ARTICLE

CELLULOID ARCHIVES AND GEOGRAPHIES OF MULTITUDE

ENNURI JO
University of Pennsylvania, United States

ABSTRACT

This paper considers cinema as an archive by analyzing the 2023 documentary film *Geographies of Solitude*. The film explores the landscape of Sable Island, a remote island near Halifax, Canada. The filmmaker Jacquelyn Mills is accompanied by environmentalist Zoe Lucas who has dedicated her life to the island. Lucas' acts of preservation approaches a form of archivization, yet unlike institutional archival practices, her work assembles objects produced by nonhuman agents that formal archives deem unworthy of recordkeeping. In turn, the filmmaker uses 16mm film and develops it using found natural materials on the island. The resulting film allows for both the natural environment and the artificial film matter with the camera to be recognized as nonhuman archivists of Sable Island. The friendship between the two women and the film's emphasis on the tactile sensibility of the island and the image configure the film as a feminist and ecological archive.

KEYWORDS

Experimental film, Ecocinema, Feminist and Queer Theory, More-Than-Human.

INTRODUCTION

Filmed on Sable Island off the coast of Nova Scotia on 16mm film, *Geographies of Solitude (*2022*)* follows naturalist and environmental researcher Zoe Lucas, whose decades-long commitment to monitoring the island's ecology has generated an extensive record of its wildlife colonies and a growing collection of land and marine debris: a repository of organic matter and plastic waste that documents the island's changing ecology. Lucas's fieldwork and records are captured by director Jacquelyn Mills, whose loving and attentive filmmaking transforms her ecological observation and material experimentation into an archival practice. In this paper, I argue that *Geographies of Solitude* reimagines the archive not as a repository of records but as an ecological practice in which discarded matter and affective relations actively produce archival meaning. Focusing on the film's experimental, cameraless sequences–hand-processed by Mills and Lucas using the island's own environmental elements like horse dung, seaweed, and plastic waste–I show how the film imagines alternative forms of archival work through its material interactions with the island.

Throughout the paper, I use the term archive in three distinct but interconnected registers to articulate *Geographies of Solitude*. First is the most traditional definition of the archive, the archive as institution: the organizing system and repository of records built upon standards of appraisal, legitimized by institutional authority. This form of the archive operates through rigid practices of classification that determine certain materials as valuable and legible and exclude others as waste and disposable. Secondly, I consider the archive as practice, by which I refer to the set of hands-on actions like collecting, indexing, and inventorying data that constitute the archive as ongoing labor rather than a fixed repository. To this end, Ann Cvetkovich highlights the significance of hands-on and behind-the-scenes work, the affective methods of archival practices, and "feeling [her] way through the archives," especially in relation to various theories of the archive that interrogate its acts of erasure.[1] I understand the archive as practice as a process of sustained attention and situated work that continuously produces and maintains recorded knowledge. Lastly, I pay close attention to the archive as excess. What is rejected and omitted by the classificatory system of the institutional archive nonetheless persists in the form of material residues, the affective afterlives of archival objects, and forms of care and relationality that extend beyond institutional classification: what a traditional archive may consider as excess can shape what the archive is and what it does.[2] Bringing these three registers together, I argue that *Geographies of Solitude* unsettles the institutional archive's distinction between value and waste. Rather than treating the archive as a mere repository of records, the film imagines archival practice and knowledge as a series of ongoing and attentive processes that preserve material interactions between the archivist and the archived and forces us to rethink what an ecological archive is and can do. By considering Lucas's records of the island,

the cameraless inscription of environmental traces onto the film stock, and the feminist and ecological relations cultivated between human and nonhuman worlds, *Geographies of Solitude* reconceives the archive as an ecological practice of care.

GEOGRAPHIES OF SOLITUDE (2022) AND THE HISTORIES OF THE SABLE ISLAND

Geographies of Solitude is a film that embodies the feel of a sensory documentary with its long takes that immerse you in Sable Island's landscape. Jacqueline Mill's camera often simply lingers on the beach, on the manmade structure where Lucas lives and works, on the wildflowers scattered all over the landscape, on the horses and the seals (Figure 1). The island is uninhabited, sans a few maintenance workers and researchers who make extended visits[3]; visitors are allowed only on certain dates and require special permission. Zoe Lucas is an exception as the island's resident human naturalist, and is a subject of the film just as much as the wildlife she safeguards. Overlapping with the footage taken on the island is a voiceover of Lucas's public lecture, in which she tells the story of how she came to call this island home: first visiting the island for a summer job, she fell in love with the its quiet wilderness and continued to serve in research and conservation roles on the island for the following years, then decades. The beautiful shots of the island landscape are accompanied by those following Lucas's work of inventorying all kinds of data from the island. Some of this data concerns the health of the wild horses on the island: for example, Lucas has diligently kept records of their fecal matter output. Lucas also records the accumulation of marine litter that washes up at Sable Island. At one point in the film, she shares her 20-year record of deflated balloons, sorted by the kinds of advertisements and messages printed on them: one exemplary balloon once adorned a family's Halloween party in Lafayette, Indiana, then travelled over 2000 miles to Sable Island as a piece of trash. These inventories, Lucas argues, will raise awareness and signal the urgency of the problem, which she simply terms the "reality of the planet" (Figure 2). Lucas is the founder and president of the Sable Island Institute, a nonprofit organization dedicated to biodiversity conservation and public education about the island; the film aligns itself with her work in its portrayal of the island as both a resilient and endangered ecosystem.

Lucas's 20-year archive of the Sable Island is preceded by a more traditional archive of various written records that document life on the island. Parks Canada, the country's government agency that manages its national parks, conservation areas, and historic sites, describes the island as a "home to the famous Sable Island wild horses, grey seals, and unique plants, birds, and insects [and] known as 'The Graveyard of the Atlantic' due to more than 350 shipwrecks off its shores."[4] The agency presents the island's story to the public through its website by highlighting the history of government efforts to create settlements and to establish safety infrastructures and conservation work. In an expanded



Figure 1
Sable Island horses.
Still from *Geographies of Solitude* (dir. Jacquelyn Mills, 2022).

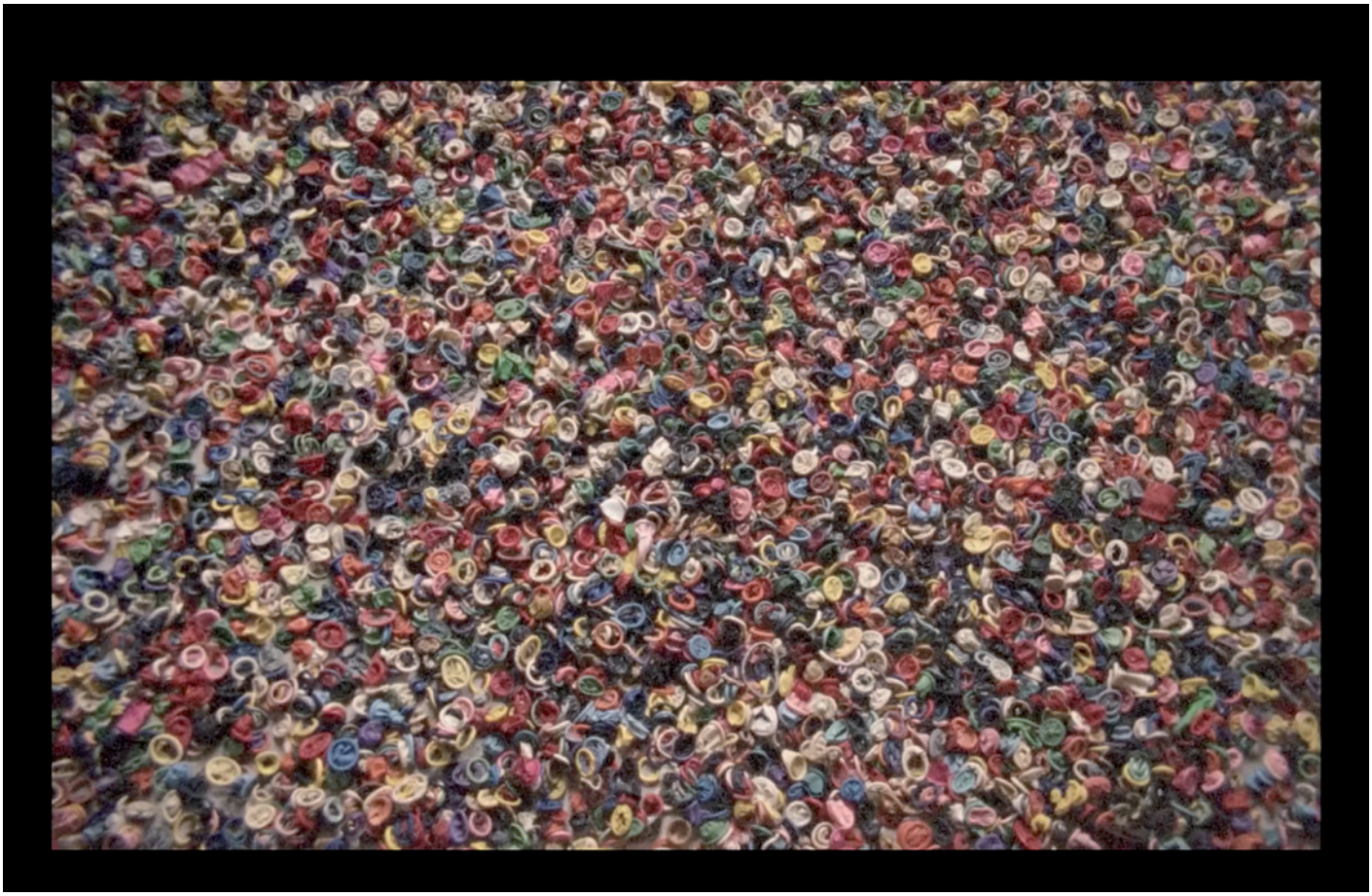

Figure 2
A colorful array of deflated balloons and balloon lips, collected by Lucas.
Still from *Geographies of Solitude*.

"cultural history" section, the website delineates a series of attempts for human settlement that began in the early 16th century with Portuguese explorers. These attempts were unsuccessful, and the numerous shipwrecks on the island gave it the moniker of "Graveyard of the Atlantic." In particular, the agency applauds the work of Sable Island Humane Establishment as a major part of the history of the island, describing it as a series of superintendencies, government vessels, and introduction of new technologies on the island and noting that the organization was itself designated an event with national historic significance. The Sable Island Humane Establishment was established by the Nova Scotia government in 1801 as the island's first life-saving station and oversaw rescue and recovery operations along the island's coastline until 1958, a few years before the founding of the Canadian Coast Guard.[5] The Nova Scotia archives, managed (and now digitized) by Nova Scotia's Department of Service, maintain various records from 1801 to 1867 that document the work of the Sable Island Humane Establishment such as telegraph post and line records, communications among island residents, records of government expenditures, and descriptions of daily life before the responsibility of rescue operations shifts from the local to the federal government.

Today, rather than the long history of various colonial governments' failed attempts to establish settlement, the island is more known for its wild animal population: the Sable Island Horse. Thought to have accompanied the island's human visitors and left behind, these horses now are recognized to have genetically diverged enough from other horse breeds; today, they are feral and legally protected from human interference.[6] The island is also home to the world's largest wild seal colony. Both the Nova Scotia government and the Parks Canada Agency describe the island's history as one of a beneficial and necessary kind of human intervention upon a distant island whose harsh environmental conditions have resisted settlement efforts with a near-misanthropic force of wilderness. On one hand, a history of long and uncooperative encounters between nature and man, followed by helpful and effective state interventions; on another, a story of cooperation and resilience in the form of institutionalized community.

Alongside this official history exists a story of less-than-successful operations and waste matter. For example, offshore drilling activities around Sable Island is condensed into a passing mention in this history, yet the Canadian petroleum industry had an active presence around the island for decades. In 1959, Mobil Oil Canada started its initial hydrocarbon exploration, or the systematic search for oil and natural gas deposits, in the shallow section of the Scotian Shelf. After years of pre-drilling surveys, Mobil Oil Canada drilled the first well on Sable Island in 1967. In the following decades, petroleum companies further profiled seismic reflections and drilled numerous gas wells, eventually initiating the Sable Offshore Energy Project, Canada's first offshore natural gas project, in 1996, but decommissioning it shortly afterward when they found that wells on the island were not commercially viable.[7] The story presented by the archived records of explorations, drilling operations, and their eventual shutdown starkly contrasts

with that of the official history. In the former, government-supported interventions protect human residents and conserve the nonhuman environment; in the latter, petroleum companies actively drill gas wells in the Sable Island area, only to abandon them upon finding that they will not yield meaningful commercial output. The official history of Sable Island encapsulates what an institutional archive can do: it organizes and legitimizes a history where the Sable Island wildlife and its conservation is a cherished national heritage. In this history, one can easily find records of the "graveyard" that necessitated government-run rescue operations; a natural gas project decommissioned due to lack of commercial viability, on the other hand, does not belong in this history.

If the film portrays Sable Island as anything other than a beautiful haven for wildlife and its human protectors, what it shows is not a graveyard but a landfill of plastic. Ironically, plastic is a material mostly derived from crude oil and natural gas, of which what the petroleum industry determined Sable Island would not make a profitable source despite decades of explorative drilling. Media scholar Heather Davis argues that plastic is not simply a source that makes up the material world, but much more importantly a conduit with which to consider how Western modernity has shaped the way we think about matter and material relations at large as *plastic in nature*: "inherently pliable, disposable, and consumable."[8] Even as the film highlights Lucas's efforts to separate the plastic from the island, it also shows the Sisyphean nature of her work, as the plastic only stays to break down into smaller pieces of micro-plastic. To borrow Davis's words describing another artwork, there is an "inability to filter out plastic, to maintain a neat division between the synthetic and natural worlds…"[9] Lucas and Mills have made an extraordinary effort in preserving and inventorying the different kinds of plastic trash found on the island. The film asks us to ponder the ecological crises and our contribution to it, both in material terms (the trash we produce) and in the way we view the world – forever plastic in its plasticity and always replenishing itself.

By introducing Lucas's work, *Geographies of Solitude* offers an up-to-date supplementation of the history of the Canadian state's rescue and conservation operations, which in its current writing largely omits discussions of ongoing ecological challenges faced by the island. Yet, Lucas's inventories do more than document the accumulation of plastic and the increasing environmental degradation on the island. Most importantly, the film complicates the institutional archive's dynamic of value and waste by highlighting how the island escapes such an archival logic through its waste-full constitution. One of the core functions of any archive is to appraise the value of what is worth keeping in the long term, given the physical constraints of the vault, which necessitates establishing the selective norms of value. The logic of the archive in the most traditional sense is discriminatory, and it produces not only an official and orderly set of records but also waste: the archive and the dumpster are twin productions. *Geographies of Solitude* lays bare the logic of the archive not least through Lucas's work of an archivist with her Excel spreadsheets that track the fecal output of the horses

and the bags of plastic debris that she has meticulously labeled, but its attention to waste material at large. The film grants visibility and persistence to materials otherwise designated as waste and destined for disappearance as well as Lucas's act of inventorying and Mills's filming of that act which altogether raise a larger question about how value is assigned. The film constitutes a kind of meta-archive – an archive that is aware of its own double production of value and waste. Such a concept of the archive also approaches Mel Hogan's formulation of the archive as dumpster, in which Hogan uses the relationship between archive and the dumpster as an analogous framework to examine the relationship between our digital data and their material consequences. Pointing out the inseparability of the archive and the dumpster, Hogan asks: "what if we… consider what is wasted, left out of the archive, disposed and dismissed, as part of a historiography of the archive itself"?[10] My examination of *Geographies of Solitude* is a response to Hogan's question, originally directed at new media, now pointed at cinema: how does a film like *Geographies of Solitude* take its own waste and excess stories back into its constitution, into its own historiography of the archive? Lucas and Mills create such an archive through a multitude of ecological and feminist practices that permeate throughout the film.

ECOLOGICAL FILM PRACTICE

Geographies of Solitude can be characterized as an example of ecological cinema: films that facilitate immersive and sensuous engagement with the natural world, calling for a non-anthropocentric and a more ecologically conscious mode of belonging to the world.[11] Ecological cinema functions much like Hogan's conceptualization of the dumpster-as-archive, in that both redistribute attention away from established hierarchies of value and toward the nonhuman world that conventional systems of perception and preservation often overlook. In ecological films, the natural world, often relegated to the background in mainstream narrative films, is brought to the forefront, and the urgency of the human clock-time dissipates into the slow yet dynamic movement of time in nature.[12] An ecological film prioritizes the natural environment and its interaction with the human world rather than focus on human drama: it calls for a reprioritization of the spectatorial economy of attention at large through its form and constructs an alternative imagination of the human-nonhuman relationship.

As an ecological film, *Geographies of Solitude* encourages spectators to look at the island through the caring perspective of Lucas and soak in the details of the island environment through an immersive and sensuous filmic experience. Through Mills's camera pointed at the island, we see a pill bug making its way between mountains of dried-up grass, scurrying out of the white spotlight created by, presumably, Lucas's lantern. We see a golden field of reeds blowing in the wind, its long, lance-like leaves shaking like currents in the sea. We see Lucas's hands in rubber gloves cleaning a plastic thingamajig with a toothbrush that

goes *scrubscrub-swooshswoosh* against the background of an endless stretch of more plastic. The archive of *Geographies of Solitude* that holds these acts of collection and preservation is one that preserves what is ordinarily discarded and overlooked, extends care beyond human subjects, and values sensory processes and lived experiences over fixed inscriptions. The film recalibrates our perceptive economy to pay more careful attention to the island's natural environment.

While the film resonates with Hogan's conceptualization of archive-as-dumpster with such reorientation of perception, the film's archival nature becomes the most evident through its experimental practices that invite the nonhuman environment to participate in their own preservation. During their shoot, Lucas and Mills made short cameraless films by leaving the undeveloped film stock exposed in the island's various elements for an extended amount of time. To make them, Mills processed the film stock by hand, painted them with non-toxic emulsion, and exposed them to the moonlight and starlight on the island, soliciting Lucas's help throughout the steps. These images are shown throughout the film, in between scenes of the island and Lucas at work. This cameraless filmmaking process exemplifies how an archive is shaped not only by the records it makes legible but also the archival labor and choices that determine and preserve their value. In a traditional archive, archival labor begins with appraising the value of records and acquiring them into a collection. The archival labor that preserves Mills's cameraless images similarly begins with an appraisal of value as in a traditional archive. For one of the sequences, Mills began by burying undeveloped film stock in horse dung, determining that the encounter between the horse dung and the film stock is a process that calls for preservation and further observation. For another sequence, Mills's selection of objects represents the island's wildlife: strands of hair from one of the Sable Island horses, animal bones (whether of a horse or a seal, it is unclear), and sand; these elements are put in contact with the film strip. The animal matter and dirt are not treated as discard but instead become active profilmic subjects and media of filmic inscription.

The step of appraisal and preparation, then, is followed by a period of exposure. A traditional archive protects against environmental elements like humidity, temperature, or pests; their material vulnerability determines to what degree the archive must control the physical condition of the repository. Mills, on the other hand, left the film strip to react and decompose in the moisture and the microbial activity of the animal waste; she exposed another film strip in starlight, letting it freely interact with the nighttime atmosphere. These films were then each developed, not by treating them with chemical developers but with yarrow and seaweed instead – plant matter from land and sea, respectively. What a conventional repository works against to protect its artifacts and records actively constitutes the cameraless films on Sable Island. The images blur the rigid boundaries between protected artifacts and outside threats. Temperamental and unstable environmental phenomena become active artistic forces. The environmental elements become profilmic subjects and ecological collaborators

in the inscription process that produce the images by the otherwise undesirable processes of physical alteration and decay. Finally, the film *Geographies of Solitude* exhibits the cameraless films on screen with titles that enumerate their constitutive elements for viewers, much like how an archive indexes records and artifacts to ensure their availability and integrity for future users and provides clear and thorough descriptions. These titles are:

- Horse Hair, Bones, and Sand, exposed in starlight and developed in seaweed;
- Film buried in Horse Dung, Developed in yarrow;
- Sable Island Balloon Litter, Spliced to 35mm Film;
- Sable Island Mist, nighttime, hand-processed in seaweed.

While these titles explicitly outline the makeup of the processed film strips as if indexing records in a physical repository, the resulting images do not offer any representational clarity. These images show a series of abstract and translucent shapes that quickly dissipate into the background, and invite the viewer's attention with its ephemerality and delicate textures. The sequence, "Horse Hair, Bones, and Sand," offers few identifying markers of the titular objects. The image consists of flickering arrays of small, soft grains of light in a muted green reminiscent of algae. Long strands of what appears to be hair cut through these lights in an irregular rhythm: the lines are straight and bunched in one shot; they are scattered and curved in the following shot. The background fades and brightens erratically. The film then seamlessly transitions into "Film Buried in Horse Dung, Developed in Yarrow." Now the image takes on a grayish blue, with large black spots playfully jumping around in the frame (Figures 3-4). Bones, hair, dung, and sand in disarray, all things intimately associated with decay and disorder, preserved their traces on the filmstrip.

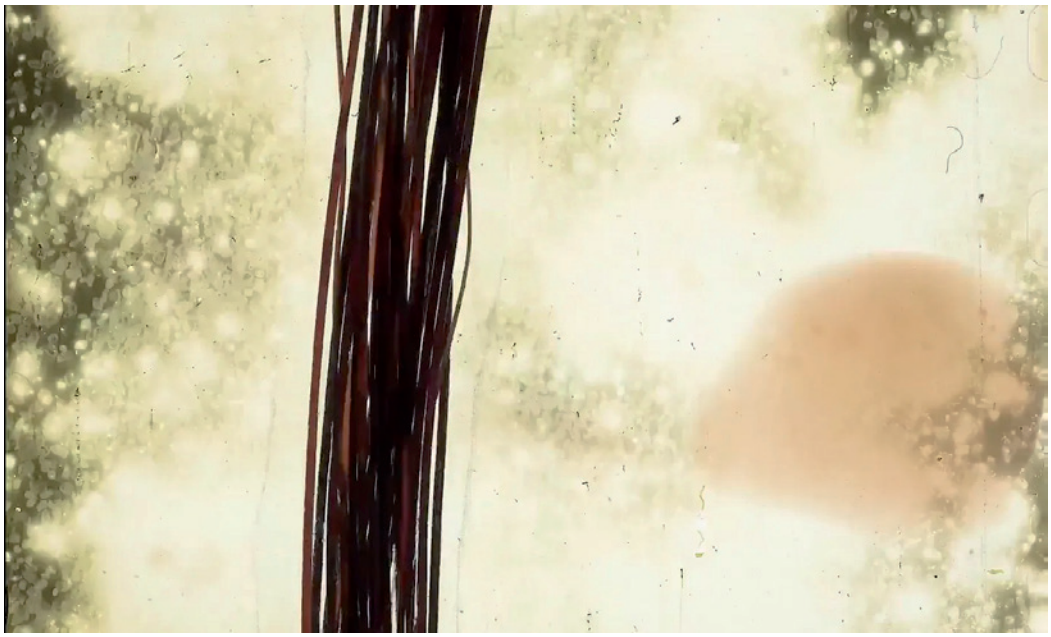

Figure 3
"Horse Hair, Bones, and Sand", exposed in starlight and developed in seaweed; Still from *Geographies of Solitude* .



Figure 4
"Film buried in Horse Dung, developed in yarrow." Still from *Geographies of Solitude*.

CELLULOID STORIES

The nonhuman elements that contribute to the making of the film include the film strip, too. Film stock at large has always blurred the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic, and the multifaceted history of film stock productively complicates Mills' goals. Film stock consists of the film base that is a strip of flexible plastic, which is then coated with a light-sensitive emulsion whose main component is gelatin. While colloquially called celluloid film, film base today is made of polyester; Mills's film strips are made of the same material that litters the island – plastic. The original base was indeed made of celluloid, which was derived from plant matter; however, it was always created to be an animal substitute. In the 1860s an American inventor John Wesley Hyatt invented a moldable material to make billiard balls, using nitrocellulose and ground camphor to substitute for ivory.[13] In an early advertisement (1878) it was described as "a new material in the arts," and "tough as whalebone; elastic and dense as ivory." It went on to say: "As petroleum came to the relief of the whale, so too has celluloid given the elephant, the tortoise, and the coral insect a respite in their native haunts; and it will no longer be necessary to ransack the earth in pursuit of substances which are constantly growing scarcer."[14] As such, celluloid alone, while it aspires to imitate the animal, comes from plant matter. Then, not long after the invention

of celluloid, in 1873, a gelatin emulsion coating was first used for photographic stock.[15] Then, with the advent of cinema, celluloid gains another use and status. Journalist Stephen Fenichell puts it well when he writes: "Celluloid film succeeded in raising the first plastic's cultural profile from a medium or mere mimicry into a priceless repository of human memory."[16] In 1889, George Eastman replaced the glass plate and paper supports that were used for developing photographs until then with thin strips of nitrocellulose plastic, or celluloid film, covered in a thin film of gelatin coating.[17] Motion picture, from the very beginning, then, is a complex assemblage of the actual material renderings of animal and plant matter, their imitative synthetic counterparts, and the cinematic projection that preserves, or encrypts, the very plant and animal beings alongside and at the expense of human narratives.[18] In her recent work *Cinemal,* film scholar Tessa Baird asks: "If in 1911 Kodak was manufacturing more than eighty million feet of film stock per year, how many millions of feet, or rather hives and trotters, were rendered to give motion to motion pictures?"[19] The rise of film as a cultural medium literally depends on mass slaughter, and is in a larger sense contingent on a false conceptualization of organic matter as easily replaceable, moldable, and infinite. These rolls of film, developed in seawater, plant matter, and animal waste, embody the delicate interaction between the process of chemical decomposition and the unchanging matter of plastic in the present, layered on top of a complex history. They embody a dynamic entanglement of human labor, the organic environmental elements and the inorganic trash matters on the island, and film stock.

Mills's making and use of cameraless footage is significant because it simultaneously calls attention to the material history of film stock as well as solicits participation from the very nonhuman elements, organic and inorganic, that it has historically regarded as exploitable. Baird identifies in her examples of experimental cinema the ways in which animals name themselves through their unique sounds – something that Akira Lippit calls a "proto-nominative capacity," the capacity for living beings to name themselves and therefore to assert their existence among other living beings.[20] In a similar manner, the short cameraless films of *Geographies of Solitude* invite the earthly matter of Sable Island to leaves of their existence, of their interactions with each other and with the work of Mills and Lucas's archivization of the island. To be clear, the nonhuman elements' participation in *Geographies of Solitude* is still conditioned and staged by human acts. Yet, the sand, strands of horse hair, and yarrow all leave a lasting physical mark on the medium of film, a material created only thanks to the exploits of countless animals and plant matter for the sake of mass production of motion picture narratives. The two women extend their invitation to damaged plastic and decomposing animal waste, too, further challenging the archival principle of value appraisal and secure storage. Ultimately, these images open up the traditional notion of the archive and reconstitute an alternative one in which the processes of archivization become the very part of the archival records, preserving the material interactions that take place among human labor, environmental forces,

and cinematic processes through which those interactions are recorded.

Mills's cameraless films also expand a genre of experimental film that exceeds ecological cinema. In what Laura Marks characterizes as haptic visuality, certain visual texts with a deep tactile sensibility can invite a kinesthetic and multisensory response to the image: "the eye is compelled to touch," rather than see.[21] Marks suggests that haptic images can challenge the traditional sensory hierarchy that favors vision, and the images "refuse visual plenitude . . . to prevent an easy connection to narrative, instead encouraging the viewer to engage with the image through memory."[22] In the absence of the camera, what creates the image is the direct touch among the film strip, the profilmic world, and the human hand: in lieu of the eye, the world is compelled to touch the film matter. More importantly, for Marks' haptic cinema, the memories and the affective charge they bring to the image are those stemming from the shared experiences of diasporic filmmakers and spectators that transcend stable identities. They make up what she calls intercultural cinema that, like a video archive, preserves fleeting moments of ordinary life that store memories and histories through the sensorium rather than official inscriptions. In *Geographies of Solitude,* the seemingly unremarkable elements of the island, or perhaps its memories–the drying animal dung, strands of horse hair, seaweed, and sand–are preserved into film form in the midst of decomposition and alteration, in lieu of written and photographic records in impenetrable storage. These images in *Geographies of Solitude* embody an archive that values and preserves relation and records processes of interconnectedness over a comprehensive and perfect management of stable objects. In the archive of the film, Lucas's inventories preserve the island through collection and organization; Mills's camera records her work and her felt experiences on the island; the cameraless images extend these practices into the realm of inscription and record the individual island elements as well as the unstable encounters between the island and the film stock through which such recordings are made.

TOWARD A FEMINIST AND QUEER ECOLOGICAL SENSIBILITY

In American experimental cinema there is a meaningful history of cameraless films that interacts with the natural world and approaches an ecological archive in a similar manner to Mills's film. For example, in Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* from 1963, the filmmaker pressed together moth wings, plant leaves, flower petals, between two stripes of splicing tape to project them as a roll of film. David Gatten, for his *What the Water Said* series made between 1998 and 2007, put strips of unexposed film in a fish trap and left it underwater off the coast of South Carolina, letting the seawater and various marine debris leave marks on the film strip. In these practices, the filmmaking forgoes the camera and orchestrates a direct touch between the stuff of the film and the profilmic world. The filmmakers, unlike on more conventional film sets, are not the conductor of the narrative or the

mise-en-scene. In both examples, objects that embody decay, decomposition, and discard are brought to the surface of the film to create a unique cinematographic impression. The filmmakers, and Mills, too, are only one of the collaborators at the mercy of the interactions among all the other agencies involved in production. These films help imagine an archive that records its own material traces of archivization–appraisal and selection, organization, preservation, and maintenance.

Even though the look and the sound of these films resemble one another, Mills's cameraless films stand out in its relationship to the archive. In Brakhage and Gatten's films, the human intervention that oversaw the interactions between the cinematic apparatus and the natural elements disappears from the resulting image; information about their production is only found in interviews and introductory texts that supplement the standalone experimental films. Mills continues this tradition of cameraless filmmaking, but refuses to erase the human labor that solicits and stages the participation of the nonhuman elements. Mills's cameraless footage is not standalone films but work in tandem with scenes of the island in *Geographies of Solitude,* the larger film about Sable Island and Zoe Lucas. The traces marked on the film stock are neither purely human nor nonhuman; they emerge from collaboration. The footage appears on screen with simple, descriptive titles that on one hand attribute credit to the nonhuman elements and on the other highlight the two women's archival labor of collecting, processing, and indexing the data. Overall, the archival significance that *Geographies of Solitude* gives to its cameraless films is rooted in the acts of cooperation among the profilmic world, the archivists, and the film.

Furthermore, the contemplative attention that Lucas and Mills pay to the island through different kinds of practices reveal that their archival intent is deeply rooted in the spirit of care and conservation. The film demonstrates that an archive, when acting outside of its institutional bounds, can preserve not only material objects and their traces but also gesture toward the presence of the archivists as a marker of its intent and durability. The film is a story of a woman and her perspective on an island ecosystem: of Lucas and her fascination and protectiveness, and of Mills and her interest and curiosity toward Lucas and her work. *Geographies of Solitude* is not a film or an archive devoid of human presence like the films of Brakhage or Gatten may be. Its ecological sensibility extends to human sociality, too. The nonhuman world's participation helps configure an alternative mode of being and relationality between the two women, not least because the material traces of archival acts include those left by human labor, the significance of which is heightened because it facilitates their growing friendship. For example, in one scene, Mills is teaching Lucas how to work with the celluloid film strip, in the midst of a conversation about the wondrous world around them. The voiceover is coupled with the soft, flickering lights and blue-green hues of "Horse Hair, Bones, and Sand" and "Film Buried in Horse Dung."

> Lucas: How long can you leave film in moonlight?
> Mills: In moonlight?
> Lucas: I mean just looking at how the grass is ... over like this. You're just ... let the grass itself be exposed, and the moon shining through it.
> Mills: here, try this… So in order to find the emulsion side, you put your lips on it, and whichever side your lips stick to is the emulsion.

Here, Mills's instruction to use her lips to begin the process of film exposure calls for an awakening of the senses. Marks proposes that haptic visuality can shift our attention from the dominant representative paradigm of the visual to the realm of the sensuous: suggesting that the haptic cinema is inherently feminist in this decentering act, she writes that the tactile and multisensory engagement of the image can invite "a small, caressing gaze."[23]

Mills's instruction also recalls Luce Irigaray's essay "When Our Lips Speak Together" (1980), where the French philosopher writes:

> Open your lips, but do not open them simply. I do not open them simply. We – you/I – are never open nor closed. Because we never separate simply, *a single word* can't be pronounced, produced by, emitted from our mouths. From your/my lips, several songs, several ways of saying echo each other. For one is never separable from the other. You/I are always several at the same time. How could one dominate the other?[24]

Here, the lips in this essay are not literal bodily features. Instead, Irigaray uses the figure of the two lips to invoke an alternative mode of being that departs from the essentialism of phallogocentric thought, of which the subject thinks and speaks as a self-same, bounded, and masculine "I." In lieu of this singular subject, Irigaray speaks of "*our* lips," rejecting the binary of the male subject and the female other and embracing a mode of being that is open, unbounded, and multitudinous. Irigaray makes a departure from existing syntax and logic of masculinist language and uses an experimental, figurative, and open-ended language that expresses an embodied sensibility, or a way to *parler femme* ("to speak female").[25] Mills's use of her lips in her artistry follows a similarly feminist approach: she departs from the digital filmmaking process and prioritizes the sense of touch between her own body and the filmic body.

Here, the film also recalls feminist experiments with the material substrate of film such as Carolee Schneemann's 1971 film *Fuses*, which portrays the relationship between Schneeman and her then-partner and artist James Tenney, including their sexual interactions. To make *Fuses,* she used 16mm film to shoot, then burned, baked, cut, painted, and performed other direct acts of manipulation on the film strip. The resulting film embodies Schneeman's bodily experience of female sexuality, made from the perspective and (literal) touch of Schneeman.[26] In this sense, *Fuses* approaches a feminist archive of bodily interactions between the film body and the female body. *Geographies of Solitude* takes one step further

in the archival scope and preserves bodily interactions between the film body, various organic matter from the island's ecosystem, and the two women's labor, cultivating a sensuous ecology of care and attentiveness in the process. One of the processes of archivization that the archive of *Geographies of Solitude* preserves is the budding friendship between the two human ecologist-archivists of the film and their growing connection to the island. The two women's voices carry a spirit of enchantment and joy alongside the abstract beauty of the horse bones and hair, accompanied by a subtle undertone of erotic play. What this human contribution brings to these films is a quiet tenderness for the world, a kind of love for the present, and a willingness to collect and preserve what simply exists without the rigid process of appraisal.[27]

A later conversation between the two women encapsulates this tenderness again, where Mills reaches for more companionship and affection from Lucas:

> Mills: And do you wanna… stop?
> Lucas: …it's super interesting, super engaging, super fulfilling to be here, but I lost track of everything else. Lucas: Let's get this stuff back to the station and come up with a new plan.
> Mills: Or we could focus on getting sound,
> Lucas: You don't really need me for getting sound, do ya?
> Mills: No, but it'd be nice to spend more time together… (laughs shyly)

Following Mills's voice, tinged with a hint of disappointment, is only the ambient noises of the island. The sounds of the wind and the water fill the air, quietly reminding the women and the audience that they are not alone, and that Mills will find her affection from her earthly companions, if not Lucas. In both moments, the film offers a spirit of romantic play and embraces the (feminine) body. The subtle affects encourage viewers to be just as attentive and playful in their approach, in the same way that Lucas looks at the same wildflowers as exhilaratingly beautiful, the way that Mills looks at and records Lucas's Excel spreadsheets, or the way Lucas looks at the seals. What comes through in the film is a timid but tender friendship, a shared love for Sable Island and each other's commitment to it, a kind of love that extends beyond that of normative coupling and pronatalist commitment to the future, and a kind of love that escapes reciprocity, too – a most capacious ecological sensibility for love and care that extends from the inorganic to the human.[28] Steeped in such love, *Geographies of Solitude* exemplifies how an archive might embrace the interdependence between the valuable and the valueless its own practices of appraisal and preservation attempts to erase. In its preservation of human experiences, nonhuman traces, and their collaboration, the film institutes an archive that runs on principles of relationality that is horizontal, interdependent, fluid, and ongoing, rather than prescriptive, fixed, and hierarchical. It preserves what is ordinarily discarded, values relation over mastery, and foregrounds collaborative over hierarchical relations.

CONCLUSION

Musing on plastic matters, Davis writes that plastic, ever-present in our lives as both useful and wasteful, blurs the lines between the natural and the artificial, and encourages us to "not turn away from the horrors of our times, or transmit a nostalgia for a pristine past, but instead offers a curiosity about what is present, what is possible here and now." *Geographies of Solitude* does just this by engaging with the quiet and wild world of Sable Island. It shows the island's incorruptible plastic waste alongside the celluloid strips exposed in starlight; it shows decomposing bones alongside the two women lost in their craft and companionship.

In the popular mediascape, moving images have long been rendered with CGI; animated films are completely cameraless while boasting an ever-more realistic and natural look. These images are of the editing suites and green screens: an image of organicity borne out of nothing. In contrast, *Geographies of Solitude* invites participation from wild environment, not only as profilmic characters in the film's narrative alongside its human agents, but also in the formal creation of the image itself. And in these images made with neglected materials, many of them simply waste, forms a standard of beauty and a pacing of time different from the techno- and petrocapitalist epistemologies of speed and usefulness. The film is, arguably, a useful environmental expression, in that it successfully conveys a conservationist narrative. At the same time, *Geographies of Solitude* demonstrates how thinking about ecological and artistic practices as archival in nature encourages us to rethink normative understandings of value and conservation, and to imagine what an archive can and should do in an ecologically precarious world.

The film's title *Geographies of Solitude* could refer to several different kinds of solitudes. The isolating nature of the geographical figure of the island, coupled with the reality of the Sable Island being mostly uninhabited by humans and occupied more often by shipwrecks. Maybe the solitary life led by Lucas on this island, who finds its quiet and the unchanging landscape wondrous every day. But what the stories in the film portray is far from a life of loneliness. The film imagines a geography of solitude as a study of solitary beings as they interact with Earth's features, activities, and *each other:* an archive of multitudes.

REFERENCES

Arondekar, Anjali. *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India.* Duke University Press, 2023.

Baird, Tessa. *Cinemal: The Becoming-Animal of Experimental Film.* University of Minnesota Press, 2025.

Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution.* Translated by Arthur Mitchell. Random House, 1944.

Burke, Carolyn. "Introduction to Luce Irigaray's 'When Our Lips Speak Together.'" *Signs* 6 no.1 (1980): 66-68. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173965.

Burton, Antoinette. *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India.* Oxford University Press, 2003.

Cvetkovich, Ann. "The Archival Turn as Practice." *Archivaria 100* (2025): 188-201. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/978336.

Davis, Heather. *Plastic Matter.* Duke University Press, 2022.

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure.* Duke University Press, 2011.

Haraway, Donna. *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* Duke University Press, 2016.

Hogan, Mél. "The Archive as Dumpster." *Pivot* 4, no.1 (2015): 7-38.

Irigaray, Luce. "When Our Lips Speak Together." Translated by Carolyn Burke. *Signs* 6, no.1 (1980): 69-79. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173966

Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife.* University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

MacDonald, Scott. "Toward an Eco-Cinema," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11, no.2 (2014): 107-132. https://jstor.org/stable/44086296

Marks, Laura U.. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses.* Duke University Press, 2000.

Meikle, Jeffrey L. *American Plastic: A Cultural History.* Rutgers University Press, 1995.

Mills, Jacquelyn. "Healing in Nature: Jacquelyn Mills on *Geographies of Solitude*." Interview by Yun-hua Chen. *Film International,* April 27, 2022. https://filmint.nu/jacquelyn-mills-geographies-of-solitude-berlinale-2022-interview-yun-hua-chen/

Parks Canada. "Sable Island National Park Reserve." Last modified March 16, 2026. https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ns/sable.

____. "Cultural History." Sable Island National Park Reserve. Last modified March 22, 2026, https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ns/sable/culture/histoire-history.

____. "Horses." Sable Island National Park Reserve. Last modified February 16, 2026. https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ns/sable/nature/animaux-animals/chevaux-horses

Parreñas, Juno Salazar. "When Our Tulips Speak Together: More-Than-Human Queer Natures." *Unsettling Queer Anthropology: Foundations, Reorientations, and Departures.* Edited by Margot Weiss. Duke University Press, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478059400-013.

Plante, Yves, Jose Luis Vega-Pla, Zoe Lucas, Dave Colling, Brigitte de March, and Fiona Buchanan. "Genetic Diversity in a Feral Horse Population from Sable Island, Canada." *Journal of Heredity* 98, no.6 (2007): 594-602. doi: 10.1093/jhered/esm064

Schneeman, Carolee. "Notes on *Fuses,*" 1971, retrieved from the Carolee Schneemann Foundation website, https://www.schneemannfoundation.org/writing/notes-on-fuses.

Shukin, Nicole. *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times.* University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Sitney, P. Adams. *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943-2000.* 3rd Edition. Oxford University Press, 2002, 407.

1 See Ann Cvetkovich, "The Archival Turn as Practice," *Archivaria 100:* 188-201. Notably, she writes about the "openness of professional methods of cataloguing, description, access. . . especially when affective methods are introduced" (194).

2 Here, I draw upon scholars who consider different kinds of counter-narratives of the institutional archive. These writers who work with the archive in queer studies and postcolonial studies consider the archive as a space for bodily processes and encounters, undocumented histories, personal memoires – unstable and excessive experiences and encounters erased in the traditional archive. For example, see Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Duke University Press, 2023), and Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford University Press, 2003). In both books, the writers interrogate the status of the traditional archive by analyzing what was erased and what nonetheless survived in the archival records throughout 20th century India.

3 Up to 6 residents live on the island during the year, but the island sometimes sees up to 25 short- and long-term visitors at different times throughout the year. "Cultural History," Sable Island National Park Reserve, Parks Canada, last modified March 22, 2026, https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ns/sable/culture/histoire-history.

4 "Sable Island National Park Reserve," Parks Canada, last modified March 16, 2026, https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ns/sable.

5 "Cultural History," Sable Island National Park Reserve.

6 For general information and cultural history of the wild horse population on Sable Island, see "Horses," Sable Island National Park Reserve, Parks Canada, last modified February 16, 2026, https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ns/sable/nature/animaux-animals/chevaux-horses. Their genetic divergence from prominent horse breeds, explained in brief in this public history, is supported in zoological studies like in this article: Yves Plante et al., "Genetic Diversity in a Feral Horse Population from Sable Island, Canada," *Journal of Heredity* 98, no.6 (2007): 594-602. doi: 10.1093/jhered/esm064.

7 "Exploration History," Call For Bids 2007-2008 NS07-1, Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Petroleum Board. https://callforbids.cnsopb.ns.ca/2007/01/exploration_history.html; "Sable Offshore Energy Project," ExxonMobil, 2020, https://corporate.exxonmobil.com/-/media/Global/Files/locations/Canada-operations/Sable-Overview.pdf; "Sable Offshore Energy Project," CNSOER: Canada-Nova Scotia Offshore Energy Regulator, January 2025, https://cnsoer.ca/oil-gas-energy/legacy-production-projects/sable-offshore-energy-project.

8 Heather Davis, *Plastic Matter* (Duke University Press, 2022), 9.

9 Davis, *Plastic Matter,* 3. The artwork Davis is referring to is a film installation titled *Between the Waves* (2012) by Tejal Shah, where human, plastic, animal, and other earthly bodies are shown in entanglements across space and time.

10 Mél Hogan, "The Archive as Dumpster," *Pivot* 4, no.1 (2015), 23.

11 *Geographies of Solitude* shows Lucas's collection of waste materials on Sable Island and prompts the audience to think critically about overconsumption and its impact on the natural environment, making an explicitly activist stance. Yet the film can be situated within traditions of ecological filmmaking that is distinct from environmental films, Scott MacDonald suggests that ecological cinema is distinct from environmental cinema in that they are less interested in highlighting specific challenges as environmental films do and are keener on prompting a different experience of perception entirely. See Scott MacDonald, "Toward an Eco-Cinema," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 11, no.2 (2014): 107-132. https://jstor.org/stable/44086296.

12 Here I invoke "clock-time" from Henri Bergson's writings, in which he describes the invention of the "clock-time," or time treated as a linear series of homogenous units like seconds and minutes, vis-à-vis "duration," or time as continuous and indivisible, like how we actually experience it. See Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution,* Translated by Arthur Mitchell. (Random House, 1944).

13 Meikle, Jefferey L. *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 11.

14 Qtd. 12. Meikle.

15 Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 104.

16 Qtd. 70. Mills, *Plastic Matter.*

17 Shukin, *Animal Capital,* 107.

18 I want to point out another poetic historical throughline here. Just as Sable Island is occupied with plastic and horses, so was the beginning of the film form, with which Eadweard Muybridge photographed galloping horses in the form of a motion picture, and without which the ubiquity of plastic in modern life would be impossible.

19 Tessa Baird, *Cinemal: The Becoming-Animal of Experimental Film* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025), 10.

20 Baird, *Cinemal,* 7; Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

21 Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film* (Duke University Press, 2000), 173

22 Marks, *The Skin of the Film,* 177.

23 Marks, 169.

24 Luce Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together," trans. Carolyn Burke, *Signs* 6: no.1 (1980), 72-73. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173966

25 Translator Carolyn Burke's introduction provides a helpful guide in reading with Irigaray's extraordinary writing style: Carolyn Burke, "Introduction to Luce Irigaray's 'When Our Lips Speak Together,'" *Signs* 6 no.1 (1980): 66-68. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173965.

26 It is telling that she made this film in response to Brakhage's film *Window Baby Water Moving* in which he films his wife Jane giving birth to their daughter; Schneeman critiqued that the resulting film omitted Jane's perspective and instead showed only Brakhage's gaze that rendered her experience and body into a "dark genital mystery." Carolee Schneeman, "Notes on *Fuses,*" 1971, retrieved from the Carolee Schneemann Foundation website, https://www.schneemannfoundation.org/writing/notes-on-fuses.

27 An embrace of "failure" is a prominent act of resistance in queer studies, most notably articulated in Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011).

28 A plethora of works articulate an ecology of care and a politics of the more-than-human at the intersection of feminist and queer theory and environmental humanities, including Davis's chapter, "Queer Kin," in *Plastic Matter;* also see Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016). Another recent book chapter makes a direct reference to Irigaray's essay on the lips: see Juno Salazar Parreñas, "When Our Tulips Speak Together: More-Than-Human Queer Natures," in *Unsettling Queer Anthropology: Foundations, Reorientations, and Departures,* ed. Margot Weiss (Duke University Press, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478059400-013.