

# On Feminist Indexes: An Interview with Cait McKinney and Mindy Seu

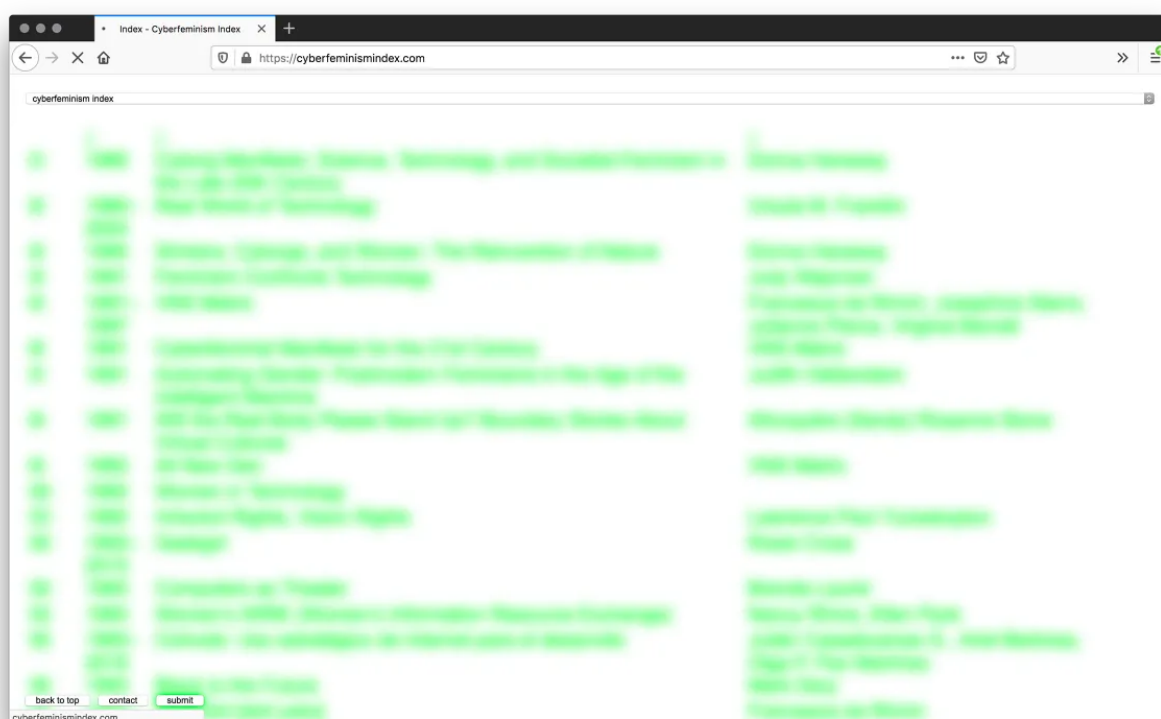
[hyperallergic.com/635737/on-feminist-indexes-an-interview-with-cait-mckinney-and-mindy-seu](https://hyperallergic.com/635737/on-feminist-indexes-an-interview-with-cait-mckinney-and-mindy-seu)

May 3, 2021

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The Lambda Literary Award Finalist and Cyberfeminism Index designer discuss the need to “troll these progress stories that we tell about computers.”

by [Rea McNamara](#) May 3, 2021



“Cyberfeminism Index”, loading page, Mindy Seu; Screenshot, 2021, Firefox v76.0.1 on Mac OS 10.13.3; <https://cyberfeminismindex.com/> (courtesy Mindy Seu)

Index cards, newsletters, and webrings: these are the networks, databases and digital archives that have been gathered and circulated by feminist indexes. In my last dispatch as the Emily H. Tremain Journalism Fellow for Curators, I wanted to look more closely at the

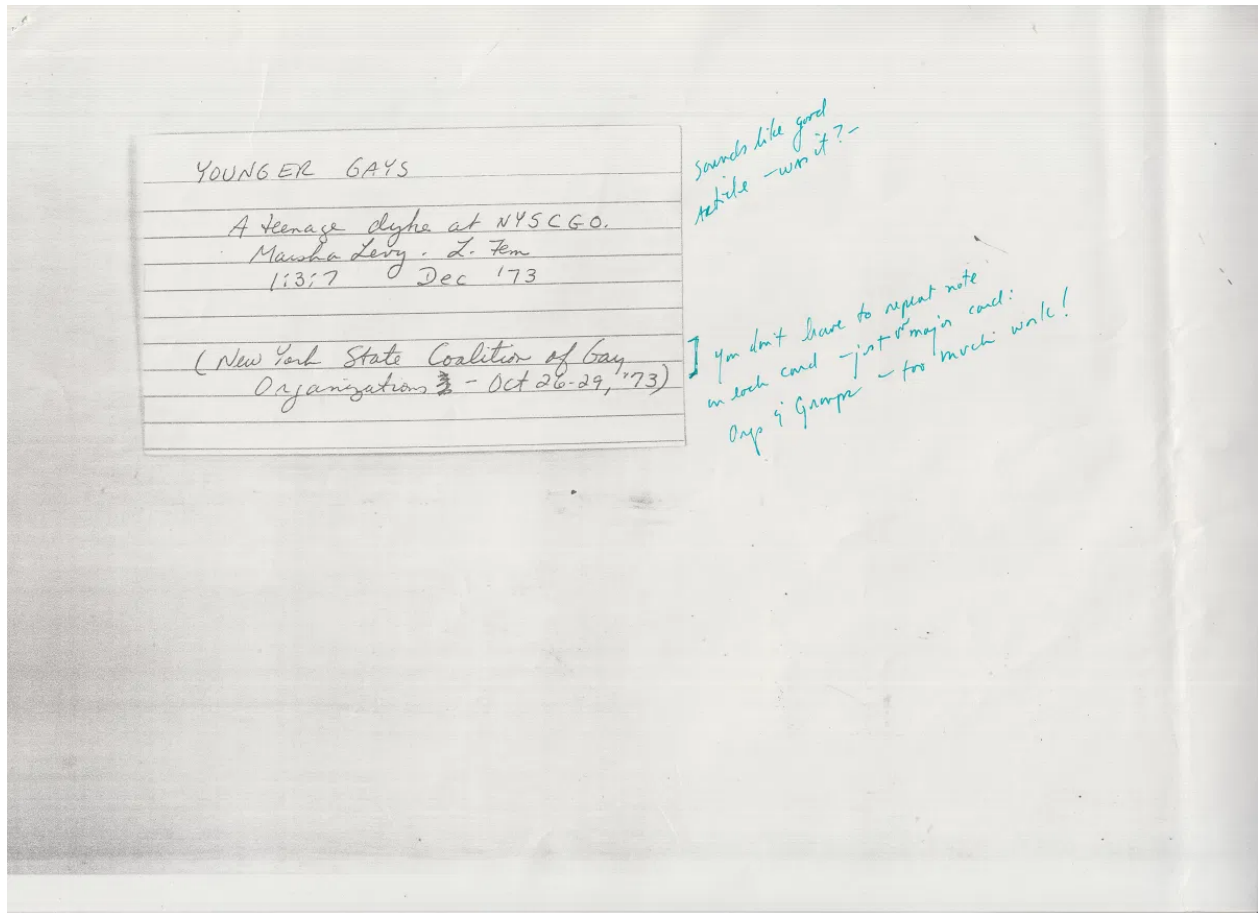
legacies of digital feminisms: namely, the ability to sustain ever-evolving perpetual projects. To tackle this, I brought together a scholar and researcher-designer both studying how feminist indexing reclaims these collectively-driven histories.

Cait McKinney, Assistant Professor of Communication at Vancouver's Simon Fraser University, recently published Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies. A 2021 Lambda Literary Award in LGBTQ Studies finalist, the book looks at how volunteer-run, lesbian-feminist activist information projects — like telephone hotlines and indexes — inform today's queer digital practices. Meanwhile, Mindy Seu, Assistant Professor of Art and Designer at Rutgers, has spent much of this past year stewarding the Cyberfeminism Index. The open source archive spans three decades of global cyberfeminism, and subsequently commissioned by Rhizome and co-presented with the New Museum.

"I'm sure Cait would second this, but I think both of these projects are very multi-authored projects," observes Seu of their feminist indexing kinship. "I don't know if solo authorship really exists anymore, or ever."

*This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.*

\* \* \*



Index card written by Karen Brown, a member of the Circle of Lesbian Indexers, and annotated by the circle's coordinator, Clare Potter, early 1980s. The annotations read: "Sounds like good article — was it?" and "You don't have to repeat note on each card — just on major card: Orgs & Groups — too much work!" Scan of print ephemera from the Circle of Lesbian Indexers Papers featured in *Information Activism* (courtesy Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation)

**Rea McNamara:** *You both look at how feminist indexing can help us better understand the ways in which online counterpublics inform digital infrastructures. What were your own formative experiences with early internet culture?*

**Mindy Seu:** When I was really coming of age online, blogging was very, very popular. And I really, really miss that on today's web. I was very active on this platform called Zynga; I don't even remember my username now. But I was talking about it with a friend recently, because we're both graphic designers who teach, and we're always thinking about online publishing. Sometimes, we'll tell our students: "we're all going to handcode websites, we're all going to publish something online." And it takes [them] a moment to register why that's valuable.

**Cait McKinney:** I was born in 1983, and grew up middle class. We didn't have a computer at home, but my dad worked from home, and he had a computer. I was allowed to use it, in the evening or on weekends. My first experience going online was getting an American Online CD and putting it in, but there [was] nothing on there that interested me because I would have been 11 or 13. And then from there, at a friend's house, she showed me the world

wide web [...] I got really into GeoCities, and this was at the point where it was like puberty time. So I was figuring out I was queer, and that GeoCities was the world where I could access information about what it meant to be queer, and what it meant to be a gay kid.

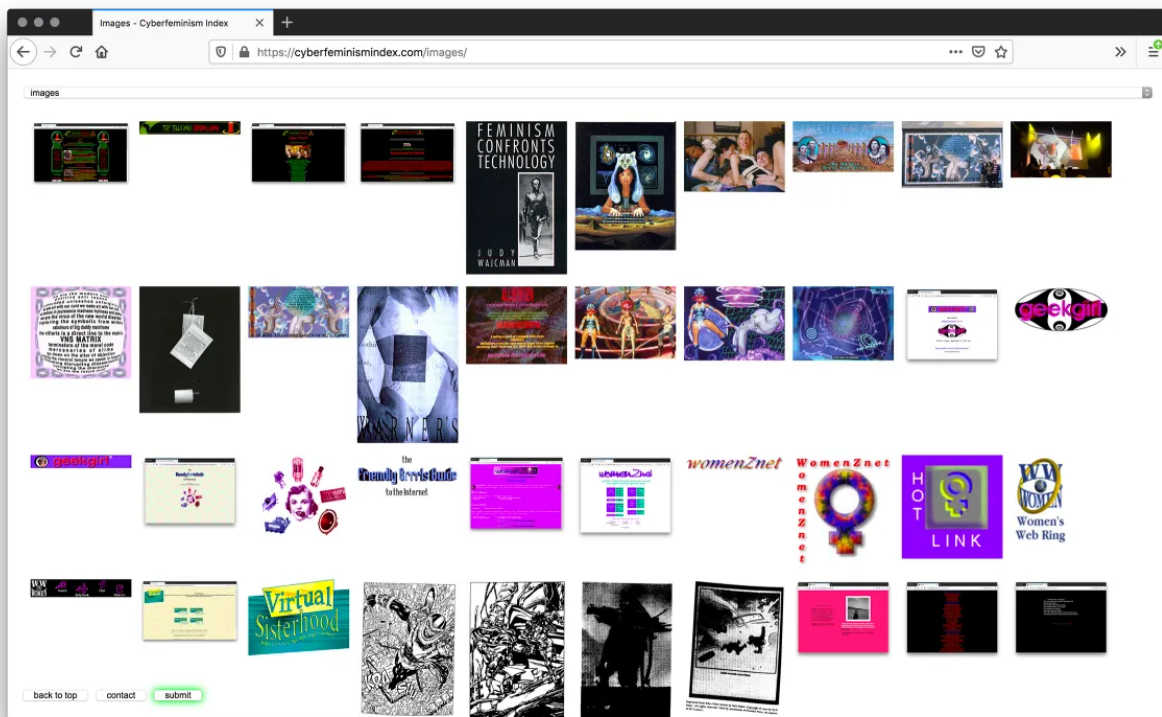
**RM:** *Mindy, from a designer standpoint, how do you think this nostalgia that we have for DIY low-res navigation tools impacted Cyberfeminism Index's interface?*

**MS:** I mean, it's interesting, because alongside my collaborator Angeline Meitzler, we never really intended to make a website that looked old. But we were trying to think about "future-proofing" or what that might entail. And we were very inspired by the 1997 website for the Old Boys Network. It's a static website, one big colour background default, form fields, their default system font. And now, however many decades later, still this working perfect thing.

**CM:** It's interesting, the way you're talking about future-proofing. Is that a design term?

**MS:** I don't even know if it's a design term. It was just a goal.

**CM:** But the terms you're using are really similar to how an archivist would think about it — creating a legacy project [...] not just for people in the present, but imagining the kind of future subject who might find or encounter it on some future version of the Internet Archive. And you talk about this on the "About" page [for Cyberfeminism Index] about how it's a perpetual project, which I love. It's like a perpetual project that refers to the labor of building an archive that can sustain itself, and also being open to revision forever as a feminist, anti-racist and anti-colonial project.



“Cyberfeminism Index,” images page, Mindy Seu; Screenshot, 2021, Firefox v76.0.1 on Mac OS 10.13.3; <https://cyberfeminismindex.com/images/> (courtesy Mindy Seu)

**RM:** This seems like a good time to bring up The New Woman’s Survival Catalog — a storied 1970s feminist publication that maps second wave feminist alternative cultural activity — which I believe is a shared influence. Why is it significant?

**CM:** For me, the text is significant, because so much of what we’re taught about the history of the internet is through *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, and those kinds of Southern and Northern California “back to the land” movements. And I love those histories: I love Fred Turner’s work, and I love his book. But when I found [*The New Woman’s Survival Catalog*] I was like, “Oh, wow, there’s a whole alternative.”

**MS:** I live in the Bay Area, and it’s just still, like, so [much] Stewart Brand worship. *The Whole Earth Catalog* is really important for a lot of reasons, but it also, to be politically correct, has a lot of holes. When they wrote a review of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, they just chose a photo of a topless woman.

But for *The New Women’s Survival Catalog*, I love the name. If we just start there, with [the] semantics — “the new woman” — if you look through the end of their catalog, it is so intersectional, even if it’s from the ’80s. It’s really powerful to see that.

And this idea of survival. It’s not *The Whole Earth Catalog* where it’s meant to be this Universalist thing. It’s meant to be for a small group of people: “How can we share these things as a method of survival?” When I was doing preliminary research for Cyberfeminism

Index, I actually interviewed Susan Rennie and Kristen Grimstad, who created [*The New Woman's Survival Catalog*]. And they said that they did this because, I believe at Barnard, they [were] creating a bibliography about all of these feminist authors that people should be reading. And their advisor told them that [the] revolution could never happen within an institution — you had to go grassroots. So after getting that, they got in a car and did a road trip from New York to California, and basically built this incredible peek into what early 1970s feminism looks like at the time.



# BLACK LESBIANS

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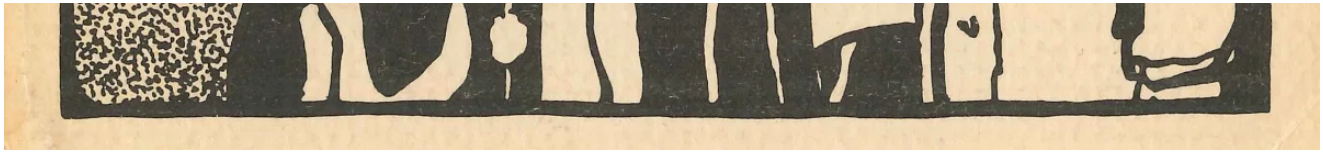
**JR Roberts**

FOREWORD BY

**Barbara Smith**







**RM:** *Cait, in your book, you highlight two significant lesbian feminist indexing projects — The Circle of Lesbian Indexers’s Lesbian Periodicals Index (1986) and JR Roberts’s Black Lesbians: An Annotated Bibliography (1981) — and explore how activism structures informed digital-based archival techniques. Why do you think this history remains so hidden?*

**CM:** I have a collection of these kinds of catalogs and indexes that I mostly buy on eBay; I brought them in once for a fourth year McGill University course [in Montreal] called Queer Theory.

The students were blown away by this [early form of information activism] about white supremacy, feminist movements, and feminist community activist spaces [led by] students of color. They were blown away that this debate had been happening 30 years ago.

Feminist techno-science is still an obscure field. There’s a real resurgence of interest in critical approaches — especially Black feminist approaches. But in general, its marginalized within the history of ideas. And it’s community work and activist intellectual work that keeps it present and palpable for people so that folks like those [McGill students] can use it to do something.

**RM:** *This connects to the Cyberfeminism Index, and how it dispels this seeming hold that Donna Haraway has on the concept, especially when it’s framed as a global project surveying hack feministas in Latin America or Kishonna Gray’s Black Cyberfeminism framework. Mindy, as a researcher-designer, in steering this large-scale open source information recovery, were you unlearning for yourself what cyberfeminism meant to you?*

**MS:** Absolutely. I think there’s a phrase: “you have to learn something to unlearn it.” And same with *Whole Earth* or Ted Nelson or Vint Cerf or all of these early internet people [...] I don’t think I was trying to necessarily make it super expansive from the start. I was just trying to map it but in mapping it, you see a lot of the holes.

The writer Saidiya Hartman talks about critical fabulations. But that phrase is really born out of looking through a historical study or an archive. And because it’s always told from the perspective of dominant figures, all the different groups will only get like fragments of that and through those fragments you have to try to fabulate what their person might have been [...] I mean, her work is really incredible. I want to give more credit to her work. So I don’t think that this is a version of critical fabulation. But I think that’s kind of the goal, just trying to represent as many people as possible, so they can see themselves somewhere in this index.



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Lesbian Swit  
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Book XVII

CAIT MCKINNEY

START

WRIT

# INFORMATION ACTIVISM

A QUEER

HISTORY OF LESBIAN

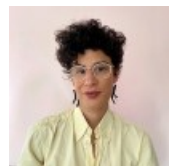
MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

**RM:** *Cait, I find it inspiring the “capable amateurism” you detail that guided feminist indexers’ premature ventures into computer labs back in the 1980s: “a fearless approach to learning and implementing new media technologies that emerges out of feminist commitments to craft techniques, collectively organized work, and figuring things out on the fly.” Why do you think it’s important to hone in on these past early adopter stumbles and barriers?*

**CM:** I was reading a [New Yorker](#) article [recently] trying to contextualize Substack through the history of newsletters. (It’s not a good article.)

The author argues that the history of newsletters starts with the turn to desktop publishing, and the tech industry publishing newsletters for other members of the tech industry, and [how] then the finance sector takes it up. So this is in the mid ’80s to late ’80s. [But] there’s so much literature on the history of newsletters that come out of different communities of struggle.

To get back to your question, the turn to computing is always narrated as a story about improved access and this “explosion” of publishing. But there were already various communities marginalized from mainstream publishing doing this work for decades before that, and for those communities, reasonable computing didn’t necessarily represent improved access. It was really cumbersome and expensive. Even early Cyberfeminism was complicating those basic ideas about access and divisions in access, and what computing means in different feminist contexts. So I think it’s really important to troll these progress stories that we tell about computers.



## Rea McNamara

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Rea McNamara is a writer, curator and public programmer based in Toronto. She is currently the Emily H. Tremaine Journalism Fellow for Curators at Hyperallergic. [More by Rea McNamara](#)