VISUAL ESSAY

LAYERING DUST, BENDING LIGHT
FEMINIST REPHOTOGRAPHY AND THE WALLAL ECLIPSE ARCHIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines feminist engagement with colonial photographic archives through practice-led research on the Wallal Archive, which documents the 1922 solar eclipse expedition to remote Western Australia. I argue that archives function not as neutral repositories but as regenerative systems where presence and absence exist in entangled relation. Through an analysis of *Archiving Totality*, a rephotography series created during the pandemic lockdown, I demonstrate how material engagement generates knowledge that is unavailable through textual analysis alone.

Drawing on feminist archival and material photography studies, I employ cropping and art historical citation to reframe what scientific narratives often occlude, particularly the contributions of the five women whose work remains marginalised. Rather than attempting to "recover" erased histories, I work with archival silences, acknowledging limits while refusing erasure as final. This practice positions dust as both material evidence and metaphor, demonstrating how creative engagement can enact refractive care with colonial scientific archives, embracing instability and multiplicity over preservation and totality.

KEYWORDS

Feminist Research, Archival Photography, Analogue Processes, Material Traces, Creative Practice

INTRODUCTION

On 20 August 1922, the steamship *S.S. Charon* departed Fremantle, Western Australia, carrying an international delegation of scientists northward to witness a total solar eclipse. Their destination was Wallal Downs in the remote Kimberley region, where they would capture photographic evidence of starlight deflection to verify Einstein's theory of general relativity.[1] The expedition's photographic documentation, approximately 200 images now held by the State Library of Western Australia, appears to fulfil photography's classic archival function: preserving visual evidence of a significant scientific event, documenting participants and logistics, providing material traces of historical achievement.

Yet when I began working with this archive in 2020, I found myself drawn not to the grand scientific narrative but to the margins: fleeting gestures of care, women operating equipment, hands passing glass plates, Aboriginal workers whose presence is acknowledged functionally but who remain largely unnamed, domestic scenes that sustained the expedition but rarely feature in official accounts. The archive demonstrates where scientific achievement and colonial violence, masculine authority and feminised labour, preservation and decay exist in constant entanglement.

This paper examines my creative practice, *Archiving Totality*, a series of rephotographed images from the digitised Wallal Archive. Through feminist engagement with colonial photographic archives, I embrace rather than resist contamination, acknowledging complicity while refusing innocence and employing art historical strategies to reframe what dominant narratives occlude.

Recent photography scholarship emphasises the material vulnerability and ongoing decay of photographs. Unlike the myth of photographic permanence, actual photographs deteriorate: emulsions fade, papers yellow, digital files corrupt. Elizabeth Edwards argues that photographs' material dimensions, their weight, texture, and smell, are not incidental to their meaning but constitute it.[2] To handle a photograph is to participate in its ongoing life, adding fingerprints and wear that become part of its archive. Carolyn Steedman's *Dust* treats dust not as a nuisance but as what connects physical particles to the emotional and material resonances.[3] For the Wallal Archive, this is crucial, as evidenced by visible dust particles on emulsions and handling marks accumulated over the course of a century. Photographs are not static records but active participants in the meaning-making processes. Photography is not an object but an event that continually unfolds.[4] Attending to dust, decay, and accumulated handling reframes archival instability as an occasion for care, and the archive itself as living matter.

MATERIAL TRACES AND COMPOSITIONAL STRATEGIES

Archiving Totality emerged during the pandemic lockdown when physical archives remained inaccessible. Unable to handle original materials, I worked with the Battye

Library's digitised catalogue, creating what became a layered practice of reflexivity and remediation. I took screenshots of the archival images, projected them onto a television screen, and photographed them using a Hasselblad 6x6 medium-format film camera. This method introduced deliberate contamination: the TV's pixel grid became visible; mouse cursors appeared, and computer taskbars intruded.

These "errors" were choices, highlighting the layers of mediation between historical events and contemporary encounters. Dust accumulated on the TV screen, settled on my camera's film plane, and marked the scanner glass. The final images bear multiple temporal and material layers of dust: from 1922, from the digital archive's creation, and from my rephotography process, and each subsequent screen on which they are encountered. As Alice Yaeger Kaplan memorably writes, "gold is in the dust."[5] Dust functions as an indexical trace of encounter, becoming evidence of specific material processes rather than digital simulation. But dust also serves as a metaphor for what escapes archival control.

Beyond dust, *Archiving Totality* employs cropping and art historical citation as tools for feminist reinterpretation. Where the original archive emphasises scientific equipment and masculine achievement, I cropped to the centre what was peripheral, including hands enacting care and women operating telescopes.

This strategy draws on feminist art history's recognition that framing determines meaning. A woman operating the Floyd telescope, barely visible in the original image's background, recalls Johannes Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c.1665) when cropped, the quiet composure, intimate framing, and implied narrative beyond the frame. Waves during cargo unloading echo Hokusai's *The Great Wave Off Kanagawa* (1831), transforming a documentary moment into a dynamic composition suggesting precarity. A reclining man with a cup of tea evokes centuries of reclining female nudes from Titian through Manet, raising questions about gendered conventions of leisure.

Most resonant is the passing of a glass plate between hands, framed to recall Michelangelo's "*The Creation of Adam*" (1508-1512). Like God's finger extending toward Adam's two hands reaching toward each other, the glass suspended between them signals a moment of transmission, the archive as relay rather than a fixed point.

These references serve as methodological tools, revealing how we perceive historical photographs through cultural conditioning. They demonstrate that archival photographs, despite claims to objective documentation, are always arbitrated by aesthetic conventions.

BEYOND RECOVERY: FEMINIST ARCHIVAL PRAXIS

This approach responds to feminist archival theory's recognition that traditional archives often neglect or distort women's histories, treating their contributions as supplementary rather than foundational.[6] The five women who travelled to Wallal – Jean Chant, Elizabeth Chant, Mary Acworth Evershed, Elizabeth Campbell,

Eleanor Adams – appear sporadically in the original archive, often unnamed or identified only through marital and patriarchal relations. Their intellectual and physical labour becomes invisible or supplementary to the "real" scientific work attributed to male astronomers.

My reframing cannot "recover" these women's full stories without perpetuating further marginalisation. Instead, following Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation, I work with archival silences in ways that acknowledge limits of knowledge while refusing archival erasure as the final word.[7] By giving the women visual prominence through individual portraits, I insist on their significance while respecting what the archive withholds.

Drawing on Ariella Azoulay's critique of classificatory violence and engaging with compositional strategies, I position creative practice as a form of refractive care.[8] I bend rather than reflect historical narratives, I embrace archival instability over preservation, multiplicity instead of totality. These images continue rather than escape the mediation they document. The work contributes to understanding how feminist methodologies can activate photographic archives towards projects of care in the age of ecological entanglement.

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1 William Wallace Campbell, "The Total Eclipse of the Sun, September 21, 1922," *Publications of the Astronomical Society of the Pacific* 35, no. 203 (1923): 11-45.

2 Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographs and History: Emotion and Materiality," *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations*, ed. Sandra H. Dudley (London: Routledge, 2010), 21-38.

3 Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002): 166.

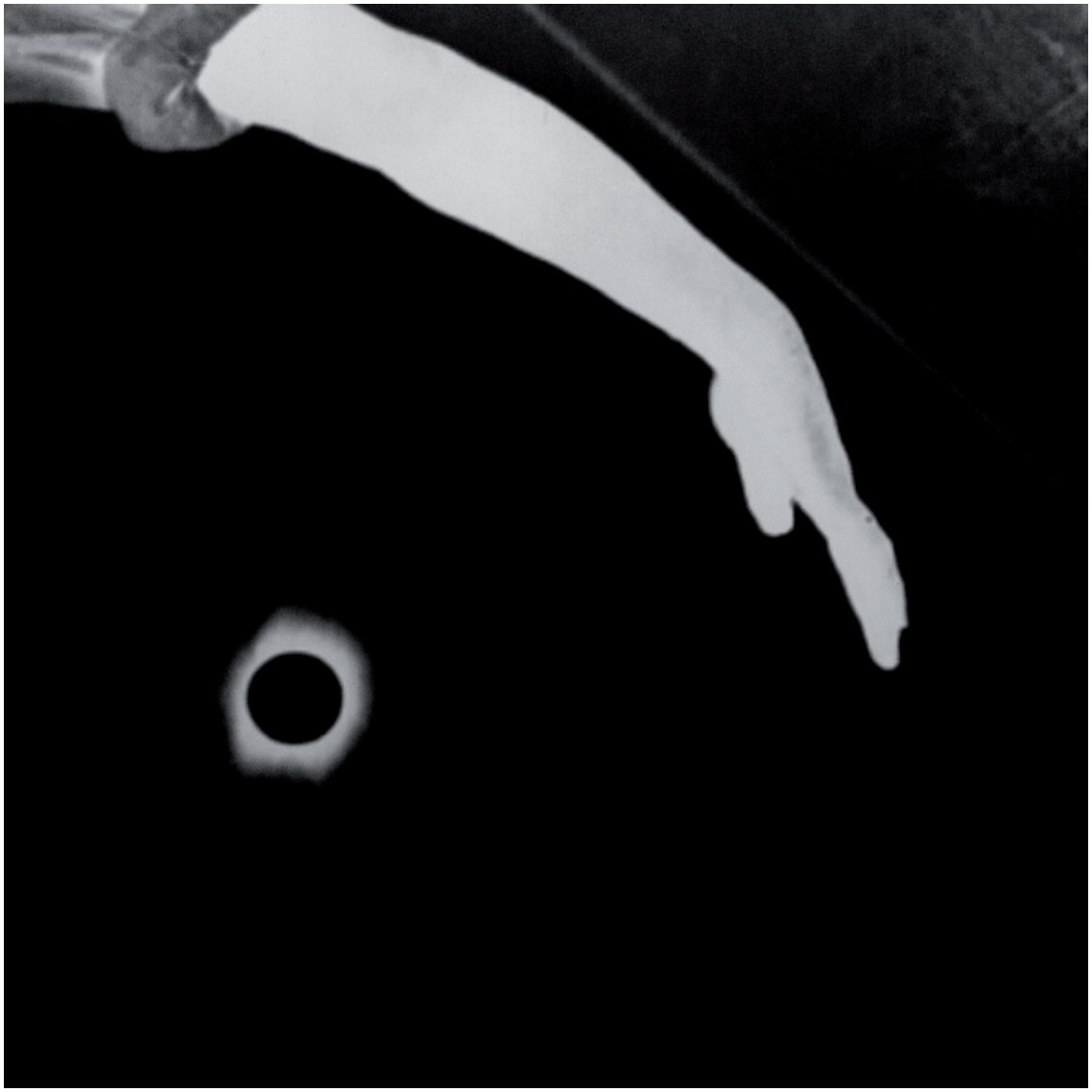
4 Ariella Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (Verso, London, 2015): 23.

5 Kaplan, Alice Yaeger. "Working in the Archives." *Yale French Studies*, no. 77 (1990): 103–116: 116. https://doi.org/10.2307/2930149.

6 Marika Cifor and Stacy Wood, "Critical Feminism in the Archives," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no.2 (2017), https://doi.org/10/24242/jclis.vli2.27.

7 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14.

8 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).





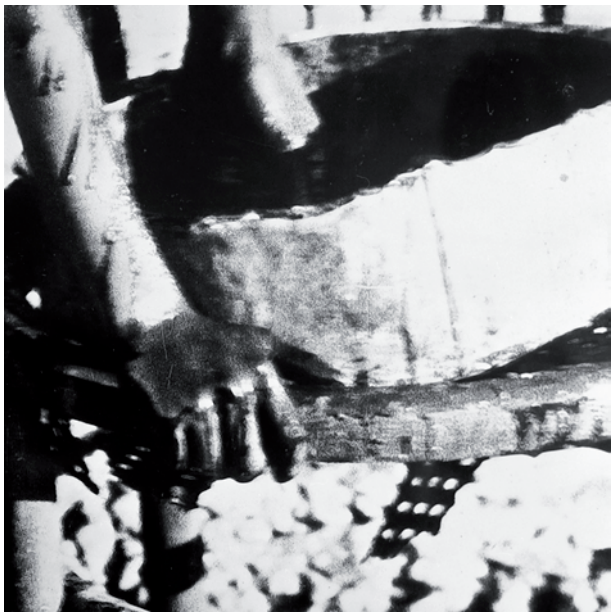


























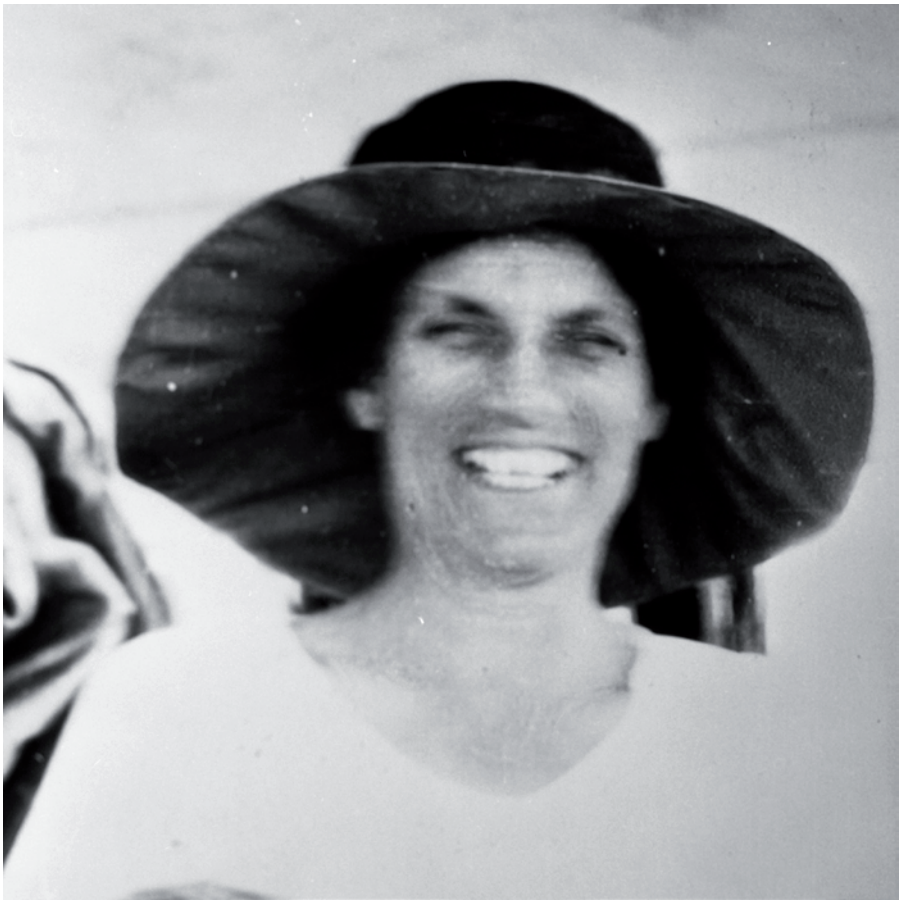
















Chloe Bartram. *Archiving Totality*, 2020-2022.
All images courtesy of the artist.