

***Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen:  
A Critical Essay***

**by**

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## Abstract

Monograph *Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen* and other original published works fill significant gaps in both women's history and early media history, highlighting the importance of feminist archiving as a political intervention. Extensive archival research across multiple institutions and rigorous analysis of Eleanor Roosevelt's previously undocumented engagement with emergent media challenge dominant narratives of Roosevelt's political contributions and contribute to a more inclusive history of early television in the United States.

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## Synopsis

This discussion is based on the following sources:

### Books

Beauchamp, Angela. *Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen: The First Lady's Appearances in Film and Television, 1932-1962*, McFarland, 2023.

### Articles

Beauchamp, Angela. "Desert Hearts." *The Encyclopedia of LGBTQIA+ Portrayals in American Film*, Erica J. Dymond and Salvador Jimenez Murguia, eds. Rowman and Littlefield, 2022, pp. 107-9.

---. "Drum." *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films*, Salvador Jimenez Murguia, ed. Rowman and Littlefield, 2018, pp. 162-3.

---. "I Will Not Be Your Little China Doll: Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt in Film and Television." *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present*, Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring 2020.

---. "Looking for Mr. Goodbar." *The Encyclopedia of LGBTQIA+ Portrayals in American Film*, Erica J. Dymond and Salvador Jimenez Murguia, eds. Rowman and Littlefield, 2022, pp. 235-8.

---. "Mandy Walker." *Hollywood Heroines: The Most Influential Women in Film History*, Laura Bauer, ed. ABC-CLIO, 2018, pp. 67-8.

---. "Sherry Lansing." *Hollywood Heroines: The Most Influential Women in Film History*, Laura Bauer, ed. ABC-CLIO, 2018, pp. 312-5.

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## 1. Introduction

In March 2024, MP Fleur Anderson unveiled an “Eleanor Roosevelt” blue plaque in London’s Southfields district to commemorate the location of the Allenswood school where she was educated as a teenager. The previous year, the US government issued a special Eleanor Roosevelt quarter as part of a limited series of coins to celebrate accomplished American women. In 2022, her story featured as a central narrative in Showtime’s television series, *The First Lady* (Bier), from her privileged, yet tragic, childhood, to what she considered her finest achievement: securing passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Despite her death more than sixty years ago, Roosevelt’s tireless activism to advance world peace and the rights of women and the politically marginalized continues to extend its influence into the present. While she has been the subject of an array of biographies, documentaries, biographical films, and cultural discourse, it is striking that, for a woman who regularly appeared in the newsreels, guested with television’s biggest stars, and hosted three TV series of her own, there has been, until now, no sustained scholarly analysis of her on-screen presence. My book, and the other articles that inform this PhD by

publication, not only fill these cultural, intellectual, and historical lacunae but in so doing, they demonstrate the importance of feminist archiving as a political intervention.

One of the reasons that Roosevelt is such a fascinating and important historical figure for analysis and why a scholarly investigation is so compelling is because she was among the first political figures to really understand and engage with new media forms that would come to dominate the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. From print and radio, Roosevelt envisaged the power of film and TV, courting a relationship with the film industry and its fans as early as 1932, even before she and Franklin entered the White House, by writing an anti-censorship article for *Modern Screen*. Furthermore, she became the first woman to host major public affairs broadcast television in the 1950s with her series *Today with Mrs. Roosevelt*, demonstrating her role as the most politically powerful woman in the United States and someone who was savvy enough to use TV and other nascent media to further political interests in ways her contemporaries, male or female, did not. Yet in part because early programs were sparingly preserved, and the fragments that exist are scattered over multiple physical archives, there has, until now, been almost no scholarship on her moving image record, making my publications so vital on several levels. Roosevelt is such an important figure in women's history, but oftentimes, her story is interwoven with that of husband Franklin. However, she worked well past him and into the age of television. Without my research, her role as a key media pioneer in the 1950s, and a film industry influencer in the 1930s and '40s, would still be obscured.

The only other published work to go beyond short reference to her presence on television is one chapter analyzing a *Today with Mrs. Roosevelt* episode in Dario Fazzi's *Eleanor Roosevelt and the Anti-Nuclear Movement* (2016), and J. Fred MacDonald's 1979 article "Black Perimeters." Fazzi's focus is on the content of moderator and guest remarks in the context of 1950s anti-nuclear activism. However, I do not reference this textual analysis

in my own work, as it is so specific to the political issue at hand. MacDonald covers the incident in which Paul Robeson was cancelled as a guest on *Today with Mrs. Roosevelt*, but the author did not have access to her papers at that time. It was helpful in pointing me to original coverage in Black newspapers. Dana Cloud's chapter in *Queering Public Address* (2007) examines two television documentaries, the "Eleanor Roosevelt" episode of *The American Experience* (Williams, 2000) and the "Eleanor Roosevelt: A Restless Spirit" episode of the *Biography* series (Rasky, 1994), and how they consider questions of her sexual orientation. Cloud concludes that both documentaries ask the wrong question for shock value—was she or was she not a lesbian?—rather than examining how her public memory "can trouble the assumptions of heteronormativity" (39). This is the approach that I take, not attempting to define Roosevelt's identity, especially in historical context, but presenting her legacy as someone who transcended the confines of class, race, gender, and the heteropatriarchal nuclear family. My work is the first to survey and analyze arguably the most important American woman of the 20th Century and her relationship to the film and television industries. In formalizing a thoroughgoing and rigorous analysis of Roosevelt and her engagement with film and television as emergent media, I undertake urgent archaeological and archival research that contributes to both women's history and early media history.

This critical essay centers my 279-page book, *Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen: The First Lady's Appearances in Film and Television, 1932–1962* (McFarland, 2023). In this work I utilize a wide variety of archival sources to construct and analyze a narrative of film and television history as it relates to Roosevelt, from her husband Franklin's first presidential campaign in 1932 through her death in 1962. Later in this critical essay, I explore methodological approaches to examining her visual media presence, especially related to archival research and critical discourse analysis. Throughout, I demonstrate the ways in

which this book, along with my other work, has produced an original and significant contribution to our knowledge in a number of key ways: firstly around Roosevelt and the history of her engagement with film and television; secondly around the practices of film and television history as a feminist and political process; and thirdly, around the broader questions of gender and politics within the context of the United States and its history.

While this essay will focus predominantly on the contribution to scholarship that is made by my work on Roosevelt within the monograph, it is important to locate this within the broader context of my longer career as a film and television historian who has been publishing articles and conference papers since 2015. Prior to this, I wrote and curated a film history blog as an independent scholar. Some of the articles that I wrote prior to the monograph are more directly connected with Roosevelt than others. For example, my 2020 peer-reviewed article “I Will *Not* Be Your Little China Doll: Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt in Film and Television” (*Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present*, Vol. 19, No. 1) was a useful space in which I was able to begin exploring key ideas around how Roosevelt and her team actively created a heteronormative public image. During the bigger project, this became a central theme as I interrogated the ways in which early filmmakers constructed and recreated an image of Roosevelt that was explicitly and irrevocably coded as heteronormative. For example, British film *Great Day* (Comfort, 1945) takes an approach that aligns with the image she created, the devoted wife who was the eyes and ears of a man with limited mobility: “She’s not coming as the First Lady of America, but as one of yourselves, a woman with a husband and a family and a home of her own.” Even as late as 2005, HBO’s television movie *Warm Springs* (Sargent) ignores the evidence that has been produced and preserved in archives of her correspondence, as well as the general knowledge of her living arrangements, still reducing Roosevelt’s character to a romantic myth of the wifely martyr to her husband’s needs in the face of polio.



Using the *Americana* article as a starting point, the initial focus for my intended book length project was to provide a textual analysis of representations of Roosevelt in film and television, most created after her death. Although I had read and screened quite widely at this point, I had no real understanding of the scope of Roosevelt's visual media presence during her lifetime and could find little information in standard databases or the work of other scholars. Thus, the original aim was to draw on examples such as the *Eleanor and Franklin* television miniseries (Petrie, 1976) versus the *Hyde Park on Hudson* theatrical release (Michell, 2012) in order to explore how different production eras reflect not only the historical character, but also the contemporary cultural context, examining discourses expressed through dialogue, lighting, costume, and choice of actors. Specifically, I was interested in examining the character of Eleanor Roosevelt as she "queered" over time in both fiction and documentary. However, during the research process, I began to uncover a hidden history located across multiple archives. Roosevelt created her own moving image record, from the newsreels to films to television appearances and series of her own, authored articles for movie fan magazines, and regularly interacted with the film industry. No one had previously pursued bringing all this information together and to light.

Recognizing the gaps within scholarship and knowledge, I shifted my focus and methodological framework to foreground an archival perspective in order to document, analyze, and understand the history and media engagement of one of the most important women in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American history. An exploration follows of why and how the work became an archival history that I consider a more significant contribution to knowledge—a rare study of one woman's use of moving image media, constructed from research materials spanning twenty different archival locations. Also critical is my approach to understanding how she was able to construct a heteronormative persona that allowed her to transcend the limitations placed on most other women at the time. Eleanor Roosevelt is well-known as an

important figure during the Great Depression, World War II, and building the United Nations; however, her contributions during the Cold War have not been recognized in the same way. My work in the archives would reveal that she was the first woman to do major public affairs television in the US in the 1950s, something that has not been previously acknowledged by Roosevelt scholars. She played an important part in media history after print and radio, while she never stopped working for world peace and human rights. Existing scholarship fails to adequately explore Roosevelt's key role in American political discourse after her triumphs in the United Nations, in part because histories of women on television and in film have been purposely erased in industry narratives. My research subverts the dominant paradigms around Roosevelt's political contributions, especially as an older woman, as well as more general histories of early television in the United States. It produces a new, more inclusive history that contributes to the story of an already inspirational figure.

Outside of my work on Roosevelt, I have tended towards scholarship that has drawn on critical discourse analysis as its predominant methodological approach. This can be seen in two entries written for *The Encyclopedia of LGBTQIA+ Portrayals in American Film* (Erica J. Dymond and Salvador Jimenez Murguia, eds. Rowman and Littlefield, 2022) where I have written contributions on *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (pp. 235-8) and *Desert Hearts* (pp. 107-9). I also contributed an entry on the slavesploitation film *Drum* (pp. 162-3) for *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films* (Salvador Jimenez Murguia, ed. Rowman and Littlefield, 2018). In addition to these pieces, I have authored short biographies of cinematographer Mandy Walker (pp. 67-8) and studio executive Sherry Lansing (pp. 312-5), which are featured in *Hollywood Heroines: The Most Influential Women in Film History* (Laura Bauer, ed. ABC-CLIO, 2018). Along with earlier conference papers, this work was crucial in developing key themes that inform my academic endeavors: a focus on women in biographical film and the lack of scholarship accorded to them therein; the relationship

between this and the history of women behind the scenes and within the film industry; and the representation of women on the screen, particularly during the Roosevelt era.

## 2. Why Eleanor Roosevelt?

*Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen* is a scholarly culmination of years of research, bringing together my professional academic area with an interest in someone who has fascinated me since childhood. The *Eleanor and Franklin* miniseries (Petrie, 1976) appeared on TV when I was a young girl searching for role models. As described in the preface of the book, “The mass-market paperback of the biography by Joseph Lash, on which the miniseries was based, is the oldest book I still own, tattered cover barely attached. My memories of reading it on the school bus and reaching up to put it onto the top shelf of my locker each day are still vivid. I latched on to the forward-thinking activist Eleanor Roosevelt and never let go” (4). In hindsight, that biography and resulting television program can be squarely situated in the cultural context of the early 1970s and the dominant attitudes about women’s roles as mothers and caretakers. Conversely, feminist historian Blanche Wiesen Cook’s three volume biography (1992, 1999, 2016) is so much more inspiring, creating an image of a powerful and calculating political figure with a full and vibrant life, rather than the saintly luminary depicted by Lash. In this respect, as a cultural figure, Roosevelt becomes a malleable icon, pliable enough to represent ideals around marriage and motherhood in one period, but as mores change, shifting to an independent feminist force in another.

Eleanor Roosevelt is most well-known as the First Lady of the United States from 1933 to 1945, wife of President Franklin Roosevelt. She transformed that role, rejecting confinement to White House hostess duties and instead advocating for the rights of the poor, women, working people, youth, and minorities. Afterwards, she was chosen as an initial delegate to the United Nations and chair of the Human Rights Commission, where she served

as the primary author of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Roosevelt became an unofficial but highly influential ambassador for peace as she traveled the world, but also maintained enormous political influence at home. After announcing his presidential bid in 1960, one of John F. Kennedy's first media appearances was on Roosevelt's television show that afternoon, and he would name her chair of the first Presidential Commission on the Status of Women. When she spoke at Democratic National Conventions, television ratings for her speeches easily outpaced former President Truman. Roosevelt was even asked during a *Meet the Press* interview in 1957 if she would consider running for President. She stood as a symbol of a revered past, but also outpaced the influence of male political contemporaries by regularly communicating with the public through television, radio, and print media.

Contributing to her status as not only a feminist icon, but a queer one, Roger Streitmatter published *Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickok* in 1998, reproducing their sometimes-erotic correspondence. Lines such as "Most clearly, I remember your eyes, with a kind of teasing smile in them, and the feeling of that soft spot just northeast of the corner of your mouth" exist at variance with the heteronormative persona constructed for the public (52). Blanche Wiesen Cook would also detail the very queer nature of Roosevelt's social life in the 1920s and '30s, describing how Roosevelt's best friends and political mentors were life partners Esther Lape and Elizabeth Read in the early 1920s, and Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman in the late 1920s, before she met Lorena Hickok in the early 1930s. Contra to the images that had been constructed by many filmmakers in whose work Roosevelt was depicted foremost through a heteronormative lens of wifedom, Roosevelt led a life quite separate from her husband and children in New York, residing instead in a cottage with her friends. Indeed, for several years, Hickok lived in the White House in a bedroom adjoining the First Lady's. As Cook wrote, "ER's closest

friends were lesbian women; she lived in part in a lesbian world; she built a home with a lesbian couple” (“Outing”).

Historians may not be able to pinpoint how Roosevelt defined her own sexual orientation, especially in the cultural context of the past; however, feminist and queer scholars insist that the absence of specific written proclamations does not mean that we should assume a subject’s heterosexuality. They posit that those documents were intentionally not included in archival collections, by the subjects themselves, family members, or curators, especially in times before the LGBTQIA+ rights movements. “Personal records such as letters, diaries, and photographs ... were either destroyed, not created to begin with, or were carefully coded and edited to obscure queerness,” writes archival scholar Elliot Freeman (“Defying”). Even Hickok mentioned that she had burned hundreds of letters that were not “always so very discreet” (Streitmatter *xxii*). Son Franklin Roosevelt, Jr. was so upset when the remaining letters were opened to the public that he and his lawyers ensured that “procedures of all presidential libraries are now being changed to protect heirs, but unfortunately in this incidence the damage has been done.” Other efforts, although unsuccessful, were made to close the “effusively affectionate letters” for twenty more years (Faber 331). These are not disagreements over research methodology or interpretation, but blatant attempts at intentional suppression that demonstrate the imperative of preservation, analysis, and recoding of historical documents on queer and feminist terms. Without interventions such as my own, the history of a vitally historically significant queer woman might be not just lost but rewritten in accordance with heteronormative patriarchal codes. My work in the film and television archives contributes to rescuing these works from oblivion.

This approach is considered quite radical by others such as Franklin Roosevelt biographer Geoffrey Ward, who writes, “It is true that some of Mrs. Roosevelt’s closest

friends were women who lived with other women.... If they did [have sexual relationships], it is by no means clear that ER was aware of it, let alone took part in it, as Cook hints she did. Private lives were truly private then, especially for women of Mrs. Roosevelt's class and upbringing, and it was still possible to avoid seeing what one did not wish to see" ("Outing"). Ward collaborated with Ken Burns, resulting in a straightwashing of the Hickok relationship in the documentary series *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* (2014). Nevertheless, even Ward concedes that "had she somehow lived on into our own time, she undoubtedly would have added gay rights to her lengthy agenda" ("Outing"). This is because Roosevelt championed such a broad range of progressive causes, adding contemporary issues over time. For example, the 1920s found her advocating for New York City's poor immigrant workers. On a national level in the 1930s, she took on concerns over the ill effects of segregation. Early letters reveal some casual antisemitism, but Roosevelt became one of the few to use her political capital to secure additional visas for European Jews fleeing Hitler, and she supported Israel, as well as meeting with Palestinians, in the 1950s. She was neither poor, nor Black, nor Jewish, nor Palestinian. Regardless of how she defined her own sexual orientation, she had many close lesbian friends and was already so vilified for activism on many fronts that the assumption that she would lend her image to queer civil rights movements in the present day is not without foundation.

Roosevelt was one of the most admired women in the United States for thirty years, in part because she kept herself and her issues visible to the public, one of the first women to understand and deploy emergent media as a means of active public and political engagement. She wrote a daily syndicated newspaper column, five hundred articles, and twenty-seven books. She started her own radio program in 1932 and hosted three public affairs television shows in the 1950s, while appearing in TV guest spots. Very few women had this kind of impact in the world, and Roosevelt's tireless work and ideals have always been a shining

example for me, since the day that I was introduced to her through television docudrama. I am not the only one. US First Lady and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton joked that she often sought advice from Roosevelt's ghost.

### 3. The Road to Publication

My journey as a film and television scholar began independently in 2005 with the launch of the *Lesbian Film Review* with the tagline, "Lesbians, Tough Chicks, and Gender Rebels in the Movies." I used this blog as a platform to post reviews of new releases alongside critical studies of older films such as *Queen Christina* (Mamoulian, 1933) and *Christopher Strong* (Arzner, 1933), with encouragement from queer film archivist Jenni Olson, who noted that nothing like my site existed on the web at the time. I devoured books by queer film theorists Alexander Doty and Richard Dyer, posting my analysis on topics such as the subtext of Joan Crawford's outfit in *Johnny Guitar* (Ray, 1954) as I honed both theoretical and writing skills. However, readers were often more interested in current releases, demanding a focus on the crop of what I usually thought were uninteresting lesbian romances. As a result, I found myself moderating and marshalling my content to cater to this audience, and increasingly found that this was at the expense of being able to develop my critical analysis in a more academic and theoretical direction. Eventually, this led to an epiphany. The people who were engaged in the kinds of research and writing that excited me were in academia, not the internet.

As a result of my growing academic interest, I sought out my nearest higher education institution, the University of New Mexico (UNM). Although there were no graduate degrees in film on offer, I was able to enroll in the spring 2012 Images of Women class as the only graduate student. While I found that I had already written about nearly all of the films on the syllabus, this course was instrumental in introducing me to key theoretical debates that would

go on to inform all of my subsequent work; here I was able to explore feminist, queer, and film theory from people like Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam, and bell hooks and to understand how to apply their ideas and frameworks to my own arguments and film and television analysis. On the strength of my performance in this class, the chair invited me to work for the department in the fall 2012 semester as a part-time instructional assistant. The next three years were spent grading, mentoring students, and occasionally lecturing in History of Film I and II classes. The classroom was my training ground as I was exposed to a broader range of international cinema, but I was especially taken by the lack of coverage of filmmakers who were women or people of color. I sketched alternate versions of syllabi and did my own research on women in Hollywood during the silent era, for example. This further familiarized me with issues around dominant narratives and women and others who had been erased from public history. I made a conscious decision to challenge this status quo by introducing, for example, materials on “race films,” lesbian Classic Hollywood director Dorothy Arzner, and Mexican-American film *Salt of the Earth* (Biberman, 1954). As a queer feminist, my pedagogy deliberately seeks to disrupt the hidden curriculum of heteronormativity in the study of film history, grounded in an intersectional, anti-racist approach. This mirrors the philosophy behind my research projects as well.

At this time, I began a low-residency MA at Skidmore College with a concentration in Film Theory and Gender Studies. My program focused on the history of women and queer people in film and television, and research on the biographical film and docudrama would become especially relevant to my later work on Roosevelt. I sought out opportunities to consolidate my understanding of queer theories, especially queer of color critique and the intersections of race, class, nation, gender, and sexuality. This interdisciplinary study traversed queer, feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theories with training in how to analyze texts using these approaches to forms of normativities, make critical arguments in my



own work, and configure an academic path that merges intellectual, political, and personal agendas. Although my writing on cinematic representations of Roosevelt is grounded in examinations of gender and sexuality, her anti-racism work and concerns for the poor made her hated by segments of the population. Later, I was able to extend the analysis to consider how her image was “queered” as a “traitor” to both race and class, influenced by film theorist Richard Dyer’s groundbreaking 1997 book *White*. Dyer explored how “whiteness” and White culture had become the norm by which all visual representation is measured. Specifically, his recognition of the invisibility of whiteness as a default, supposedly non-raced category connected to my understanding of undetected heteronormativity as inclusive of whiteness.

As part of the research process in a course on the essay film, I created a short film directly informed by my identity as a feminist and a lesbian, and my adolescent captivation with Roosevelt became a central theme. The story of my own development as a person was intertwined with her exposure through television and biographies—from my early sense that she was different, through public commentary on those letters to Lorena Hickok. I reappropriated and subverted traditional historical “evidence” by inserting voiceover on archival footage to tie Roosevelt to my own coming out and to manufacture a declaration of her lesbian identity. These efforts were inspired by similar techniques in Barbara Hammer’s *History Lessons* (2000) and Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), both of which create queer pseudo-archival footage in place of that absent in actual archives. I do not include this essay film as one of the publications for consideration here, since it was made as part of an MA degree program; however, it helps to explain the merge of personal and professional interests into a focus on Roosevelt. I viewed *Eleanor and Franklin* (Petrie, 1976) again, and seeing Roosevelt visually embodied from that period in my life was critical to stitching together a picture of my own identity. Despite this, watching as an adult decades later was quite different, as I was so disappointed in a depiction that reduces her

accomplishments to the result of an unhappy marriage. Roosevelt is sad and lonely and so showers her love on the world since she is not loved at home. These themes do not dominate more recent biographies and documentaries of her life, and this experience stimulated the direction of my work and its motivation to critique and correct those patriarchal misrepresentations. This is a key intervention of my work throughout, and my subsequent research confronts these issues.

For a research course, I focused on women within biographical film and television and was specifically interested in how representations of the same character could shift over time, examining this within the context of cultural history. The analysis situated historical drama in the context of current sociopolitical debates at the time of production and related them to others in the genre cycle. Focusing specifically on representations of Queens Victoria, Mary, and Marie-Antoinette, I found that certain themes, ideas, and tropes were more prominent in some decades than in others and that this seemed to connect with broader cultural ideas around gender. In the 1930s, royalty was the dominant theme for women's biographical films, thus placing the figure into power by birth or marriage, not her own ambition. This woman must choose between the private and domestic or the public and powerful, and may not have both the love of a man as well as success on the throne. Despite cultural changes, most 1970s protagonists must still confront struggles over fame and success in opposition to heterosexual romance. However, she often has more of a voice than the 1930s monarch who briefly expressed that she did not tacitly accept patriarchal expectations, but then acquiesced without a further word.

While Dennis Bingham's *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?* (2010) is often cited as a foundational text within the scholarship of the biopic, I was struck by the ways in which his approach appeared to replicate the marginalization of women and women's history that I had observed elsewhere. In particular, the lack of attention to television as a primary site for the

biopic seemed to be a fundamental limitation, since it was more often on this platform, rather than within cinematic releases, that biographical stories of women have been broadcast.

Karen Hollinger comes to conclusions similar to my own in her chapter on biopics in *Feminist Film Studies* (2012) and subsequent book *Biopics of Women* (2020). However, I take these frameworks and push them further in my own studies. A key distinction between Hollinger's work and my own is that I provide a longitudinal study of specific women and analyze the ways in which their representations shift over time in connection with cultural context.

By foregrounding television as a vital component in representations of Roosevelt's imagery and biography, I make the claim that television was and remains absolutely imperative to a feminist approach to the biopic and that in ignoring the role of television series and movies, the hierarchies of patriarchal culture are simply replicated and reproduced in ways that continue to efface women's histories. For the purposes of presentation at a 2015 Popular Culture Association Conference, I condensed the length and breadth of this somewhat unwieldy but intellectually generative research into a paper entitled *Changing Lives: The American Women's Biopic*, arguing many of the points described above. Roosevelt appeared in this broader biopic research project but interspersed as one of many subjects.

In May 2015, I completed my MA and transitioned that fall into a full-time staff role at the University of New Mexico, where I continue to work as the Department Administrator, teaching one undergraduate film history and theory course each semester. In my role as instructor, I made substantial changes to History of Film I and II syllabi with topics such as the Golden Age of Mexican cinema and the Indigenous New Wave; developed a new Queer Cinema History class; and diversified other courses such as Film Noir. Teaching at a "minority majority" institution in which more than half of film students are Latinx or Native

American, approximately fifty percent identify as women, and a significant population consider themselves gender-nonconforming, inclusion is a serious goal and responsibility. Recognizing that there is a history of women in filmmaking from the very beginning and that queer representations and people of color in film industries existed long ago is knowledge that can be liberating and inspiring to students. Someone came before who looks like them.

Undertaking this work as part of my teaching has also concretized my understanding of and approaches to a broader range of film theorists and practitioners. In particular, the silent era scholarship of Shelley Stamp on director Lois Weber and Cari Beauchamp (no relation) on screenwriter Frances Marion would later inform my archival research and prove fundamental in shaping my own approach to the role of feminist film historians in reappraising, correcting, and re-presenting narratives of film and television history that have erased or otherwise misrepresented women.

#### 4. Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt

*Royal Portraits in Hollywood* by Deborah Mitchell and Elizabeth Ford (2009) was foundational to my approach to the Roosevelt project, not least because it was one of the few women-centered biopic books available at the time. I found their thematically organized methodological approach instrumental in informing my own working methods throughout the Roosevelt project. Given that the archival material with which I was working was spread across a multitude of sites and in an array of forms, the process of organizing and cataloging materials in a methodical and rigorous manner was of paramount importance. Without this, my analysis and argument would be impossible. In adopting the thematic approach demonstrated by Mitchell and Ford, I was able to find a manageable and productive mechanism through which to organize the materials for analysis, enabling me to identify connections across sources.

Drawing on the learning and experience that I gained in the research project that focused on Queens Victoria, Mary, and Marie-Antoinette made me increasingly aware of the paucity of scholarship and knowledge pertaining to mediated representations of the lives of American First Ladies. Recognizing the potential magnitude of this lacuna and the need to find a meaningful starting point, I returned to Roosevelt, with the aim of affording her the historical analysis and attention that had thus far been lacking. The project grew into an article and then a book on Roosevelt; however, future aspirations include completing a broader survey on First Ladies. Television miniseries became especially important as primary sources, both because women's stories have been largely relegated to TV and because the length of multi-episode productions including Franklin Roosevelt are more likely to have time to include her in the script. Historical dramas often portray Mrs. Roosevelt as central to the action, giving her input on strategic decisions with policymakers, confronting Prime Minister Winston Churchill and his drinking habits during White House stays, or taking political risks to secure entry visas for European Jews. Fourteen hours of *The Winds of War* (Curtis, 1983) and thirty hours of *War and Remembrance* (Curtis, 1988) were just two of the miniseries screened. Television allowed me to get a fuller picture from a wider variety of cinematic sources, even more so than that afforded the queens.

In 2016, I presented the results of this research using characterizations of Roosevelt as a case study to examine how biographical and historical films that seek to recreate the past do so in the context of present cultural discourses. This Popular Culture Association Conference paper "Perfect Wife, Angry Feminist, or Queer Role Model? Changing Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt in Film" was updated with newer television references and published as "I Will *Not* Be Your Little China Doll: Representations of Eleanor Roosevelt in Film and Television" in the Vol. 19, No. 1, Spring 2020 issue of *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present* (9,458 words). This peer-reviewed article is a critical discourse analysis addressing a wide range of fictional portrayals over time, from *Great Day* (Comfort, 1945) to the Netflix *Hollywood* miniseries (Mock, 2020). I illustrate how constructions of the "character" Eleanor Roosevelt are intimately tied to contemporary

cultural context. As Richard Dyer first described in his seminal work *Stars* (1979), a celebrity's public image is a manufactured composite, a meta-narrative that changes and shifts. Here, for example, I discuss the "performance" Roosevelt developed, constantly in flux during her lifetime but with consistent central themes, and duplicated on-screen by others:

The woman who did the bidding of a husband with limited mobility was a public relations invention in a time when women with ambition and drive of their own were not well accepted in the public sphere. This persona became so widely accepted that as film and television assumed the role of the dominant means of storytelling, biographical films, docudramas, and documentaries all replicated the image repeatedly without interrogation.

*Sunrise at Campobello* (Donehue, 1960), for example, depicts her as the loving wife who sacrifices everything to support her husband during Franklin's recovery from polio. However, I provide evidence that although Joseph Lash published the *Eleanor and Franklin* biography in 1971, elaborating on her image as mother of the world, those metanarratives begin to change in public discourse. As feminism became an important cultural movement, television movie *FDR: The Last Year* (Page, 1980) explains his affairs by focusing on the traditionally feminine woman that his wife is not. Her character is that of an angry feminist who drives him into the arms of another adoring woman with no interest in politics. The writers construct an Eleanor Roosevelt set in the 1940s to make statements about unhappiness with women in the 1970s.

In more recent times, these two oppositional "star texts" give way to themes tied to new knowledge from Blanche Wiesen Cook's biographies and societal changes around not just gender roles, but sexuality. I examine films such as *J. Edgar* (Eastwood, 2011) and *Hyde Park on Hudson* (Michell, 2012) to demonstrate the malleability of Roosevelt as a character who has become the symbol of an independent, queer woman. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover simultaneously surveils her while secretly envying her relationship with Hickok. In *Hyde*

*Park*, she is clearly more invested in her daily life with Hickok, although she puts on a show in the family home when the King and Queen of England come to visit. In both cases, this causes concern as she must keep up appearances of the heteronormative ideal.

In the last several years, her character shifts even more to an out and proud lesbian or bisexual woman, no longer in the closet. I describe this in television programs such as the *Hollywood* “Screen Tests” episode (Mock, 2020) where Hickok is recognized as her partner by studio representatives and the *Another Period* “Roosevelt” comedic episode (Konner, 2016) in which she openly seduces another woman. However, it should be noted that Dyer also discusses the radical potential of stars for marginal audiences as they “read against the grain” (162). The Roosevelt of the 1930s and ‘40s as perceived by queer audiences has become the dominant cultural discourse of the present.

In my article, I draw on queer theory by examining how Roosevelt has been “queered” by depicting her life outside of heteronormative models that are not specifically related to sexual orientation or gender identity. Influenced by critical race theory, I tie depictions of Roosevelt’s anti-racism work as critiques of whiteness to simultaneous critiques of the heteronormative—the white, straight, male, middle-class ideal from which all marginalized groups are measured. This intersectional approach is significant in that it acknowledges that not all people are raced or gendered in the same way. I show how her on-screen personage has been “Othered” as a White woman politically and socially tied to Black populations, illustrating these connections with her 1935 visit to a coal mine and the famous [“For Gosh Sakes” New Yorker cartoon](#) that is often included in documentaries. In *Eleanor Roosevelt: Close to Home* (Makepeace, 2006), she responds, “It was indicated to me that I should feel somewhat ashamed of that cartoon and there certainly was something the matter with a woman who wanted to see so much and to know so much.” She herself recognized that

the blackface and low economic status of the men were meant to shame her, to “Other” her as non-White and working poor.

My textual analysis of these films and television programs is significant in that it ties screen productions to the eras in which they are produced, drawing lines from public discourse to specific character traits of a real person. History is always storytelling, and my work shows how filmmakers manipulate cultural understandings to illustrate stories that are important at the time. Furthermore, the significance of Roosevelt must be understood within the historical context of the United States, which does not have the same legacies of the UK or France’s indomitable and infamous queens. In this regard, Roosevelt fulfils a vital role as foremost among First Ladies. In an era in which most people get their history from television and film, the mediation of her story becomes even more important; the ways in which her image is constructed and made relatable for audiences, especially those within the United States, is a significant motivation for my research agenda.

In writing “I Will *Not* Be Your Little China Doll,” I undertook a methodological approach of close reading a selection of television shows and films from 1945 to 2020. As I reviewed this primary research, I realized that I was also watching not representations, but actual footage of Roosevelt on television. This proved useful for context and would later become a significant foundation in plans for the *Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen* book. However, it remained outside the remit of this article.

While Roosevelt has been the subject of multiple books concentrating on everything from her trip to the Pacific theater during the war (Shannon McKenna Schmidt, *The First Lady of World War II*, 2023) to her friendship with Black activist Pauli Murray (Patricia Bell-Scott, *The Firebrand and the First Lady*, 2016), the same has not been true for analysis of her on-screen presence. The only publication related to representations prior to my work is Dana Cloud’s chapter in *Queering Public Address* (2007), which examines two television



documentaries, the “Eleanor Roosevelt” episode of *The American Experience* (Williams, 2000) and the “Eleanor Roosevelt: A Restless Spirit” episode of the *Biography* series (Rasky, 1994), and how they consider questions of her sexual orientation. In general, the biopic as a genre has not been an exceptionally popular one for academics, perhaps considered old fashioned. In addition, George Custen and Dennis Bingham, the two major scholars of the biographical film, focus predominantly on male-orientated biopics and fail to give adequate or equitable treatment to women’s biopics. Indeed, I argue that the scholarship on biopics more broadly has tended to marginalize women’s stories. Important exceptions include Bronwyn Polaschek’s *The Postfeminist Biopic* (2013), Deborah Cartmell and Ashley Polasek’s *A Companion to the Biopic* (2020), and Laura Stamm’s *The Queer Biopic in the AIDS Era* (2022). In this regard, my article made an original and important contribution to current scholarship, not only filling in gaps in knowledge about representations of Roosevelt, but also expanding the field of study regarding women’s biopics more generally.

My methodological approach focuses on a political reading of films and television programs as artifacts of popular culture, with an ideological analysis of the contemporary cultural conversations expressed therein. I use Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as a means to examine how Roosevelt was depicted by others on screen, drawing on examples such as *Sunrise at Campobello* (Donehue, 1960) to show how cultural texts like biographical films featuring women expose societal stresses and expectations around gender roles, reinforcing hegemonic cultural patterns, while also exposing resistance. MCDA considers not only the language of words, but the ways in which media and material culture communicate levels of power and ideologies. Dialogue, costume, blocking, choice of actors, lighting, color, and other production details all communicate discourses, sometimes extremely traditional and repressive, other times subversive. David Machin and Andrea

Mayr's book *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (2012) served as a useful guide for engaging with both moving image media and texts.

This interdisciplinary approach fits naturally with my training described above in combining queer, feminist, postcolonial, and critical race criticisms in textual analysis, as relationships of power are central to MCDA and to a queer, anti-racist theoretical point of reference. I examine heteronormativity in a broad sense, investigating recurring discourses around cultural constructions of gender and sexuality for American women over time, interconnected with race and class. Queer critique and the concept of "queering" is used to identify representations that problematize or "Other" the character as sexualized, gendered, or racialized. I draw upon my earlier study with UNM's Amy Brandzel, whose *Against Citizenship: The Violence of the Normative* (2016) extends this intersectional concern with normativities to issues of settler colonialism, as an important influence on my approach.

While much of my work examines how film and television normalizes the figure of Roosevelt, fitting her character into accepted roles for women in American culture, an equal number of TV programs and movies queer her by depicting a life outside heteronormative models. For example, I maintain that *Eleanor and Franklin* (Petrie, 1976) shifts the paradigm from Roosevelt as the model wife and mother who lived to serve her husband and the world to the suffering saint, a woman who could not find fulfillment with a cheating FDR. She is defined by her lack of a normative marriage, marking her as different from other women who aspire to romantic love in a marital context. This asexual spinster-like character may be observed in *Bertie and Elizabeth* (Foster, 2000), showing Roosevelt as cold and socially apart from others. Using MCDA, I make a comparison of this recreation of the King and Queen of England's visit in which Roosevelt sits slightly off to the side, unsmiling, while Bertie leans towards mother-in-law Sara Delano Roosevelt and chats with her. This staging misrepresents the actual archival footage of this very scene in which a smiling Eleanor Roosevelt leans

toward the King, very much a part of the group with the gregarious FDR. Historically, she was hated by many because of her work against racism. An on-screen example that queers her in this context is teleplay *Eleanor: In Her Own Words* (Cullingham, 1987), which utilizes the text of a letter she received: “I don't need to be rude, but do you have colored blood in your family, as you seem to derive so much pleasure in associating with colored folk?” She is marked as “colored” because of non-White associations, defining her as “Other” as well. This methodological approach extends into my archival work, as described further below.

## 5. Beyond Roosevelt and the Biopic

In addition to my work on the women’s biopic and Roosevelt, I developed and published several shorter pieces connected to my broader interests in gender and race. The first was an entry on Blaxploitation film *Drum* (Carver, 1976) for *The Encyclopedia of Racism in American Films*, edited by Salvador Jimenez Murguia and published in 2018 by Rowman and Littlefield (pp. 162-3, 784 words). Centered around themes of Black male hypersexualization as a perceived threat to White female purity, this work allowed me to examine issues of masculinity, when most of my previous writing had been more focused on women’s issues.

Along with Erica Dymond, Jimenez Murguia also edited *The Encyclopedia of LGBTQIA+ Portrayals in American Film*, published by Rowman and Littlefield in 2022. My entry on *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (Brooks, 1977) drew on my earlier work on the biopic, since it was loosely based on a true story (pp. 235-8, 1618 words). The film deals with cultural contradictions and confusions amidst the sexual revolution and the feminist and gay rights movements of the 1970s. I wrote about the “destructive pressures of heteronormativity and sexual repression” as the film equates the liberation of women and gay men. At the same time, other aspects of the film can be read as misogynist, homophobic, and a backlash against

those movements. It is fascinating, appalling, and hard to forget, but often ignored because of the classic disco soundtrack that prevents further release. Both the *Drum* and *Goodbar* pieces required research into 1970s popular culture, connecting to my other work on the relationship of film and television productions to cultural context.

My other entry in this encyclopedia is a discussion of the historical importance of *Desert Hearts* (Deitch, 1985), the first lesbian film to be distributed by a major studio (pp. 107-9, 1084 words). I argue that the simple existence of this film, its lesbian gaze, and ending with an uncertain, but possible, future for a lesbian romance is “still defiant, subversive, and meaningful,” even nearly forty years on. Yet I also include critiques that the love affair too closely duplicates heteronormative relationships, questioning the extent to which it queers relationships and paradigms of romance significantly enough.

The other two short pieces that were published during this period are biographical sketches of studio executive Sherry Lansing and cinematographer Mandy Walker in *Hollywood Heroines: The Most Influential Women in Film History*, edited by Laura Bauer and released by ABC-CLIO in December 2018. Because I worked for cinematographer Shane Hurlbut, ASC (*Terminator Salvation*, *Need for Speed*) from 2012 to 2015 as we launched a subscription-based educational cinematography website, the connection between my research on gender in films and television of the past naturally connected to the roles of women in the film industry of the present. I experienced the misogyny of the film world firsthand, and I was frankly pleased that most of my work was not involved in production. This increased my admiration for Mandy Walker, who since the article was written has received an Academy Award nomination for Cinematography. My profile focuses on her accomplishments as a rarity in a male-dominated field, as well as her work to train the next generation. Shooting *Hidden Figures* (Melfi, 2016) afforded Walker status as the first female cinematographer to shoot a movie with a budget of over \$100 million, conveying a story about oppression and

triumph for a group of African American women in the 1950s. Like Walker, these women broke into a traditionally male field, with the added barriers of segregation, racism, and greater sexism of the time. Her technical prowess and artistic achievement reminded me that despite the usual “director as auteur” focus, directors of photography and creatives are also critical to cinematic look and feel (pp. 67-8, 1031 words).

The Sherry Lansing piece came in longer at 1651 words (pp. 312-5). Lansing is not a household name for many but should be. She was the first woman to lead production at a major studio, hired as the president of production at Twentieth-Century Fox in 1980 and later chair and CEO at Paramount, as well as working as an independent producer, earning an Academy Award nomination for Best Picture. While many researchers focus on the history of women in film in earlier times, Lansing’s story reminded me that pioneers exist in more recent decades. Although she now has a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, when Fox was purchased and she introduced herself to the new owner, he assumed that she was there to serve coffee. These five publications informed my work on Roosevelt, as I continued analysis of representations of gender and sexuality on-screen within the cultural context of women’s work and worth.

## 6. Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen

The *Americana* article on representations of Roosevelt was published in spring 2020, by which time I decided to continue the research and publish an academic monograph. This was now a passion project, and I planned to expand the textual analysis to include archival work.

Until feminist interventions of the last few decades, histories of American film and television largely ignored discussions of the contributions of women, mirroring the masculinized stories that Hollywood told about itself during the studio era. Women were not

only forgotten, but women behind the screen were actively erased from the narrative (Mahar, 179-203). When women now compose a small percentage of film industry workers, women's history is vital to draw strength from the past. It is not true that filmmaking has always been the domain of men. There were women who came before and from whom we may draw inspiration, and feminist historians have been writing them back into the record. As Catherine Martin argues in her work on archival research as a feminist practice, "When we excavate the archival traces of the forgotten women embedded in the patriarchal hierarchies of the broadcasting industries, we are telling them—and the modern day women who have followed in their footsteps—that they are an important part of our cultural story" (459). Asserting the value of women's contributions in the past has been critical to the feminist perspective that scaffolds my work.

*Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen* is a feminist film and television historian's illumination of a history that has previously been lost in the archives, contributing to women's media history. Its research methodology relies upon not only moving image archives and textual analysis of the productions themselves, but study of a broad range of primary materials. In the introduction to *Looking Past the Screen*, Eric Smoodin notes that this kind of approach, using materials most often studied by other disciplines of history, moves the work of film history much closer to those methodological practices (16). The interpretation of movies and telecasts still maintains a significant role in the film historian's analysis, but the text of the film itself may not always be central, especially when the moving image is absent or not accessible (29). Shelley Stamp's chapter in Smoodin's book, "Lois Weber and the Celebrity of Matronly Respectability," and the work of other scholars bringing the women of the silent era back to public attention substantially influenced my approach to recognizing archival work as a feminist act. They realize that the reasons even film school graduates do not know

about early female filmmakers is because the accomplishments of women in most fields, not just film, were often “marginalized, sidelined, and ignored” (Stamp “Why”).

Founding editor of *Feminist Media Histories*, Stamp reiterates the call to “look past the screen” for feminist media historiography, to emphasize women’s stories and expand the canon of women’s film work. She and others like Monica Dall’Asta and Jane Gaines (“Prologue”) appreciate that feminist film scholars are well-trained in using critical theory to expose existing narratives that support power structures, and Richard Dyer acknowledges the persistence of textual analysis as an important methodology (“Persistence”). My earlier publications on representations of Roosevelt and shorter pieces on queer and Black portrayals demonstrate my ability to accomplish the same. However, in addition, Stamp encourages us to move “our gaze away from representations of female characters on screen, away from the spectator-screen binary, into a world of culture, a world where women circulate, have agency, and make meaning” (“Feminist”). The archives can help us “do” women’s film and television history in a broader sense, illustrating the active involvement of women in myriad ways. Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley, co-founders of the Centre for Television Histories in the UK, echo these sentiments. They advocate “a multi-methodological approach to television historiography, an approach in which television historians might draw together strands of the production/text/ viewer triumvirate to produce a more holistic picture of the history of television for women” and argue that archiving is indeed a feminist issue (153). Gatekeepers past and present decide what resources are directed toward preserving or making programming accessible, and they observe that television shows coded as traditionally feminine are noticeably absent in UK archives (156). This is also true of US archives, as illustrated in Sarah Arnold’s 2021 book, *Gender and Early Television*. This work drew my attention to the fact that I was more likely to find existing footage of Roosevelt being

interviewed by male hosts on evening public affairs programs than on a daytime “woman’s magazine” show with Dorothy Doan.

As my own work progressed, the television episodes that did not survive or the films lost to history were only pieces of the story. *Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen* uncovered evidence from a multitude of sources to create a history not yet written about an unparalleled figure. Roosevelt’s case is political at its core, and my work intersects media history and women’s history to elucidate how she used film and television through industry connections and on-screen appearances as political tools to educate the public. Although she still exists in shared memory, her contributions as an older woman in the 1950s and early 1960s have been forgotten for the most part. I place Roosevelt back at the center of television history, the first scholar to recognize that she once held such a position.

During the research process, I secured a UNM Feminist Research Institute grant and planned to travel to the Paley Center for Media and the Roosevelt Presidential Library in March 2020. The proposal read:

My book length project seeks to accomplish two things. It is a guide to representations of ER in film and television over time, divided into fictional appearances and documentary appearances utilizing archival footage. These are evaluated chronologically to illustrate how her public image has changed over the decades as new archival material is released and biographers publish new interpretations from feminist and queer points of view. These are adapted to movie or television screens, reaching a broader public. My general model is *Elizabeth I in Film and Television: A Study of the Major Portrayals* (Bethany Latham, 2011, McFarland).

Once again, another scholar working on representations of a queen informed how I approached the study of Roosevelt. The second section of the book was to cover Roosevelt’s own television appearances. I marvel now that in a week in two archives, I expected to “accomplish close readings of several appearances at only a few minutes each, as well as more time spent with longer programs.” In hindsight, what an impossible task! How could I



perform close reads of the material by watching a few minutes of each? The constraints of time and money made for a poor research plan, and it would have been a rather haphazard and incomplete use of both archives, reflecting my lack of preparation.

Then the world stopped. The COVID-19 pandemic curtailed my trip, and my research necessarily changed—for the better. Before I finally did visit the Paley archive in March 2022, more extensive research into their television holdings and careful prioritization were key to an effective archival research process. I also had two years of additional experience and specific research questions to guide my viewing of the material. A benefit of the pandemic for me was that without commuting hours and office and social obligations, I had much more time to devote to research.

Initially, I continued textual analysis, watching everything in all genres that mentioned Roosevelt, even in the slightest way. I scoured websites and databases, and scrutinized thousands of search engine results. The first tracking system was an Excel spreadsheet, and when drafting the article, I organized my work chronologically in Word, writing about each show as I viewed it and creating a gigantic document. However, for the larger book project, this system was not adequate to keep track of productions and to be able to see patterns emerging. The answer was Scrivener, software that is simultaneously an outliner, note organizer, and word processing program that allows breaking projects into smaller pieces, moving them around, and merging them together to create a manuscript. I created separate entries for each film or television show, maneuvering them chronologically to help identify patterns in specific eras. I watched each production and wrote a short plot summary, learning through this process that IMDb is often not a reliable source for details about story and characters. Doing this work myself for each show made for more dependable data. I transcribed the dialogue that concerned Roosevelt, sometimes a short reference like 1942's *Woman of the Year* (Stevens). I wrote, "As the movie opens, Craig listens to the radio

with other bar patrons. Harding is on the air participating in a quiz show in which she knows even the most obscure answers. The bartender says, ‘Federman says she’s the number two dame in the country, right next to Mrs. Roosevelt.’” I put this in context and noted initial reactions and analyses. In contrast, Roosevelt introduced and narrated *Training Women for War Production* (National Youth Administration, 1942). I transcribed the entire eight-minute short, paying special attention to her on-screen appearance. This included details about mise-en-scène, her attire, how she interacted with the camera, interviewers, and guests, and her general persona. For some entries, such as this one, I took a screenshot of a key moment to later help my memory of the characterization. Roosevelt’s introduction here appeared in Technicolor, while the rest was in black and white. I surmised that the nearby blue vase with pink flowers was part of the effort to appeal to young women.

The research process continued by systematically searching academic databases and Google for the name of each production, like “*Babes in Arms*” (Berkeley, 1939) plus “Roosevelt.” I anticipated finding contemporary critical reviews and a few scholarly references to the films that featured her in a significant role, as well as limited public reception through letters to the editor or online forum posts. The academic databases were not very fruitful, except for a few productions like *Sunrise at Campobello* (Donehue, 1960), discussed in several publications about presidential representations on-screen. However, the search engines led me to the Media History Digital Library (MHDL).

The MHDL, with an internal search feature known as Lantern, is an online resource featuring millions of scanned pages from magazines and books related to the history of film, television, and broadcasting. It contains fan magazines such as *Screenland* and *Movie Mirror* and industry publications like *Photoplay* and *Box Office Digest*, all with searchable text. Film historian Leonard Maltin described the impact when he wrote, “I believe that sometime in the future, historians will know which film books and theses were prepared before Lantern and

which came afterward, with the full benefit of this unprecedented resource.” Through these searches, I began to realize that Roosevelt’s relationship with the film industry was much more significant than anticipated, and there were numerous references to her appearances on television, making my intervention even more important. Those television spots I noticed in the Paley Center for Media archive database were just the beginning. Critics were talking about Roosevelt on television on a weekly basis, and she was a presence that mattered. She had also authored several articles for movie fan magazines.

These resources pivoted my research away from emulating studies of representations of the queens. This was Eleanor Roosevelt, perhaps the most important American woman of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and she had hosted three different television series in the 1950s, but there was nowhere to find out more. Scholars had not investigated her impact on the new medium of television, and this omission in popular and academic work confirmed my assertion about the importance of exploring television as a site for women’s histories and the significance of undertaking archival work as part of a feminist political endeavor. Early television is not necessarily easily accessed. Sporadically preserved, collections might be in private ownership and varied locations, in all manner of (sometimes unplayable) formats. However, the importance of Roosevelt’s visual media contributions during her time in the public eye, 1932 to 1962, cannot be overstated. In excavating, recording, and analyzing these archives, I would be bringing attention to the often overlooked but crucially significant role of television as a new media during her lifetime, as well as ensuring that these irreplaceable pieces of our cultural and political history are given the due attention that they deserve.

In Scrivener, I began adding digital note cards for each relevant topic I came across in the publications, including the full text of articles she wrote, such as “What Are the Movies Doing to Us?” in the November 1932 issue of *Modern Screen*. As the project progressed, I clustered the entries into categories, chronologically organized within each, and film and

television during her lifetime became the basis of the book. The other categories deal with representations after her death, research that I plan to come back to later.

Once I had finished the long hours of searching for general references, I began exploring Lantern, the Internet Archive, and Google for “Roosevelt” and the name of each production I had earlier identified, like “*Wuthering Heights*” (Wylter, 1939). *Variety* and *Daily Variety* served as incredibly detailed industry resources, but many issues were missing. I purchased a subscription to the *Variety* digital archives, and even found an article that Roosevelt had written that is not referenced elsewhere, “Eleanor Roosevelt Sees Films as Force for Culture” (1939), which despite the title, contains her byline. Instances such as this brought my attention back to how easily archival materials may be lost and the importance of my work in preserving and calling attention to this record.

The American Radio History online archive, NBC press releases from the 1950s, and contemporary articles in mainstream magazines were also utilized. For example, *Life Magazine* covered the *Today with Mrs. Roosevelt* premiere with a photo spread (“Soul-Searchers”). Other important primary sources were articles, television listings, and letters to the editor in newspapers located in several different databases. Roosevelt was a prolific writer, and her long-running, syndicated “My Day” newspaper column describes her daily activities and thoughts on issues of the day. She used this to promote political programs, to educate the public, and even to follow up arguments she had made on television. The “Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project” at George Washington University has made this collection available online, so I performed equivalent searches in the “My Day” database. This was incredibly useful to include Roosevelt’s own points of view, as opposed to those of the critics or journalists. Although this is not a diary in the strictest sense, since it was produced for more than personal reflection, it is a rare opportunity to read what a historical figure wrote at the time, rather than years later through the filters of a memoir. She doubted

the quality of her performance on Fox Movietone News or was angry about an accusation on her own television program that FDR had known about threats to Pearl Harbor before the bombing. I likewise searched for applicable references in the text of Roosevelt's "If You Ask Me" monthly magazine columns and in transcriptions of her radio programs. She wrote several volumes of autobiography, covering different periods of her life. While these served as background information, I was able to locate a handful of sentences about her experiences on television for use as a primary source.

Other memoirs also supplied primary source material, as I systematically searched for people who may have written about their relevant experiences with Roosevelt, from actors who visited the White House to guests on her TV show. Published collections of letters were also sourced, and although an associate typed the professional letters, I especially appreciated transcriptions of personal letters. Roosevelt's writing is notoriously difficult to decipher. By searching indexes for relevant people and terms, I was able to find, for example, that she invited Winston Churchill to appear on television when her show traveled to London in 1951. He declined the invitation (Schlup 155–56). One of the methodologies that may have been open to me were interviews with some of the people who knew Roosevelt in the early 1960s. However, given that my primary focus was on archival footage and constructed images within a specific time and place, along with considerations about the age of the people and the distance of memories, I did not pursue this as a necessary part of this study.

Robert Haakenson's 1952 unpublished PhD dissertation, *A Study of Major Network Discussion Programs Televised During the Period January through May 1951*, serves as a first-person source for identifying guests on Roosevelt's television shows in that period. He was in the audience each week and observed how well she and her crew performed compared to other public affairs programs like *Meet the Press*. Since very few of those episodes were preserved, Haakenson's record is a wonderful resource. Helen Jane Wamboldt's 1952

unpublished PhD dissertation, *A Descriptive and Analytical Study of the Speaking Career of Anna Eleanor Roosevelt*, focuses on radio and newsreel appearances and provides observations on Roosevelt's verbal performance skills. However, her conclusions sometimes differ from those of journalist Ruby Black, who was also Eleanor's close friend and published *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Biography* in 1940. I consider Wamboldt and Black's work as primary sources, since they involve direct observation at the time, but both also veer into secondary source territory on some subjects. While Wamboldt's writing is a dissertation and approaches her subject analytically, primarily listening to broadcasts and watching newsreels, Black's biography is for a popular audience and seems more connected to Roosevelt's own image making efforts. She does not interrogate any issues that might be controversial.

Secondary sources that inform my work include biographies of entertainers and political figures, and, of course, multiple books about both Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Other scholarship provided background information on the American presidential film, Democratic Party conventions, and histories of television networks, television news, specific television shows, women in early television, Hollywood, Black newspapers in the US, women's history, and histories of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War.

## 7. Into the Archives

*Eleanor Roosevelt on Screen* is an archival study, and although the primary sources described thus far were all available online or in published books and magazines, archives of unpublished materials were critical resources. The technique of searching Google for "Roosevelt" and the name of each film or television show I had uncovered during the research process led me to multiple finding aids and descriptions of holdings. I also targeted archives that were likely to contain relevant documents and files.

Critical discourse analysis informs my reading of archival footage, critical and public reception, and private letters, journals, and other documents. For example, I examine the misogyny of television coverage during Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's 1959 visit in which a commentator genders Roosevelt, calling her "fussy" and an "important old lady." Even though she was one of the few Americans who had previously met with Khrushchev, she could not escape the disregard that often happens to older women. Although Roosevelt actively worked to maintain a public image, as Richard Dyer points out, a "star" text changes over time. Outwardly appearing like a kindly grandmother in this period caused many men to dismiss the power she continued to hold in the Democratic Party and with the public.

Equally elucidative is an unmasking of written texts. For example, Motion Picture Production Code files include a Roosevelt radio program transcript of director Ida Lupino's appearance to talk about her 1949 film *Not Wanted*, about an unmarried woman with an unwanted pregnancy. The mere existence of the transcript in this collection reiterates the notable position Roosevelt was taking by attaching her name to this then-taboo issue. It is a feminist issue when documents are not accessible in archives, but here a document included in a collection speaks volumes. As Maggie Hennefeld and Laura Horak recently reminded readers in *Feminist Media Histories*, "Simply put, feminist futures reside in what's simultaneously absent and present in the archive" (2).

My study involved work with materials from twenty different archives. The John F. Kennedy Presidential Library turned up an unexpected find, a 1958 transcript of Roosevelt's appearance on *College News Conference* when she had negative things to say about the then-senator. Although I had read about the show in the press, the transcript helped me to understand the context of her comments that day, and the document's presence confirmed that what Roosevelt said in public mattered to JFK. Drawing connections between her anger over Joseph Kennedy's comments about Britain in 1940 and his son's appearance on

*Prospects of Mankind* in 1960 were exciting moments, linking archival materials spanning two decades and helping to illustrate her political influence over time.

The US release of *Pastor Hall* (Boulting, 1940) included a filmed prologue with Roosevelt speaking, although it does not appear in versions currently available. In the third volume of Blanche Wiesen Cook's biography, she notes that the introduction is "virtually lost to history" (623). However, a Google search resulted in reference to a 2018 gift of the pressbook with prologue transcript to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. This was again a reminder of the fragile nature of archives. What had been in a private collection when Cook conducted her research was now being listed online by a museum that was willing to digitize this important record. The pressbook could have easily been put in the trash by heirs, as it appears must have happened to the film itself.

The US National Archives and Records Administration, which holds the records of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), digitized footage of Roosevelt's 1958 interview by Russian student journalists for *Youth Wants to Know*. As the first person to initiate access, costs were high, but out of the many hours of viewing Roosevelt on television, this was one of the most interesting. Often, she was a moderator or read a prepared statement, but here she appeared entirely relaxed. I followed my instincts and paid more for this footage than my budget would normally allow, and this is another illustration of how access to archival materials is influenced by many factors. The next scholar will be able to view this footage without prohibitive costs as a barrier.

The American Archive of Public Broadcasting was of major importance for my research, hosting streaming video files of every episode of *Prospects of Mankind*, which Roosevelt moderated monthly from 1959 to 1962 on National Educational Television (NET). I screened each episode to create the show topics and guest lists that were published in the book. The series was an opportunity to watch Roosevelt's performance over a three-to-four-



year period and, unfortunately, see her health decline. Still, she was incredibly smart and engaged. The Wisconsin Historical Society holds the papers of NET and Dore Schary, the creator of *Sunrise at Campobello* (Donehue, 1960). *Prospects* folders were important for understanding the program from network points of view as compared to the personal concerns in Roosevelt's papers.

The FDR Library archival staff did not go back to full operations until August 2022, much later than others. Looking through the finding aids for the names of anyone and any program already identified, I ordered scans of correspondence with producers, agents, network officials, television staff, directors, and actors; scripts and transcripts; program notes from the three television series; proposals for new series; invitations to appear on other shows; and drafts of Roosevelt's articles written for movie magazines. These documents were especially helpful in constructing the story of her public impact during the television years, when she was less likely to be covered by the entertainment industry press as she was while First Lady.

In part because of the late timing of access to the presidential library, the Paley Center collections were even more central to forming the arguments in my book. I arrived in March 2022 with a highly organized, prioritized plan to screen fifty-one television episodes in the Paley database. The narrative relies on a wide variety of primary sources, as described in this paper, but actually watching how Roosevelt presented herself on television, the issues that she seemed most passionate about, how guests and moderators conducted themselves in her presence, and the tone, look, and feel of television in the 1950s helped me to seriously begin the process of putting all of the other research together, wrapping it up into broader themes. As I was finally able to watch the premiere of *Today with Mrs. Roosevelt* that I had gathered so much information about, the moving images contributed to my ability to use words to

create a picture of the story of Eleanor Roosevelt in film and television, the first scholar to bring together evidence from multiple archives.

By the summer of 2022, it was time to set about authoring the book. The evidence pointed to Roosevelt as incredibly media savvy, not only during the White House years in print and radio, as other scholars had already elucidated, but as an early television pioneer who used the medium to educate the public and promote human rights and progressive politics. I identified recurring themes and compelling stories related to those motifs. Additional files from the FDR Library fleshed out many sections with more detail, and in particular, the last chapter was significantly expanded with information about plans for new television series. She and the people connected to her clearly did not expect Roosevelt to die in November 1962.

My first chapter, “Manipulating Gender Expectations,” falls outside the Movie and Television structure of the rest of the book. By leading this way, I contextualize the public persona she first created in the 1920s and early 1930s and address questions about how she was able to transcend the boundaries placed around most women at the time. I write, “She found ways to exploit the public’s understanding of the proper role of a married woman at a time when the media did not contradict this with behind-the-scenes information. The gendered public face that everything she did was to help others belies the power gathered to wield such profound influence on a variety of men, institutions, organizations, political parties, and governments” (15). My analysis of her presence in film and television rests on the insights initialized in this chapter, as described earlier in this essay.

I worked on rewriting the opening to each chapter, intentionally making those stories more cinematic, or easy to visualize, and studied materials on how to draft an academic book proposal. Now I also began to work on the process of gathering photos for the book, many from the FDR Library, but also from other collections that I had never seen published in

works about Roosevelt. Another significant segment of the photographs reproduced in my book are through fair use of shots taken directly from a production or distributed for publicity. Tracking down photo permissions identified additional archival sources.

I delivered the manuscript of 110,857 words, twenty-six chapters, plus bibliography and photographs to McFarland in January 2023. I also created a chronological appendix of Film and Television Appearances and References During Eleanor Roosevelt's Lifetime, plus a separate Filmography and list of Television Episodes that are available to screen, along with their archival locations. In addition to all the other primary research with written sources, I had watched hundreds of hours of material, from programs that I wrote about for pages or chapters, to films that were mentioned in one sentence. The book was released on November 30, 2023.

## 8. Conclusion

Feminist film historian Shelley Stamp charges us to “acknowledge our libidinal investments” like Cari Beauchamp had by once characterizing screenwriter Frances Marion as her “dead girlfriend.” She invites us “to appreciate our emotional responses as historians,” functioning as an important part of the research process (“Feminist”). In her work on the silent era's Nell Shipman, Kay Armitage similarly describes how sensory contact with items in the archive becomes part of the researcher's celebratory and creative act, translating those sensations for others. “This is, after all,” she writes, “what the researcher longs for—to bring the subject back to life” (260). In the acknowledgements of my book, I thank Eleanor Roosevelt “who has remained a North Star during life's journeys,” from my childhood to the present, a steadfast inspiration for my own activism and code of ethics and the muse for my everyday research practices (v).

Acknowledgements of these personal attachments belong not only in the realm of feminist, but queer media praxis that, as defined by Alexandra Juhasz, “prompts us to know film theory, history, and studies not as something written on paper, the mark of some other’s formidable mind, but as a thing that was made to be used and re-made by us, in our world, towards what matters most” (“What Is”). When I began receiving feedback on my work from respected scholars, the larger significance of shining a light on Roosevelt’s film and television story clearly became something that matters in the larger world still today. Her commitment to peace and justice in the world, a living symbol of the cause of human rights and a person who approached the media as a tool to educate and expand the rights of others, is an important story to tell in today’s contested media atmosphere. It might even feel like hope.

In the preface of my book, I thank Blanche Wiesen Cook, author of the prize-winning, multi-volume Roosevelt biography (4). Scholars across multiple disciplines have been influenced by Cook’s work, not only the life histories that illuminate Roosevelt’s activism and ambitions, but broader essays on the importance of feminist and queer biography. As Debra Schultz recognizes, “Her body of work asserts that uncovering, documenting, interpreting, and disseminating widely the details of political women’s lives is itself a revolutionary act” (76). Yet even Cook does not address Roosevelt’s contributions on television. Her 2016 third volume is shorter than the other two and focuses on World War II and the United Nations, with little space for the 1950s. While inspired by it, my work is a necessary ancillary to Cook’s larger narrative of Roosevelt’s importance in the world. It intervenes into previously conceived narratives of both the history of women in broadcast television and understandings of Roosevelt’s work in the media.

Cook also acknowledges the “chemical, emotional, and profound connections to our chosen subjects” of researchers when she describes the joyful process of developing a

personal relationship with the people we choose to write about. She warns against the advice a professor had once given her to think, not feel, but instead to do both (“Biographer,” 4, 8). For Cook begins her first Roosevelt volume by exposing the feminist biographer’s pride at being part of a movement to remove women from the margins and place them at the center of our field of vision. Many of Roosevelt’s papers had been closed, obscuring her very independent life, and leaving “court biography” and misogynist interpretation to discourage further investigation. The “optimistic galvanizing force for activism and political commitment” that Cook had met several times as Roosevelt visited with student government leaders in New York from 1958 to 1962 would not be accessible until more archival collections were opened and new documents appeared, helping her to move the former First Lady out of the realm of the mythical saint to the most powerful political woman in the United States (1992, xi-xii, 5). Although only meeting Roosevelt through a television screen as a girl, I was also drawn to her example. Digitization and access to moving image records contributed to my work as the first scholar to bring information out of the archives that contributes to new knowledge about her impact in the world through film and television.

I am also reminded by current *Feminist Media Histories* editor Jennifer Bean in a recent essay that “History is not something out there, patiently waiting to be retrieved or found. History is something one makes” (2). Maureen Beasley wrote her monograph on Roosevelt’s masterful use of print media back in 1987. In 2014, Stephen Drury Smith and Anya Luscombe both published on her groundbreaking career as a professional radio broadcaster. My approach has been influenced by Beasley’s observations of Roosevelt as “the first important American woman in public life to demonstrate the power of the media” (193); however, decades later, mine is the initial publication to go beyond print and radio to examine her broadcast career on-screen. It took a specific vision born of personal interest and wonder at what had not yet been told for me to craft this film and television history.

In 1938, Roosevelt perceptively referred to the newsreels as she wrote, “I contend that seeing things is almost a necessity in this visual-minded period of our development” (“Why We” 17). With my richly resourced and painstakingly researched work in multiple archives, I have engaged the unique skills of the film and television historian, informed by feminist and queer theories and methodology, to bring Eleanor Roosevelt’s years on-screen to life as an important contribution to women’s history.

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