EDITED BY MAGGIE HENNEFELD AND LAURA HORAK
TRANSCRIBED BY RACHEL LOEWEN

Feminist World-Making with *Cinema's First Nasty Women*

A Roundtable with Neta Alexander, Kaveh Askari, Renée C. Baker, Jennifer Bean, Liza Black, Enrique Moreno Ceballos, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, Dana Reason, Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, Kate Saccone, Aurore Spiers, Gonca Feride Varol, Yiman Wang, and Bret Wood

ABSTRACT *Cinema's First Nasty Women* is a ninety-nine-film DVD/Blu-ray set that highlights silent-era comediennes and cross-dressed women. Cocurators Maggie Hennefeld and Laura Horak organized two live Zoom roundtables with members of the team who had created, taught, or contributed to the project, moderated by *FMH* editor Jennifer Bean. One included cocurator and film historian Laura Horak, Kino producer Bret Wood, cocurator and silent film archivist Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, composers Renée C. Baker and Gonca Feride Varol, Indigenous film historian and booklet contributor Liza Black, and film scholar Kaveh Askari. The other included cocurator and film historian Maggie Hennefeld, silent film festival organizer Enrique Moreno Ceballos, film scholars and commentary contributors Yiman Wang, Aurore Spiers, and Kate Saccone, and film scholar Neta Alexander. Rachel Loewen transcribed the roundtables and Hennefeld and Horak condensed and cut together the conversations to highlight the key themes that emerged. KEYWORDS Anti-racism, archives, collaboration, curating, distribution, feminism, film, music, pedagogy, silent cinema

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Feminist Media Histories, Vol. 10, Number 2-3, pps. 114–125. electronic ISSN: 2373-7492 © 2024 by the Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2024.10.2-3.114

FIGURE 1. *Cinema's First Nasty Women* roundtable panelists and moderator (from *left* to *right*): Jennifer Bean, Gonca Feride Varol, Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, Liza Black, Laura Horak, Bret Wood, Kaveh Askari, Renée C. Baker. This conversation took place on September 28, 2023.

FIGURE 2. *Cinema's First Nasty Women* roundtable panelists and moderator (from *left* to *right*): Maggie Hennefeld, Aurore Spiers, Kate Saccone, Neta Alexander, Enrique Moreno Ceballos, Yiman Wang, Dana Reason, Jennifer Bean. This conversation took place on October 1, 2023.

Ceballos; film scholars and commentary contributors Yiman Wang, Aurore Spiers, and Kate Saccone; and film scholar Neta Alexander (see Figure 2). Rachel Loewen transcribed the roundtables and Hennefeld and Horak condensed and cut together the conversations to highlight the key themes that emerged.

WHY "NASTY" WOMEN?

Jennifer Bean: Why "nasty women"? How does that word choice speak to the importance of the collection, to the way it's distributed, marketed, and understood?

Yiman Wang: The word "Nasty" feels confrontational. You're pushing back against the stigmatization of disobedient women. To own that name is empowering. But something also occurred to me. . . . If I want to introduce this collection in, say, the Chinese context, I would need to translate "nasty" into Chinese, and I would be hard-pressed to do so. How to come up with a word that has the same kind of political urgency? It does not always map neatly across different political realms.

Neta Alexander: This is such a rich question. This project is part of a broader trend of going back to the archives to look at (often ignored) female filmmakers. But I think what the word "nasty" brings to this project is the world-making aspect: opening new worlds in which women get to be nasty, unruly, adventurous, rebellious, crazy, and unpredictable. They electrocute policemen, jump off rooftops, and, generally, cannot be stopped. "Nasty" has both quantitative and qualitative meanings. It reminds us that we need a bigger or more accurate list of all the women filmmakers who were active in this period, and it draws our attention to the kinds of stories being told. This is a celebration of cinematic conventions being broken and dismantled to come up with new art forms. These filmmakers played with gender roles to create cinema of protest, social justice, and imagination. They used new tools and technologies to conjure possible futures where women are unruly, adventurous, and joyful.

Enri Ceballos: Yes to all of that! To screen a film and to see a film is also to embody that film. Cinema is about corporeality. In that sense, people in Mexico have been totally on board with the concept of "Nasty Women." Women in Mexico, trans women in Mexico, who historically have not been part of the canon of corporeal beauty—these films provoke us to feel free in our bodies. They're about blowing up kitchens and destroying public spaces where violence is inflicted on women. Nasty bodies, nasty lives! Through cinema we have the opportunity to wage revolution in the streets.

Maggie Hennefeld: Yeah! We've always felt strongly as curators that the word "nasty" is descriptively accurate in terms of how women raise utter hell across the ninety-nine films. We also liked the topicality because it highlights the resonances of these feminist archives for social struggles today—as well as the messiness, like Yiman was saying, about what doesn't map neatly onto different spaces in the present.

Dana Reason: For some reason my mind immediately jumped to Janet Jackson's song "Nasty." She's got a quote in it: "I'm not a prude. I just

want some respect. No, my name ain't baby. It's Janet, Miss Jackson, if you're nasty." And I thought about [composer] Renée Baker, who's like: "Oh yeah, I make my music on my own terms." So that nastiness is there to say, "We play by our own rules here." Whatever those rules might be. . . . If we want to be totally silly, but we also want to disrupt systems of oppression, *nasty* is a way of doing both.

JB: That's wonderful! I had completely forgotten about the Janet Jackson song, but it's now playing in my head.

Renée Baker: As it turned out, every time I mentioned this set to someone, it made them curious—I don't remember anyone who didn't like it. They just said, "Oh, I *have* to see that," because it was intriguing. I like the attention-drawing aspect of the title because, face it, there's just a few of us—the niche is very tiny. People are not looking for these films.

Laura Horak: The title has also been really polarizing, both with people we talked to and in reviews. There've been several reviews that say: "The collection is great, except for this weird title. I'm not sure that was a good choice." We definitely chose it as a claim about the relevance of these films to today's political moment. I remember Renée asking us: "Are you sure you want to call it that?" The Kino publicity team was not totally on board either.

Bret Wood: In terms of *Cinema's First Nasty Women*, to me it's provocative and it's intriguing. You hear the title and you're immediately going to have a follow-up question, no matter who you are. If we had called it something a little more generic, something like "Comedy Queens and Dashing Damsels," people would be like, "I know those kinds of films. I've seen that." It's good that we didn't pigeonhole it too much in a genre for marketing purposes. Pigeonholes are effective because you're selling products. But at the same time, I felt like Laura and Maggie and Elif were really throwing down the gauntlet with this name. . . . It's not just a collection of movies, but a statement about curatorship. It's a statement about how we talk about classic films. And I think it broke a lot of rules.

COLLABORATION

JB: One of the things that's unique about this project is the amount of different kinds of people you brought together to work on it. Can you talk about that?

LH: In the past, there has been tension between archivists and scholars, but this has really improved in recent years. There's still a divide between

scholars and distributors. Bret is one of the few people who's talking to scholars and finding out what we're doing. Previously, I had the sense of, "You can go off and write your books, but there's no way to get the films you're writing about out commercially." I am grateful to Kino for taking a chance on us. I hope that there's more of these kinds of collaborations between scholars, archivists, and distributors. Something special can happen when those three types of people get together.

BW: More than half of the films in this collection would not be available were it not for this project. And the great thing is, people at archives recognize that. They were like: "Here's the film you requested—and how about this one as well?" Because this is a rare opportunity to get the deep cuts, the films that don't get shown, that don't get collected in DVD sets. I find it really gratifying to release on video a film that is otherwise not going to be seen. It's why I do what I do—and archivists and academics and composers, it's why they do what they do.

Aurore Spiers: For me this whole project has become a model of how to do collaborations in our field. I was a grad student when I was brought in. Just the way I was included with advanced scholars and senior archivists and musicians—the way the curators worked with us was absolutely beautiful and generous. It's been something I want to carry forward when I work on other projects myself.

Gonca Feride Varol: Yeah, I would like to say a big thank you to everyone. I think it's a great network for the composers and musicians all over the world who made this project. I hope we can continue getting to know each other.

CURATING: TEACHING AND PUBLIC PROGRAMMING

JB: What is the relevance of *Cinema's First Nasty Women* for feminist film curating?

Kaveh Askari: One of the things I talk about with my students is it's not just about what you show. It's about what you show *first*. It's about the order in which you show things. One of the things in the public screening of this program that I was really excited about is that it was the *first* silent film program for a lot of audience members. What does it mean to show this first? Somebody who feels like they know a lot about the field would say, "Well, you absolutely have to watch this one first, and then this one." But seeing a program like this instead opens up other avenues of engagement for a viewer.

Liza Black: I'm really interested in this idea of curatorship, because for me, when I'm planning a class, I look at what we have in the library. I know I can only make so many purchase requests and, sadly, that then shapes what I curate. If I always go to what's already available, it just reinforces that loop of what we already know. We watch what we know. We know D. W. Griffith, so let's watch D. W. Griffith, right? It just repeats. The collection is a serious intervention, because it not only opens the door for future research, but it disrupts the circularity by which we teach the same films over and over and over again.

LH: We don't always think through the implications of what's available. When I started researching these films at the Library of Congress as an undergrad, I was shocked to discover this whole world of raucous feminist and queer film history. And yet you can't change the way film history is taught unless you can show these films. You need a DVD.

NA: I was also thinking about how we often teach film history in chronological order. Instead, I'm trying to think of different philosophies of cinema. I have a class on short-form storytelling, which includes examples that range from Nasty Women to TikTok, and from social media to silent cinema. You can mix and match those things by asking, how do we tell a story when we have a very limited amount of time? To bring those together is also a way to tell my students, if you want to be more proficient in short-form storytelling—which I know you want to, because you all want to be TikTok influencers—this can be a really great exercise.

KA: We have a weekly screening series on campus called the Film Collective. In this context *Cinema's First Nasty Women* did really well. It provoked some of the best engagement all semester. Some of the films were sort of question marks, and they got everybody thinking. And then a lot of the films just really killed. I noticed some particularly animated laughter in response to *Léontine Guards the House*.

Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi: I've also been screening these films for all kinds of audiences. One of the films that is always getting lots of laughs is *La fureur de Mme Plumette*—especially her escalating anger. There's a moment when everybody is uncontrollably laughing because it goes on and on and she's punching people through holes, and so on.

LB: The film *Fatty and Minnie He-Haw*, starring Minnie Devereaux, is particularly useful in the course that I'm just finishing, "How to Get Away with Murder: A Transnational History of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women." It's also going to be what I start my next class with,

"Native People in Film and TV," because it shows when this trope of Native women instantly falling in love with white men on screen began. I'm excited to use that in my classroom and to see how students react. I think we need to be finding new ways to connect with young people and I really think there's a lot of potential here, because these films are quite enigmatic to our students and therefore intriguing.

EC: In Mexico, *Cinema's First Nasty Women* has been a guide for us to look at our own forms of historical racism and gender violence. Because we have all this violence but it is very different from in the Western world. How do we look at the grizzly reality of eleven femicides a day? I pose this question through cinema in my classes. I want to let the students question themselves about their own roles or complicity in some of that violence, and how it's inherited from historical systems of media representation.

AS: I've shown *Fear of Shadows* in a class that was unrelated to gender, just about film and the moving image. Students particularly noted the score, which helped them enjoy the film in a way they didn't think they could. They ended up talking about that film quite a bit in class. If films like that can be their introduction to silent cinema—as opposed to *Intolerance* or *Birth of a Nation*, then that helps all of us. The tools for teaching are all built into the collection, with the booklet and special features. They make the material feel relevant to students, and topical in relation to issues of gender discrimination, sexual harassment, white supremacy, and labor unions.

DR: There's so much to learn from getting into the history of early silent film and finding your way through it—with sound! Sometimes you have to just surrender to the pace. Even if it's a fast film, you have to surrender to the story unfolding. Though sometimes the music is so overwhelming to your senses—full-on sound all the way through, that it overpowers the story. One thing I've been helping people with is how music can be like another character, even while all this other stuff is happening. It's a synesthetic experience. And that feels like a very different listening practice and a different way to experience cinema.

TACKLING RACIST CONTENT

RB: One thing I really liked was that you guys weren't afraid to include clips that you thought might have been questionable, or that would have raised some eyebrows. Because it's history. And we have to show it. I don't care if we like it or not. And for me as a composer, my job is to

lift it, not take away from the message, but to lift the scene so that people aren't throwing stuff in the theater or getting enraged. I've started little film societies all over the place—libraries, churches. It's impossible to appeal to everybody. So, I don't try.

ER: I think a lot of programmers are too concerned about pleasing the people. And I have started to move away from that. You don't show every film you're showing to please somebody. You're showing it to share what we have seen, what you're curious about, maybe to learn together and so on.

RB: Absolutely. I'll say this as a person of color. I think we have to be able to see it all. We have to be able to see it all and process it through our own filters. And I think it's the same for audiences: if you don't like it, the concession stand is that way!

Kate Saccone: I think it's important that the collection isn't limited to positive representations. The antiracism roundtable in the DVD booklet raises the issue of how to frame and present difficult films today—films whose politics aren't always nice. It's often very fraught. But Maggie, Laura, and Elif have shown us that there are ways to do it that can be generative and necessary.

AS: These issues have also come up in the book I'm coediting on the films of Alice Guy-Blaché [with Clara Auclair]. Guy-Blaché made a number of Westerns that include racist depictions of Mexicans and Native Americans. That's something we want to address in the collection. Nasty Women is providing a model for us. Also for teaching. I was also thinking of Jacqueline Stewart's introduction to *Gone with the Wind*, which I've used as a teaching resource.

JB: Jackie's work has been invaluable to me as well, because her basic point is that we can't just ignore the racism. What good does that do? You can't just say, let's not curate that one because it's *too* problematic, let's look instead for something easy in the archive when that means silencing what actually exists.

YW: I'm really invested in engaging with Hollywood's and early cinema's nefarious legacy. Especially in the face of cancel culture, which is an easy but ineffective solution to the deep-rooted problems that we have been struggling with. Just to cancel them and shove them under the carpet does not do anybody any good.

Creating the audio commentary for *The Death Mask* sort of triggered me. The film is problematic in many ways. Tsuri Aoki, a Japanese actress, was cast in a Native American role, for which she cross-dresses.

But then, at the end of the film, she becomes this maiden who has to be rescued by Sessue Hayakawa, another Japanese actor who plays a Native American character. You also have this polarization between two Native tribes: one is civilized and one is primitivized. You have all these problematic strands interwoven in the film. That got me to think about, well, what if we depart from the film's white orientation? And try to imagine what it was like on the set for Native American actors and Japanese American actors interacting with each other during the production. You know, can we speculate—do the speculative, fabulous, critical fabulation that Saidiya Hartman poses—how might differentially racialized performers have interacted with each other on the set? How can we start to tell the story from their perspective? I think there's still space (and necessity!) for renegotiating the film's nefarious legacy from a nonwhite orientation. Speculative historiography becomes really important for that line of thought. All of this was catalyzed by working on *The Death Mask*. So I'm thankful for the experience.

MH: The alternate title for *The Death Mask* is "The Redskin Duel," which is obviously an extremely racist title. I was curating a program at the University of Minnesota last spring in this big auditorium with organ music and a five-piece band. I was thinking about what program would be appropriate for that sort of curatorial context and audience, and I initially included *The Death Mask* in the program. But the venue managers said, "No, it's too risky," that there wasn't enough space for contextualizing it in my introduction, or even in the postscreening roundtable. And the musicians also refused to play for it. They said, "Listen, we know our audience. It would need much larger framing. And this is not the right space for including this film." So, the program I eventually came up with did not include any of the films that have content warnings in the DVD set.

I wanted to pose that as a question for speculative historiography. Why are these the only BIPOC representations we have in the archive? Why are they all so messy and contradictory? How can the archive be simultaneously racist and feminist? And what spaces are and aren't appropriate for curating those kinds of "nasty" texts?

KS: The contradictory nature of the archive is something I thought about while curating the WFPP anniversary film series at MoMA. For example, I wanted to highlight Gene Gauntier and *The Girl Spy* [which is included in *Cinema's First Nasty Women*], but I didn't want to erase the fact that she plays a spy for the Confederacy. Showing this intrepid woman also reveals how much white supremacy structured, and still

structures, our society and world. But I also didn't include a rare feminist film that had blackface throughout because I felt that there were better films to show in this celebratory series, and I was limited in terms of screening slots and space for contextualization. How we engage with the messiness of the archive at a curatorial level is so contingent.

NA: There's just no such thing as a "safe film," say, made before the 2000s. Recently I wanted to add *Midnight Cowboy* to my syllabus for Intro to Film, because it's a classic queer, groundbreaking, pre-HIV film. Then I watched it again. I hadn't remembered that there's a very brief moment of blackface, which made me think, should I teach it or should I not? One thing we can do is to contextualize films as a product of their time. If we now live in a time when white supremacy is slightly more hidden and implicit, to go back to a time when it was more explicit is actually a very important exercise. We have to teach those histories.

LOGISTICS

JB: I'd also like to hear more about the logistics of creating the *Cinema's First Nasty Women* project.

BW: This would be a good time to mention who provided so much of the funding for this project. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada gave us a Partnership Development Grant.

LH: Yes, that grant made all of this possible. We're lucky that Canada funds these kinds of projects. The grant is meant to bridge between academia and other types of institutions, but it hadn't ever been used to work with a film distributor.

NA: Just knowing how much work, energy, time, and resources a project like this requires, I wonder if we can use that to open up a broader conversation that has to do with institutional support and acknowledgment. Not only in terms of grants and funding, which is very important, but even in terms of the tenure process. How do we move beyond the very fetishized genre of the monograph that you have to publish to get a tenure position? How do we bring in projects that are equivalent in terms of the time, energy, intellectual curiosity, and innovative research that goes into them? We need to think about how to make these sorts of projects more accessible to people who are precariously employed or still untenured and to convince institutions of the incredible value that collaborative, creative projects can produce for the wider intellectual community and the general public.

KS: The advice I would give to someone doing a big project like *CFNW* is to follow a similar sense of transparency in terms of the curatorial process. For example, being very transparent about the antiracist panel and including it in the book. Speaking to all these questions we've been discussing instead of sidelining them. Even having this roundtable, I think that's really valuable.

JB: Yeah, for me the collection is so indissociable from all the material and the labor and the work that went into it, the whole curatorial effort. It's also important to remember that the grant came through in March 2020. As we all remember well, things were shutting down. Even just to record the audio commentaries at home . . . I have done many commentaries for the National Film Preservation Foundation. For those projects, we always went to Los Angeles, and the studio assigned a sound technician to work with you. So you practice, practice, practice (practice!) because once you're recording it, maybe you only get two takes. Very different than doing it at home in a lockdown.

AS: I have a confession. It has to come out because it's been eating me alive. I listened to my audio commentary for *Eugénie redresse-toi!* for the first time a few days ago, and then I realized that I never mention Berthe Dagmar, because she's just an extra in the film. You only see her in one scene. But she was a major star at Gaumont at the time and was herself a director. But in my audio commentary, I don't mention her all. I don't know why. I also find it hard to comprehend that a major star would show up as an uncredited extra in the film. I wish I had credited Berthe Dagmar as the maid, even if it's a small role. That's my confession!

MH: Aurore, I really identify with that! I recorded two audio commentaries for the *Léontine* films and the temporality of recording an audio commentary for a five-minute film is *wild*. I found it so challenging. There's all this context that you want to jam in, but you can't talk too fast otherwise it will be completely incoherent. I tried writing myself a little script, but I was bulldozing through it, and it was getting all out of sync with the image, and devolving into total mayhem. The thing that ended up working was improvising with bullet points. Speaking of time, I was wondering if there are any last tidbits that people are really burning to share . . .

WRAPPING UP

JB: What would you like to say to someone else here on the project?

GV: The project was very important for me, because most of the time I'm producing music for commercials or for media and music libraries, and

all of a sudden I found myself composing music for a real reason. Projects like these play a very crucial role in promoting gender equality—finding out about the achievements of people who have already broken barriers in the industry. For me, it's important to be a part of a project that empowers the representation of women both in the cinema industry and in the music industry. I'm sure that this project will inspire many others to use the arts as a tool for social expression.

BW: It's a lot of work. There were a lot of deadlines, a lot of meetings, and it could be challenging at times. But I hope that everyone feels that the resulting work allowed them to introduce their own creativity—whether you're scoring it, curating it, providing commentary on it, or teaching it in a classroom. I hope that the material is assembled in a way that lets everyone be proud of that work.

ER: It wouldn't have come together without all these people, because it is so much work, and a lot of work behind the scenes. It's such a satisfying moment when we could hold the DVD in our hands. However, the project keeps giving, because there's all these unexpected spinoffs. Karen Pearlman is making, not one, but *two* films adapted from it. And there's a separate CD soundtrack by Dana and Terri Lyne Carrington. It's so great to see other people being inspired and doing their own creative things. I hope that energy continues! ■

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