many of the potential themes for the project that would later become the *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking* anthology. We began looking for these qualities in other films we researched and watched, be they topics of surgical alteration at birth, same-sex desire, an investigation of bisexuality or a journey into a mystical community where gender no longer exists as a fixed ideology: we were thinking about films that in some way dealt with the duality that is queerness (and, of course, the abuse and violence that surrounds a life lived queerly). We also thought about films that specifically treated and questioned feminine norms and the ways in which they might be

² We would like to note just one of the classist aspects of the film festival circuit — as was the case at the Queer Kampala International Film Festival in Nairobi, where Wanuri Kahiu’s *Rafiki* premiered: theatres in Cuba were charging four or five times their normal admission for a film festival, effectively filtering who would be able to attend the festival itself.

³ Patricia Ortega, dir., *Yo, imposible* (Antorcha Films / Mandragora Films, 2018).

subverted in different cultural contexts. In the end, we also thought about reimagining cisgender femininity as queerness and finding new ways of rethinking it through critiques of cis motherhood, the heteronormative colonial gaze and other critical topics of cis femininity. For this reason, about half of the anthology includes cisgender feminist films, while the other half contains more conventionally understood queer films.

Back in Baltimore about one year later, in February 2020, we watched the outbreak of the pandemic and decided to take advantage of the sudden change of our world having come to a sort of halt and actually embark on *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking* together, calculating that many of the filmmakers who interested us would be available for virtual interviews over the next months. Aware of the “varying levels of commitment to or rejection of the label ‘feminist’” that similar studies and anthologies before ours had thematized, we were committed to working primarily with women filmmakers who are expressly self-declared feminist filmmakers.⁴ Most important to us was the decision to focus the collection on the *practice of film* and not its mere theorization. This approach means that a female or feminized experience or worldview, not a male experience, is at the center of our filmmakers’ narratives and aesthetics. Of course, these issues can vary widely, according to the worlds that the films recount in each global context, but there are surprisingly more commonalities than differences and we were interested precisely in those. While some of our filmmakers do not define themselves *expressis verbis* as feminist filmmakers (for instance, both Naomi Kawase and Alina Marazzi live and work in heavily patriarchal societies), they still emphasize the “female experience” that grounds their film practice. Interestingly, in the case of the Algerian filmmakers, we see a clear generational shift from a feminist movement of the 1990s where “feminism” was a word that women would avoid to a current wave of feminism that fully appropriates the movement not just as “feminist” but also “radical” or “militant.”⁵

When researching the worthwhile body of existing works about feminist film, we came to the realization that there wasn’t really “one obvious way” to organize our anthology. For instance, editors Diane Waldman and Janet Walker organized their important 1999 anthology, *Feminism and Documentary*, around the genre of documentary, a historical tool for telling women’s counter-

⁴ Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul, “Introduction; Refocusing: Talking about (and with) Women Filmmakers,” in *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*, ed. Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul (New York: Routledge, 2003), 10.

⁵ See our interview with Kahina Zina Benghouba, where she discusses the militancy in the current wave of feminism in Algeria, by which she does not mean a Western critique of feminism but instead the necessity for a structured organization.

history and, often, conveying activist speech from the margins. While some of the critical essays in their anthology — for instance, Michael Renov’s discussion of documentary subjectivity as expressed in the post-*vérité* age — still ring true for some of our own selected filmmakers (in this case Rosine Mfeto Mbakam’s approach to her own post-colonial-*vérité* style), we wanted to organize our anthology not around genre or a film-theory framework but, rather, from inside out: speaking with and from each filmmakers’ practice of feminist cinema and finding the themes connecting them.

We were inspired by Michele Meek’s recent anthology, *Independent Female Filmmakers*, in the way it based its selection of filmmakers in the history of feminist independents from Yvonne Rainer to Miranda July.⁶ Each filmmaker included was given their space, their interview and a profound discussion of their own. We appreciated that some of the filmmakers presented in this anthology were credited for a kind of feminist thought *ante literam*, like Lizzie Borden with her emphasis on “intersectionality” before it had become common within gender and film studies. We were also inspired by the way the anthology wove established and emerging women filmmakers together without perpetuating ideas of hierarchy and establishment.

We also found Geetha Ramanathan’s *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women’s Films* very helpful in that it closely analyzes the construction of a feminist film authority through visually, aurally and narratively bypassing restrictive cinematic conventions based in male auteurism and also analyzes women filmmakers’ clash with such well known problems in the representation of women and their experiences on screen without giving room to their own desires and avoiding their “to be looked at status.”⁷ Finally, in her *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms*, Patricia White, one of our anthology’s contributors, made us aware of a few global women filmmakers such as the Bosnian Jasmila Žbanić, the Korean Jeong Jae-Eun or the Danish Susanne Bier, whom we had not known before, as they had been overshadowed by male directors or other male canonical film movements in their cultures, as with the Dogme movement in Scandinavia.⁸ It is for that very reason that we looked closely at marginalized female voices in women’s cinema in countries and cultures with legendary established male film histories, such as Italy, Chile and Korea. While we were influenced by these important earlier studies, we decided to give our anthology a thematic connection, organized in

⁶ See Michele Meek, ed., *Independent Female Filmmakers: A Chronicle through Interviews, Profiles, Manifestos* (Milton: Routledge, 2019).

⁷ Geetha Ramanathan, *Feminist Auteurs: Reading Women’s Films* (London: Wallflower, 2006), 1.

⁸ Patricia White, *Women’s Cinema, World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

four sections that can showcase the global experience of women filmmakers in non-Western countries and societies and the marginalized themes and topics in their respective feminist film practices.

What is a feminist film practice?

Before introducing the filmmakers featured here and detailing our selection process, we would like to answer a few important questions. What is a feminist film practice? What threads are common to this practice in a global context? What is a feminist point of view? How can a feminist film practice contribute to ideas of radical equalities? What is a “feminist counter-cinema”? Let us start from that last question.

In her now legendary 1973 essay, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” Claire Johnston argued that the emerging women filmmakers of her time had taken their aesthetic from television and *cinéma vérité* without a true or real feminist intervention into the fabric of film itself.⁹ According to Johnston, this was not the fault of feminist cinema but the fact that a “woman on celluloid” had actually never “appeared” outside of the realm of heteronormative patriarchal fantasy.¹⁰ She further denounced that the “truth” of women’s oppression and misogyny could not even be captured on celluloid but had to be constructed out of new meanings and a new form of cinematic mediation yet to be created. As Mary Desjardins points out, Johnston’s criticism was not only fundamental within the post-’68, post-structuralist feminist theory but also exclusively instrumental in shifting the debate within feminist film theory and criticism “from a belief that ‘real’ women could be unproblematically represented in cinema, to a questioning of the status of the ‘real’ itself.”¹¹

In her 1989 *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, legal scholar and philosopher Catharine MacKinnon returned not just to the beginning of cinema, asking a similar question about the “real,” but beyond, to the Enlightenment and earlier periods to point out that the subjective/objective division never actually existed from a standpoint of objectification because the telling of history itself had always been done from the male position of power. She summarized her own standpoint later in *Are Women Human?*: “Those who occupy the objective standpoint socially, who also engage in the practice from that standpoint called objectification — the practice of making people into things to make them knowable — their standpoint and their practice are an expression of the social

⁹ See Claire Johnston, *Notes on Women’s Cinema* (London: SEFT, 1973), 24–31.

¹⁰ Johnston, *Notes*, 29.

¹¹ Mary Desjardins, “May 68: Feminism and Beyond,” *Spectator* 8.2 (1988): 51.

position of dominance that is occupied by men. This standpoint [...] embodies and asserts a specific form of power, one that had been invisible to politics and theory but, by feminism, lay exposed as underlying them.”¹²

What both scholars demonstrate is a powerful and implicit tendency in the cinematic tradition toward the unconscious materialization of cisgender male-centered points of view and power structures dominated by cis males as an unvarnished, uncreated and unproblematic reality. In this regard and for this very reason, we believe that a feminist film practice and a feminist point of view need to be regarded as a speech act coming out of *women's realities*. The “real” needs “real voices,” just as MacKinnon’s understanding that, “she is saying what happened to her” changed the law in that “what happened to her, when it happens, is now authoritatively recognized in law as inequality on the basis of sex, that is, as a violation of women’s human rights.”¹³ Thus, cinema in the hands of women becomes an act of resistance to a cinema that excluded them historically, an act of political activism, an artistic expression and a lived experience. To adapt MacKinnon’s bold reasoning onto women’s cinema, then, we can say that making feminist films means transforming the definition of equality by insisting that women have the right to make films and make *their* films. Equally valid for women’s cinema as for human rights violations is MacKinnon’s claim that “women can access our own reality because we live it.”¹⁴

The sixteen global feminist filmmakers included in *Radical Equalities* each present pivotal answers and creative solutions to these questions, each of them having created their own feminist point of view or cinematic voice of resistance. In our critical selection, we tried to pay attention to some common impulses of recent feminist thought expressed in emerging films: the bodily experience of being or identifying as a transgender woman in a heteronormative culture as in the Peruvian short *Loxoro* (Claudia Llosa Bueno); the right to an intersex identity that has been mainly silenced and made invisible from the filmic landscape, as in the pivotal *Tintenfischalarm* (Elisabeth Scharang) from Austria and *Yo, imposible* (Ortega) from Venezuela; questions of maternal ambiguity, including its regrets, as recounted in films such as the Peruvian *Aloft* (Llosa), the Italian *Tutto parla di te* (Marazzi) and the Japanese *Asa ga kuru* (Kawase); the female search for belonging in a place or culture, as told in *Les deux visages d'une femme bamiléké* (*The Two Faces of a Bamileke Woman* by Mbakam) from Cameroon/Belgium, the South Korean *Sound of Nomad: Koryo Arirang*

¹² Catharine MacKinnon, *Are Women Human? And Other International Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), 46–47.

¹³ MacKinnon, *Are Women*, 47.

¹⁴ MacKinnon, *Are Women*, 48.

(Soyoung Kim) and the Japanese *Still the Water* (Kawase); the right to a woman's own sexuality, the resistance of heteronormativity and the joy of lesbian love, as in the Chilean film *Joven y alocada* (Marialy Rivas) and the Kenyan film *Rafiki* (Wanuri Kahiu); the abuse of this very right to a woman's own desire and body from sexual violence to femicide, as in the Chilean *Princesita* (Rivas), the Cameroonian/Belgian film *Les prières de Delphine* (Mbakam), the Algerian films *Lettre à ma sœur* (Habiba Djahnine) and *E'Sitar / Le rideau* (Kahina Zina Benghouba); the hardship of recovering from the trauma of sexual abuse, as in the Brazilian film *Pessoas — contar para viver* (Viviane Ferreira); the deconstruction of the colonial gaze in narratives of Black women's histories as in the Cameroonian/Belgian film *Chez Jolie Coiffure* (Mbakam) and the reawakening of African ancestrality in the Brazilian film *Um dia com Jerusa* (Ferreira); the class difference of women of color and indigeneity vis-à-vis their struggle with the white upper class as recounted in the Peruvian film *La teta asustada* (Llosa), the Brazilian film *Três verões* (Sandra Kogut) and the Cuban film *El techo* (Ortega); restoring the archive of the genocide, specifically those under the Salazar dictatorship (1937–1974) and in Rwanda and Bosnia, to the public and grieving women's forgotten lives, as in the Portuguese film *Luz obscura* (Sousana de Sousa Dias) and the US film *Cameraperson* (Kirsten Johnson).

All of the films we have chosen create a specifically feminist language of film to show and tell narratives to preserve women's lives, women's livelihoods and women's personal lived experiences, including the lives' of some of our filmmakers' own mothers coming to life in the films by Marazzi, Johnson and Mbakam. Yes, they might be revealing and pointing to atrocities, pain and suffering but, by stressing human intersubjectivity, they simultaneously find a new form of storytelling that feels comforting and, at times, like the overdue release of truth through the lived experience of cinema itself.¹⁵ To say it with our friend and filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu, these stories put *joy* at the center of their surrounding struggles.

Approaches to female filmmaking

In our interviews, we started by asking all the filmmakers how they see *themselves* positioned in between their filmic creation and the world around them. Below is the questionnaire we shared with all filmmakers, separate from the individual questions about their respective films we posed during interviews:

¹⁵ The Austrian poet and feminist Ingeborg Bachmann famously said that “everybody should be able to handle the truth”; see Ingeborg Bachmann, *Die Wahrheit ist dem Menschen zumutbar* (Munich: Piper, 1981).

Where is the filmmaker in this film? Where is the feminist in this film? How might you respond to the historical reflection that certain “filmmakers may not even be self-consciously interested in feminist projects, but they nevertheless constitute an independent cinema that I am willing to call feminist because of the ways they imagine unexpected possibilities for women’s desire”?¹⁶

1. What film did you set out to do? And what film did you end up making?
2. How was the process of finding funding for your film? What were the politics behind it?
3. Do you find it hard to stick with a feminist content? Or do you ever feel under pressure by the funding institutions to make a particular film?
4. Do you find yourself held to higher standards than male directors?
5. Are there any obstacles you face due to your gender in the world of film production dominated by males? Does this influence the types of film you make?
6. Is the professional disappearance of gender (as the director, writer, cameraperson) desirable to you in your film work?
7. Is there a feminist message in your work? Do you define your work as overtly feminist?
8. Is the gender of the filmmaker more significant than the values or political perspectives a film espouses?¹⁷
9. How has your relationship with your family, specifically your parents, influenced your work?

While these questions were great guidelines for addressing each of the filmmakers with a qualitatively similar questionnaire, we adjusted our actual inquiries for each of the sections and individual interviews and have silently and thoroughly edited the interviews for space, cohesion and clarity. Upon analyzing the themes of our anthology, we decided to organize our interviews and critical articles in four main content sections: “Sexual Violence and Womanhood,” “Other Sexualities,” “Interdependency, Class and Race” and “Mixed Media, Memory and Motherhood.” Each interview is coded within

¹⁶ Ivone Margulies and Jeremi Szaniawski, *On Women’s Films: Across Worlds and Generations* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 334.

¹⁷ See E. Ann Kaplan, “Women, Film, Resistance: Changing Paradigms,” in *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing*, ed. Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis, and Valerie Raoul (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15.

these four sections according to the main subject areas relevant to the directors' creative processes.

Throughout the course of our interviews, we seized the spirit of the communal intellectual experience and occasionally invited filmmakers and the authors of our critical essays to be a part of the interview with each other. For instance, Patricia White joined our conversation with Kim and film scholar Rie Karatsu to discuss the question of a feminist South East Asian film history. On another Zoom call, we invited Karatsu to ask specific questions of Kawase. We also included Chris Taylor, a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins University specializing in Japanese film, for the interview with Kawase to help with translations and the appropriate cultural preparation of the interview itself. In each interview chapter, we introduce a brief biography of the filmmaker with an original title that emerged directly as the lived experience from our interviews.

Of course, these are only the very broad strokes of the themes of the films and how they intersect thematically. In fact, our main focus in relating these women filmmakers and their films to one another was primarily based not on a critical-theoretical reading or encounter with their films but mainly in their respective *film practices* that we collected in deep qualitative interviews with each filmmaker. During these interviews, the filmmakers explained how they found their topics, their visual strategies and their cinematic languages, whether in narrative films or documentaries. All the filmmakers also told us about their biographical background growing up as girls and young women in their culture, as we believe that the *lived experience* of being socialized as a woman in a society is of course very relevant to any artistic practice. For instance, the filmmaking initiative of the Algerian Atelier Béjaïa Doc, founded by Djahnine, is the result of women living in a political environment constantly threatening their independence as women and their rights to their sexuality, as well as the right to be grieved and remembered as victims of violence and femicide. We wanted to engage with the atelier primarily to understand how women filmmakers were responding to this crisis and we found that, through feminist filmmaking, they developed a way to organize productive resistance in their respective cinematic approaches of revealing stories about femicide in Algeria.

Another main focus we established in our interviews was to find out how our filmmakers funded their films, what obstacles they encountered, what associations supported them in getting their films out and reaching wider audiences. We will discuss this important problem of the lack of funding in our epilogue, "Against the Grain." We found that not only do many of our filmmakers have to leave their home countries to apply for funding for their films, as is particularly the case with our Latin American filmmakers (Ortega and Llosa) and our African filmmakers living abroad (especially Mbakam), but also that women face specific problems during the application process. As Kim

recounts, women filmmakers in South Korea are not only being rejected constantly for funding but, as in her own case, they might even get insulted for applying and, consequently, refrain from doing so. We found that several filmmakers, from Algeria and Cameroon to South Korea and Brazil, would connect through their own internal networks of film funding, often generated through their own families, rather than apply to the official state funds. Frequently, these partnerships were the only way to fund a film before a state institution would back the film with further funding. We were interested in precisely these personal networks that the filmmakers involved in their respective cultures and countries.

In addition to funding, a major issue in our understanding of feminism in film practice itself was the question of the teams surrounding feminist filmmakers. Who is working on these? We found that there is an insistence by many women directors on working with female crewmembers. For instance, Viviane Ferreira, a Black Brazilian filmmaker, is part of the Brazil-based Cinema Negro and the association Negritude Infinita, through which she also finds many of her crewmembers.¹⁸ In Kahiú's case, she made sure that queer women were represented in each department of production of her film *Rafiki*, from grips to director's assistants; some other filmmakers emphasize that they wanted to keep their crews as small as possible, in that they in fact preferred working on their own, not having to insert yet another intermediary "voice" or "gaze" between them and that which they wanted to say (Mbakam, Kim, Johnson). Mbakam further points out that, for her, making films on her own (in her case being the director of photography as well as the sound engineer and director) helped her not only decolonize herself but also perceive and fully grasp herself as a Cameroonian woman filmmaker. With funding for independent cinema lacking in countries such as Kahiú's Kenya, Llosa's Peru or Ortega's Venezuela, women filmmakers are often forced to find funding outside their own countries and, at times, even live abroad because of this constraint (the Cameroonian Mbakam lives in Belgium and Ortega lives in Argentina).

Our interviews also focused on the attempts by our filmmakers to introduce taboo topics, such as lesbian love, to new audiences with their films. We see this process through *Rafiki* and the LGBTQIA+ community in West Africa, through *Tintenfishalarm* and *Yo, imposible* and intersex communities in Europe and Latin America and even while speaking with and for Cameroonian immigrants to Belgium through *Chez Jolie Coiffure*. In other words, we wanted to know how

¹⁸ On the 2020 session of the Cinema Negro festival, see Centro AfroCarioca de Cinema, "Encontro 2020," accessed November 12, 2021, <http://afrocariocadecinema.org.br/encontro2020>. On Negritude Infinita, see Negritude Infinita, "Sobre nós," accessed November 12, 2021, <https://negritudeinfinita.com>.

filmmakers reached audiences that had not before seen themselves represented as main characters in filmic narratives and record how excited our filmmakers felt about that response. All in all, the feminist film practices we found and thematized in the anthology are often new and utterly groundbreaking ways of getting women's films out into the public, as Patricia White has well demonstrated in her pivotal 2015 study, *Women's Cinema, World Cinema*. Feminist counter-cinema, as White calls it, is a cinema by and for women, and that was always our main focus in selecting the films for *Radical Equalities*.

Turning to the analytic section of our anthology, we worked with different academics across the globe to compose a comprehensive group of critical articles touching upon each of our filmmakers and their films. Judith Butler's pivotal *The Force of Nonviolence*, which many of our contributors had read upon its 2020 publication, acted as the main theoretical launching point for all of our critical contributions. Specifically, each essay parlays into the framework for their analysis Butler's fundamental understanding of "interdependency": "No one is born an individual; if someone becomes an individual over time, he or she does not escape the fundamental conditions of dependency in the course of that process. [...] We were all, regardless of our political viewpoints in the present, born into a condition of radical dependency."¹⁹

The title of our collection, *Radical Equalities*, is inspired by *The Force of Nonviolence* as well, referencing the moments in which Butler describes the principles of dependency and obligation for an ethics of nonviolence: "a new idea of equality can only emerge from a more fully imagined interdependency, an imagining that unfolds in practices and institutions, in new forms of civic and political life."²⁰ Feminism is an area of thought that has occupied itself with the question of obligation and dependence by thinking about the female subject position, by its very historical nature, as interdependent on the normative male subject position to which it is subjugated: "To be dependent implies vulnerability."²¹ In all waves of feminism, women were and are the gender who had to think femininity as a second gender (Simone de Beauvoir), as a reverse sex or the gender that is not "one" (Luce Irigaray) — perhaps most important is the idea that the female gender is the one that positively reveals vulnerability as a feature of all our shared lives (Butler).

Soyoung Kim, the South Korean filmmaker featured in our anthology, says that in her practice as a filmmaker, she has never lost that sense of vulnerability:

¹⁹ Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London: Verso, 2020), 41.

²⁰ Butler, *Force*, 43.

²¹ Butler, *Force*, 46.

“I’ve always felt like I’m a fledgling all throughout my life, as a filmmaker. A little bird, you know, like Octavia Butler’s novel *Fledgling*. I’ve always felt like a little fledgling, even now when I’m reaching a certain age.”²² There is a sense, as she says, of not “belonging” to the profession, as a woman in a historically male discipline. We want to add that, in *Cameraperson*, Johnson — celebrated as an important filmmaker following its release and, more recently, that of *Dick Johnson Is Dead* (Netflix) — used footage that she did not own but that she “hijacked” from other projects. In fact, many of our filmmakers are working with found footage, archives, home movies and other sources not originally intended for use in a feminist or any other film. But all of our filmmakers have made the shared experience of being alive as vulnerable interdependent human beings a central focus in their storytelling, not something to hide or run away from.

Other complexities derive from a feminist counter-cinema: one breaks down the patriarchal fantasy of “non-vulnerability” and utter “self-sufficiency.” Judith Butler highlights the necessity of acknowledging dependency as our condition during times of crisis (prophetically, she wrote this shortly before the COVID-19 outbreak): “If we were to rethink ourselves as social creatures who are fundamentally dependent upon one another — and there’s no shame, no humiliation, no ‘feminization’ in that — [...] our very conception of self would not be defined by individual self-interest.”²³ We found that feminist counter-cinema turns not only human interdependency but also the interdependency between humans and nature into its own aesthetic and, thereby, into a film language that deserves its own investigation, as our collection presents. As suggested by our very title, *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking*, we thus look at our selected films not only as films but as *feminist practice*. We pay very close attention to the construction of a feminist point of view in the films chosen, through the construction of the narrative but also through the concrete use of the filmic language: cinematography, lighting, the speed at which the image is recorded, as well as post-production techniques such as colorization and sound mixing.

²² Soyoung Kim, “A Fledgling All My Life — An Interview with Soyoung Kim,” interview by Bernadette Wegenstein and Lauren Benjamin Mushro from May 16, 2020, in *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking: An Anthology*, ed. Bernadette Wegenstein and Lauren Benjamin Mushro (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022).

²³ Judith Butler, “The *New Yorker* Interview: Judith Butler Wants Us to Reshape Our Rage,” interview by Masha Gessen, *New Yorker*, February 9, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/judith-butler-wants-us-to-reshape-our-rage>.

Critical contributions

Our first critical contribution, “Feminist Counter-Cinema and the Critique of Sexual Violence,” written by co-editor, professor of media studies at Johns Hopkins and documentary filmmaker Wegenstein begins our section, “Sexual Violence and Womanhood.” Her piece investigates a feminist filmmaking practice in comparison with traditional male representation of women’s sexual trauma on the screen (taking as its main example *Irréversible*), which she critiques on the basis of trauma and recovery research by Bessel van der Kolk and Judith Hermann. Leaning on the film practices of Djahnine (*Lettre à ma sœur*), Ferreira (*Pessoas — contar para viver*), Mbakam (*Les prières de Delphine*), Kawase (*Asa ga kuru*), Rivas (*Princesita*) and Zina Benghouba (*E’Sitar / Le rideau*), Wegenstein shows that a feminist critique of sexual violence must be read as a form of “creative activism.” She shows how the filmmakers’ lived experiences and the engagement with the characters, both fictional and real, themselves produce a counter-cinema without frills. Theirs is a cinema where truths are spelled out in a cinematic language of trust between the filmmaker and her characters. Just like in the work of trauma-healing and recovery, these films do not find some objective truth of history or of the act of violence as seen from the perspective of God or some man but, instead, find the truth as lived by those who suffered it and told from within the folds of their own stories.

Continuing with the theme of womanhood, Rie Karatsu, professor of global and media studies and a specialist in Asian feminist film at the University of Nagasaki, concludes the critical analysis of this first section with an article on the symbolism of water in East Asian film, “Water Imagery and the Feminist Subversion of Womanhood in Naomi Kawase’s *Still the Water* (2014) and Soyoung Kim’s *Sound of Nomad: Koryo Arirang* (2016).” Developing her past scholarly writing, Karatsu provides a critical look into Asian cinema, specifically in Japan and South Korea in the context of water imagery and the feminist subversion of the male-oriented order in East Asia. Karatsu’s critical contribution detours from previous analyses of the work of Kawase and Kim that had perceived their cinematography as monolithic, linear and consistent, encompassing static, inherent national or generic tenets, and instead conceives their filmmaking practice as historically constituted, exploring the way the two filmmakers negotiate the existing constraints by playing into systemic expectations of gender discourse and world cinema. Her essay evinces the duality of gender and its relation to water as represented through the Amami islands of *Still the Water* (2014) and the Koryo Saram diaspora of *Sound of Nomad* (2017).

Our third critical contribution, written by co-editor Lauren Benjamin Mushro, doctoral candidate in media and cultural theory at Johns Hopkins, and entitled “Unruly Flesh: Reimagining the Body and Non-Binary Desire in Feminist Filmic Practice,” delves into queer desire and violence against non-binary bodies,

effectively bringing us to our next theme, “Other Sexualities.” In her article, she argues for the creation of a space of visibility and desirability of unconventional bodies through artistic representations of the flesh in alternative coming-of-age stories, in stark contrast to existing films that tend to depict non-cis bodies in a scientific, documentarian tone. Once establishing a discourse on the aspect of queer desire, Benjamin Mushro investigates colonial violence done onto the queer body and filmic practices that refuse violent gazes through an assertion of joy and queer love. This article surveys a large range of the films found in this anthology, mainly focusing on Ortega’s *Yo, imposible*, Llosa’s *Loxoro*, Scharang’s *Tintenfischalarm*, Rivas’s *Joven y alocada* and Kahi’s *Rafiki*.

Considering the intersectionality of global feminisms, we found it imperative to dedicate a section to the analysis of intersecting identities for women and non-binary people. Marina Bedran, assistant professor of Lusophone literatures and cultures at Johns Hopkins, spearheads our section “Interdependency, Race and Class” with her article “Beyond the Confines of Classed Spaces: Mutual Care, Interdependency and Feminist Filmmaking.” This chapter deals with a decolonial feminism in the context of domestic workers based on the films by Kogut (Brazil), Mbakam (Cameroon and Belgium) and Patricia Ramos (Cuba). All these films show how class, closely tied to both race and gender, structures space and the way people experience it: the upper-class home in Rio de Janeiro near the beach in Angra dos Reis, which has been taken over by domestic worker Madá and her house staff (*Três verões*); the liminal spaces of Havana’s rooftops inhabited freely by young Cubans looking for jobs (*El techo*); the personal space of a Cameroonian immigrant in Brussels who remembers her sexual trauma in dialogue with the documentarian (*Chez Jolie Coiffure*). Bedran’s reading also pays particular attention to care and cooperation as ways of negotiating the confines of classed space, resonating with a feminist critique of neoliberalism and individualism. Bedran further shows how each of the filmmakers decolonizes the space of the domestic sphere, whether they turn to fiction and humor (as with Kogut and Ramos) or whether they turn to a hyper-realist documentary style that conveys both displacement and healing (as with Mbakam).

As class and race most often go hand in hand, our anthology also dedicates a chapter to survey the field of emerging Black Latin American female filmmakers in the Southern Cone. Izabel de Fátima Cruz Melo, assistant professor of history at the Universidade Estadual da Bahia (UNEB), and Lúcia Ramos Monteiro, associate professor of film studies at Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF), focus on themes of generational ties in contemporary films made by Black women in Brazil in their contribution, “A Chronicle of Our Families: Performing Amerindian Ancestralities in Black Women’s Cinema.” Their article more specifically delves into the presence of family photos in contemporary Black

women's films emerging out of Brazil as a locus of both memory and invention, archive and performance. The fruitful production of Black women filmmakers in the last decade is part of a larger context consisting of converging factors: the struggle of Black social movements, urging representation in television and film (and not only representation but also roles other than colonial stereotypes consisting of violence and submission), the implementation of affirmative action to expand access to higher education, the inauguration of new film schools in public universities, and the creation of funding programs aimed at Black artists. Cruz Melo and Ramos Monteiro center their analysis on Ferreira's *Um dia com Jerusa* and Safira Moreira's *Travessia*, delving into the ways in which Black female filmmakers create performances composed both of souvenirs from the past and of desires for their future.

The meditation on memory, race and photography by Cruz Melo and Ramos Monteiro transitions us to our last section, "Mixed Media, Memory and Motherhood," where we encounter a complex dialogue on the archive and the process of digging into found film, presented by Laura Di Bianco, assistant professor of Italian and affiliated professor of the Center for Advanced Media Studies at Johns Hopkins. Di Bianco pushes us as readers to understand our relationship to the past as contained in the present, specifically focusing on the aesthetics of three of our films, Marazzi's *Tutto parla di te*, de Sousa Dias's *Luz obscura* and Johnson's *Cameraperson*. Di Bianco delves into the meaning of women-inflected cinema, as discussed by Laura Mulvey in her 2020 study *Afterimages*, and the common theme of found footage as a method of creating novel stories or rewriting accurate history. The filmmakers Di Bianco investigates build their own feminist archives, ragpick from history (as with de Sousa Dias) or, as she states about Johnson, a career director of photography (DP), create their own "living archive."²⁴ Di Bianco reads the act of mourning on film with Butler's *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009). The practice of working with found footage in these three films shows, as she says, that "the most seemingly banal details might hide a story yet to be told."²⁵ Di Bianco unveils the feminist strategies by three filmmakers to show us grievable lives and to share intimate grief publicly through watching and engaging with the filmmakers' own archives of loss and grief. Di Bianco shows us how they make "intimate trauma a shared one."²⁶

²⁴ Laura Di Bianco, "Women's Archiveology: Lost Mother, Found Footage," in *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking: An Anthology*, ed. Bernadette Wegenstein and Lauren Benjamin Mushro (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022).

²⁵ Di Bianco, "Women's Archiveology."

²⁶ Di Bianco, "Women's Archiveology."

In our last critical article, “Woman with a Movie Camera: Gender and Documentary Sustainability,” Patricia White, professor of film and media studies at Swarthmore College, bookends the critical analysis within our section “Mixed Media, Memory and Motherhood,” discussing the endemic sexism and racism inherent in the distribution of funds in the US documentary film world (“It’s like a cocktail party that most of us didn’t even know about”).²⁷ As she points out, documentary itself is a marginalized genre, much less prestigious and glamorous than fiction (compared to action films and other high-budget features that contribute significantly to the Oscar conversation). The second part of her article is a close reading of Johnson’s 2016 *Cameraperson*, produced with recycled footage from other well-funded projects, for which Johnson had worked as DP, as well as from her own home movies showing her mother dying of Alzheimer’s and her twins growing up. White showcases how Johnson creates a space of respect and reciprocity for her screen characters, inscribing her own feelings about them with the final words in the film “with love, KJ.”²⁸ In her reading, White presents *Cameraperson* as undercompensated care work, revalued as itself sustaining. The documentarian’s labor *becomes* her life.

In our epilogue, “Against the Grain,” we take the opportunity of working with Annette Porter, filmmaker and director of the Saul Zaentz Innovation Fund, to analyze the state of funding for women filmmakers in the US, the UK and elsewhere.

Looking backward and forward

Of course, feminist counter-cinema in the sense of Claire Johnston’s theorization (as well as Laura Mulvey’s) and feminist resistance through film production have another problematic aspect to their forgotten and repressed history that we want to summarize here by briefly leaning on E. Ann Kaplan’s essay “Women, Film, Resistance: Changing Paradigms”: namely, the fact that film history excludes or is unaware of its female pioneers. According to Kaplan, the period of women pioneer filmmakers from 1906–1930 is hard to account for insofar as we cannot clearly see the narratives of early filmmakers being “feminist narratives” yet, though there are some very clear and important exceptions. One is French filmmaker Alice Guy Blaché (1873–1968), whose 1913 short *Matrimony*, as Kaplan points out, presents us with a story of a female heroine “in charge of things and finding an ingenious way to bring about the

²⁷ Renee Tajima-Peña, “#DocsSoWhite: A Personal Reflection,” *Documentary Magazine*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.documentary.org/feature/docssowhite-personal-reflection>.

²⁸ Kirsten Johnson, dir., *Cameraperson* (Big Mouth Productions / Fork Films, 2016).

marriage she wants.”²⁹ We also want to remember Elvira Notari (1875–1946), the Neapolitan filmmaker of the silent era who directed many feature narratives and documentaries about Naples that are considered the first feminist films in Italy.³⁰ In a Latin American context, we will remember Sarah Maldodor (1929–2020), Adélia Sampaio (1944–) and Sara Gómes (1942–1974), seen as the first Black women to have made short films in Brazil and Cuba.

For the US, the story of African American filmmaker Madeline Anderson (1923–), the first Black woman to direct a documentary film, is emblematic. Anderson personally offered her earliest film *Integration Tape #1*, a survey film chronicling the civil rights struggles of the 1950s, to the distribution company, Icarus Films,³¹ which had already distributed Anderson’s *I Am Somebody* (1970). Icarus then brought *Integration Tape #1* to the attention of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. But it wasn’t until the film retrospectively received critical attention, thanks to Icarus vice president Livia Bloom, that it became finally registered by the registry of the Library of Congress as the earliest US African American documentary and can now be streamed on major movie platforms such as the Criterion Collection.³²

In the US, as Kaplan remembers, the classical Hollywood years of women filmmakers from 1930–1960 have gone into the history of filmmaking as the “Silencing of Women.”³³ In the US, between 1960–1990, we encountered white women’s resistance and, since the 1990s and the new millennium, film historians have included a “multicultural women’s film in European and North American contexts.”³⁴ We believe that this movement is all the more reason for the feminist counter-cinema described and collected in our anthology not to lean primarily on US or European film histories but, instead, to amplify the voices of filmmakers in their individual cultural contexts beyond the West. For this reason, we also limited our focus on US filmmakers to just one voice, Kirsten Johnson, a DP who became a first-time director with her 2016 documentary *Cameraperson*. In the European context, we focused on films

²⁹ Kaplan, “Women,” 17.

³⁰ See Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elena Notari* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³¹ Icarus Films is an independent distribution company that the *New York Times* calls “a haven for nonfiction films that are at once socially conscious and supremely artful”; see Ben Kenigsberg, “4 Film Series to Catch in N.Y.C. This Weekend,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2018, New York ed., C22, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/movies/film-series-in-nyc-this-week.html>.

³² Livia Bloom, vice president of Icarus, graciously gave us an interview in the spring of 2020, when she first told us the story of coming across Anderson’s *Integration Tapes*.

³³ Kaplan, “Women,” 17.

³⁴ Kaplan, “Women,” 18.

directed by immigrants like Mbakam or women-directed films focusing on clandestine women's movements in the face of patriarchal dictatorships, as is the case with de Sousa Dias. Marazzi, our Italian filmmaker, centers her films around radical stories of regretful motherhood in the Catholic context of Italy. Of course, we could have included many other talented women filmmakers from the US and Europe but decided to give the main floor to other global filmmakers from regions under-represented in the history of women's films.

In *Radical Equalities*, our main goal was to truly “encounter” our filmmakers and their work. Working from a background of filmmaking and production ourselves, we searched for a space in which we could dialogue with our filmmakers, even if from a distance. This objective was the main reason behind conducting our sixteen interviews — rather than limiting ourselves to a purely theoretical analysis, we hoped to provide our audience with an understanding of the way in which the feminist filmic practice is distinct and feminist precisely insofar as it refuses the presumption of one objective and objectifying reality — a presumption fundamental to the cinematic tradition, which has used all the vast resources at its disposal to cast male ways of looking, telling, feeling and creating, as if they were nothing more than the revelation of reality itself.

Between February 2020 and March 2021, during which we conducted all our interviews, we found that we all yearned for a connection more than ever, even if through a virtual platform. Our cold calls and emails to filmmakers across the world were received with such love and willingness to share. In our conversations preceding the interviews, of which there were dozens, we continued to encounter the theme that binds this anthology together — a commitment to the dignity and representation of marginal life and a commitment to our interdependence as human beings. As Ferreira quite beautifully sums up in her interview,

The only way to ensure that the world is improving and that we are *all* living with a high quality of life is to ensure the grievability of Black female lives. When we achieve the wellbeing of Black women, we achieve the wellbeing of all the other identity groups that exist. So I try to shed light on the importance of this group, demonstrating that there is a better path that exists, a safer path.³⁵

If we protect the weakest and most vulnerable groups in our society, we surely will find ourselves on the right path. Of course, it is no surprise that one of the

³⁵ Viviane Ferreira, “Life Is Not a Tragedy — An Interview with Viviane Ferreira,” interview by Bernadette Wegenstein and Lauren Benjamin Mushro from February 15, 2021, in *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking: An Anthology*, ed. Bernadette Wegenstein and Lauren Benjamin Mushro (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022), italics original.

most powerful and radical forms of equality we found in our curated list of films is *joy* as a form of artistic resistance and creative activism. As our readers make their way through this anthology, we implore them to never forget — *é divertido viver!*³⁶ It is fun to live!

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³⁶ Ferreira, “Life.”

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Contributors

Bernadette Wegenstein is an Austrian-born linguist, author and critically acclaimed documentary filmmaker living in Baltimore. Her work brings together her feminist thought and her interest in human-centric storytelling. She studied semiotics with Umberto Eco at the University of Bologna and received her doctorate in linguistics from Vienna University. As a post-doctoral fellow she studied comparative literature and film at Stanford University. Wegenstein is the recipient of numerous academic and film awards and commendations from the Austrian government and is currently also a professor of media studies at Johns Hopkins University, where she directs the Center of Advanced Media Study. She is the author of several books in the field of media studies with MIT Press, including *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory*, *The Cosmetic Gaze: Body Modification and the Construction of Beauty* and *Reality Made Over: The Culture of Reality Television Makeover Shows*. Her numerous articles and book chapters include most recently “Media in the Age of Apophenia: Why the Study of Media Art and Theory is More Important Today than Ever,” the inaugural contribution to MAST; “Ideas of Physical Beauty”, in *A History of Beauty, Volume I: The Modern Age*, ed. Paul Deslandes (Bloomsbury); and “Beauty Politics in the Age of #MeToo,” in *Beauty Politics*, ed. Maxine Craig, which has been translated into Portuguese for *Revista Rosa*. She is currently writing a book on Jane Campion for the anthology *Philosophical Filmmakers*, edited by Costica Bradatan for Bloomsbury Press. As a filmmaker, Wegenstein has produced and directed feature-length and short documentaries, including most recently the award-winning feature *The Conductor*, which has been screened at more than forty international festivals since its release at the Tribeca Film Festival and has won three Best Documentary film awards; *See You Soon Again*, which was co-produced by the Austrian Film Board and co-directed with Lukas Stepanik; *The Good Breast*, which premiered at the Geena Davis Gender Institute’s film festival at Bentonville, as well as the documentary short, *See Me: A Global Concert*, which won numerous awards as well and regularly plays on European TV. She is currently in post-production with the partly animated documentary *Devoti Tutti* and in pre-production with the musical feature film *A Sweet Secret*.

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Laura Di Bianco holds a doctorate in comparative literature from The Graduate Center, City University of New York (2014). At Johns Hopkins she is assistant professor and director of Italian studies and is affiliated with the Center of Advanced Media Studies and the Program for the Study of Women Gender and Sexuality. Her research and teaching interests lie at the intersection of Italian studies, film studies, women's and gender studies and ecocriticism.

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Di Bianco has published articles in academic journals and volumes such as *The Italianist* and *Italian Women Filmmakers and the Gendered Screen*. She is the film review editor for the online journal *Gender | Sexuality | Italy* and co-editor for *Modern Language Notes*. Currently, she is completing her first book project — *Wandering Women: Urban Ecologies of Italian Feminist Filmmaking* — which investigates the representation of urban space and women's subjectivity within the oeuvres of contemporary Italian women filmmakers such as Francesca Comencini, Alice Rohrwacher, Marina Spada, Roberta Torre, Eleonora Danco and others. Her second book project — *Crumbling Beauty: Italian Cinema in the Age of Anthropocene* — deals with ecological crises in Italy as represented in films from the silent era to the present.

At Hopkins, Di Bianco teaches surveys of Italian cinema, courses on women's filmmaking, as well as courses on modern and contemporary Italian literature and cinema, with a focus on the interplay of humans, non-humans and the environment. By overseeing translation projects with graduate and undergraduate students, she recently completed English subtitles for films by pioneer silent film director Elvira Notari that were presented at the 2018 edition of Festival del Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna.

Patricia White is professor and chair of film and media studies at Swarthmore College. She is author of *Women's Cinema/World Cinema: Projecting Contemporary Feminisms* (Duke University Press, 2015) and *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Indiana University Press, 1999). With

Timothy Corrigan she co-wrote the widely adopted introductory film textbook *The Film Experience* (Bedford St. Martin's, 6th ed. forthcoming). She is also co-editor, with Corrigan and Meta Mazaj, of *Critical Visions in Film Theory* (Bedford St. Martin's, 2011). Her essays on feminist and LGBTQIA+ cinema have been published in *Camera Obscura*, *Cinema Journal*, *Film Quarterly*, *GLQ* and *Screen*; in edited collections including *Reframing Indie*, *Sisters in the Life*, *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, *Out in Culture* and *Inside/Out*; and in such online venues as the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and *Public Books*. White edited and wrote the introduction to *Figures of Resistance: Essays in Feminist Theory* by Teresa de Lauretis (Illinois University Press, 2007). She received a doctorate in the history of consciousness from the University of California, Santa Cruz and a bachelor's in film studies from Yale. She serves on the boards of the non-profit feminist media arts organization Women Make Movies and the magazine *Film Quarterly*. White is a member of the editorial collective of the feminist film journal *Camera Obscura* and oversees the Camera Obscura book series for Duke University Press. She recently edited the hundredth issue of the journal, the special issue *On Chantal Akerman*. Her contribution to the British Film Institute Film Classics series on *Rebecca* (Selznick International Pictures, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) is forthcoming from Bloomsbury Press.

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Karatsu has engaged in research on the nation and gender representation in Japanese films. Her research examines the ways in which Japanese films have negotiated the international gaze and interrogates the role of gender in constructing narratives of nation. Karatsu has written articles on Takeshi Kitano, Naomi Kawase, Mika Ninagawa and Takashi Miike. Her publications include "Rewriting 3.11 and Feminization of the Countryside: National Discourses in Shinkai Makoto's *Your Name* (2016)" in *Japanese Studies*, "Innovation as Conservation: Reflexivity, National Cinema, and Male Hegemony in Takeshi Kitano's *Hana-bi*" in *Arts* and "Female Voice and Occidentalism in Mika Ninagawa's *Helter Skelter* (2012): Adapting Kyoko Okazaki to the Screen" in *The Journal of Popular Culture*. She is also the author of "Beyond the Melodrama of *Kachusha-mono*: Kenji Mizoguchi's *Straits of Love and Hate* (Aienkyo, 1937)" in *Tolstoy On Screen*, ed. Lorna Fitzsimmons and Michael A. Denner (Northwestern University Press, 2015), "The Representation of the Sea and the Feminine in Takeshi Kitano's *Scene at the Sea* (1991) and *Sonatine* (1993)" in *Continuum* and "Questions for a Women's Cinema: Fact, Fiction, and Memory in the Films of Naomi Kawase," in *Visual Anthropology*.

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