

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Brooklyn College

2021

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and 'Queer Cinema'

Alexandra Juhasz
CUNY Brooklyn College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bc_pubs/313

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

Alexandra Juhasz

The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema

Edited by Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo

Print Publication Date: Nov 2021

Subject: Literature, Film, Literary Theory and Cultural Studies

Online Publication Date: Nov 2021 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190877996.013.22

Abstract and Keywords

Committed media praxis is a doing as much as it is a knowing. Queerness is a manner of being as much as it is a politics, theory, or set of modish objects. This chapter about topics that are also processes—queer, media praxis, cinema—performs these across two acts: “Part 1: A Hesitant or Maybe Just Slightly Defiant Preamble,” is a creative unfolding, in the body of the text and as much so in its footnotes, of the author’s “queer feminist media praxis”: “Part 2: VHS Archives” is a demonstration of VHS Archives, a multisited, many-year project in experimental pedagogy, web-based archival engagement, and committed activist interventions into contemporary AIDS activism and queer media.

Keywords: AIDS, media praxis, queer, lesbian, video, archives, VHS, queer cinema

COMMITTED media praxis is a doing as much as it is a knowing. Queerness is a manner of being as much as it is a politics, theory, or set of modish objects. Queer cinema might have institutional anthologies, retrospectives, and canons, but for me, it needs smaller, stranger sites that honor how it’s done: its moods, weather, learning, and loving.

Invited to write a “field defining” contribution about topics that are also processes—queer, media praxis, cinema—I perform a staging in two acts: a mid-life, mid-career report from the field where I am trying to do my best by lesbianism, queerness, community, media-making, scholarship, activism, teaching, and writing. By staging a set of paper-bound gestures (oblique, parenthetical, personal, photographic, citational), I attempt to render, in form, what Amy Villarejo has assured me is “a creative and attentive writing practice that does justice to the complexity of position and perspective upon which you justly insist.”¹ Thus, with her permission, and your indulgence, I attempt to explain and also enact committed media praxis within queer cinema.

“Part 1: A Hesitant or Maybe Just Slightly Defiant Preamble,” is a partial and personal map of my ongoing queer feminist media praxis—a few bona fides mingled with fears and remembrances—as just one participant within a beloved community who invented, and

then perhaps also consolidated, queer cinema (studies). “Part 2: VHS Archives” is a demonstration of where that gets me to of late: a multisited, many-yearred project that returns to my own easily lost beginnings, friends, and colleagues (including Juanita Mohammed Szczepanski and her daughter Jazzy, see Figure 24.1) albeit by way of experimental pedagogy, web-based archival engagement, and committed activist interventions into contemporary AIDS activism and media. Using this recent, committed, queer media project as a close-to-the-heart sample case, I demonstrate its stakes and practices as a kindred project set to salvage and/or save our precious images of love especially as time makes this, our queer activist media, yet again perilous, politicized, and provisional.



Figure 24.1. The author with Jahanara Zzaman (and child) in Union Square, New York City, participating in the site-specific action “Dear J,” staged by students in my 2018 VHS Archives class. I met Jazzy when she was “the child” in my friend Juanita Mohammed Szczepanski’s video “Homosexuality: One Child’s Point of View” (1991).

(p. 627) **Part 1: A Hesitant or Maybe Just Slightly Defiant Preamble**

I am a hesitant, on-again off-again scholar of “queer cinema.” Sure, my academic, artistic, personal, and even sexual histories legitimate my participation in said terrain. I began my academic (and media activist) career in the mid-1980s as a graduate student in cinema studies and a maker and budding scholar of AIDS activist video. By the early (p. 628) nineties, now an assistant professor, I was working on two related large-scale projects. The first was a documentary and book on feminist film-and-video history, *Women of Vision*² (granted, a significant portion of the women featured in this study were and are “lesbian,” as was I at this time. Decades later, the disproportionate participation of les-

bians within African American and women’s cinema would become a shared research interest for many of the authors in *Sisters in the Life*, a 2018 anthology considering the history of out Black lesbian cinema I coedited with Yvonne Welbon).³ In the mid-1990s, I also volunteered to serve as a producer of a feature film by my then partner Cheryl Dunye, *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). Neither of us knew much of anything about narrative feature filmmaking.⁴

Cheryl came from art video and I cut my media teeth in AIDS activist video. Our ballsy fall into narrative feature filmmaking emerged within a larger community-based movement in this very same direction (only a little later to become known as the New Queer Cinema).⁵ Adding fuel to the fire was our investment in bringing lesbian and people-of-color (POC) representation to this already lively, if still limited, cinema scene at the moment when small “indie” features were thriving.⁶ Ours was to become the first African American lesbian feature film (which recently enjoyed its twentieth-anniversary remaster and rerelease). It came on the tale of many such films by our friends: *Go Fish*, *Poison*, *Swoon*, *Looking for Langston*, and *Tongues Untied* (to name but a few of the slightly earlier films to which we had personal and political connections). I coproduced⁷ *The Watermelon Woman* with Barry Swimar, who was hot off our friend Jennie Livingston’s 1991 *Paris Is Burning* (Barry *did* know quite a bit about narrative feature filmmaking, as did some portion of our hired crew, who worked for peanuts, yes, but were paid from Cheryl’s \$30,000 National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) artist’s grant⁸ won from the very last round of grants made to individual artists by this important, always-under-threat, and ever-more defanged national institution).

Given the all-hands-on-deck spirit of our project and the moment, as well as the seriously self-referential bent of Cheryl’s oeuvre more generally, I somehow also ended up “acting” as Martha Page,⁹ the closeted White Hollywood movie director in the film’s faked past (I was and am even less an actor than a producer). Page (and I) were modeled after the closeted Hollywood director, Dorothy Arzner, one of only a small number of women who enjoyed such success in the golden age of cinema.¹⁰ As Page, I perform—again surrounded and abetted by a large cadre of our friends, most of them lesbians—one White woman’s role in many faked (but close to real) scenarios¹¹ (a total of eighty-two photos and four film clips) that convincingly illustrate the invented private and professional life of an underrecognized Black (lesbian) icon, Fae “the Watermelon Woman” Richards (Lisa Marie Bronson).

Many months before the feature film was to shoot, and as a way to jump-start and authorize that more-conventional production process, a queer and rowdy crew of our friends and lovers and their friends and comrades volunteered for the photo shoot—in Philadelphia and in front of and behind the cameras—as just one more joyous, raucous but also professional and serious (art) action definitive of this lively, loving community in that time and place. Our crowd was in close kinship with the one we fabricated and (p. 629) celebrated from the un(der)recorded past, only better, in that in the early 1990s we were out and proud and in love and anger with the world and each other, but also backed by (les-

bian) feminism, civil rights, and AIDS activism and theory, which helped to more firmly situate and support our daring desires, community, and goals.

The Fae Richards Archive,¹² which serves to verify the “truth” of the fake story underlining *The Watermelon Woman*—a collaboration between Zoe Leonard and Cheryl that I executive produced and acted in—is now itself an important piece of American (lesbian) Art. A great many of us came together to support Cheryl and Zoe¹³ after they had taken the lead by doing the preliminary research and imagining, debating, and then constructing the life of Fae Richards. We all wanted to better understand and then re-render what we knew we needed: verification of the truth of women, people of color, lesbians, and queers in race films, early Hollywood cinema, and decades of American domesticity and culture.¹⁴

I play Martha Page, Fae Richard’s lover and director, against and to type. In the photos, I am dressed up to look like a proper butch lesbian, hair brill-creamed off my face, smart suit and tie borrowed from the real-life wardrobe of others on our team (Figure 24.2). My character is engaged in an artistic and sometimes domestic partnership with a talented, gorgeous Black actress who as often as not is wearing a dress from my actual closet. In so doing, as I would do again many times across my life and career, I perform as the White woman who is bound to Black lesbians by “desire, power, anger, disdain, and humiliation”¹⁵ within and outside of cinema.¹⁶ In its time, and again, it seems, also today, given what is expressed by contemporary audiences during its twentieth anniversary rerelease,¹⁷ *The Watermelon Woman* brought (and brings) Black lesbians to the canon of queer cinema to which the film is sometimes and, more frequently lately, attached as an important outlier.¹⁸

Later, in the 2000s, and at that time married to a man, but always to be the lesbian-Mom of the two children I created with Cheryl (and their gay male father, Robert, who plays one of the two cops in the film, the White one, who handcuff “Cheryl” when they catch her shooting video on a dirty Philadelphia street with a small but expensive-looking camcorder),¹⁹ I coproduced (with Ernesto Foronda and Candi GUTERRES), her “comeback”²⁰ feature. *The Owls* (2010) is a still undersung, collectively rendered look at the perils of lesbian domesticity as seen through a dark Highsmithian meditation on the threats of alcohol, female biological clocks and queer baby lust, aging, and radically changing norms about gender and sexual identity within the “lesbian community.”²¹ This “queer film” (when paired, as it always should be, with its behind-the-scenes “making-of” film *Hooters* (2010), directed by Anna Margarita Albelo) is a cheap and woolly, dark and funny, metadiscursive, self-reflexive look at feminist process and lesbian, queer, and trans identity, as linked to histories and theories of our representation in cinema, made by and for the lesbian/queer/trans POC community (if any such thing has ever existed, a question around which the film circles endlessly).²² Two new return videos about AIDS, cultural memory, and the place of women and people of color therein (*Compulsive Practice* [2017], with Jean Carlomusto and Hugh Ryan, and *DiAna’s Hair Ego Remix* [2018], which I produced with the Cheryl, Ellen Spiro, and (p. 630) Jennifer Steinman) round off this brief introduction to my past, current, ongoing if always changing engagements with queer top-

ics, people, connections, media, processes, and returns: my committed (queer feminist) media praxis.²³ Things change, they stay the same; we need things to change, so there’s always more committed media praxis to do. Cheryl explains:



Figure 24.2. Martha Page (Alexandra Juhasz) (*center bottom*), framed by images from the time she shared a career and home with Fae Richards (Lisa Marie Bronson). “If I remember my gossip correctly, she was one mean and ugly woman” (explains Ira Jeffries playing Miss Shirley in *The Watermelon Woman* about Martha Page (me) in the fake interview footage, where Fae’s lesbianism is first revealed in an “interview” shot by “Cheryl”).

What has changed in the community of South Carolina is that people are still battling this epidemic but many of the safe sex initiatives that were set in place have been eradicated in this political climate, except for Bambi’s clinic. A friend of mine, Linda Villarosa, wrote an article about the epidemic in the South for *New York Times Magazine* “America’s Hidden HIV Epidemic.” The number of Black people affected is greater than ever. One thing popped out to me is that there’s complacency with some of the young people who are poor, of color or disenfranchised, who don’t see any hope. DiAna’s salon is a beacon that teaches people how to engage, be active and make choices, because young Black and Brown people are our future.²⁴ (Figure 24.3)

Why, you must be wondering, is this illustrated, lengthy, meandering biographical sketch, or quite lengthy “preamble”—my own private queer media inventory—jammed in front of “Part 2,” my *proper* contribution to the *Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*? It all started when I found myself feeling a bit hesitant and a lot more unauthorized to write about that here. So, I wrote “Part 1” to convince myself, or you, that this, or I, or we are rightfully a part of all the parts: Oxford/Handbook/Queer/Cinema. While my feminism is a situated and empowering call to unmask, see, name, and work to change all insidious, sanctioned disequilibriums of power meted out along arbitrary binary schema of perceived difference (race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, ethnicity, age, (p. 631) etc.), my queerness destabilizes binaries and other such neat arrangements. Thus, my queer feminist media praxis is an adaptive set of sometimes inappropriate actions and methods (like this still-going preamble) that seek to engage productively with, while also demonstrating caution about, the role of sanction and credibility themselves in the field(s) of lesbianism, queer cinema,

and queer theory—as well as my pleasure and sometimes power in “defying” them²⁵—for reasons definitive of the very artistic tradition(s) we make, study, and cherish, and the community/ies to which this sometimes speaks.



Figure 24.3. Cheryl Dunye and Dr. Bambi Sumpter in “DiAna’s Hair Ego Remix” (Ellen Spiro and Cheryl Dunye, 2017), a return, sponsored by Visual AIDS for their yearly Day With(out) Art, to DiAna DiAna’s beauty salon, where AIDS info is still very much up front. Tragically, we learn that little else has changed for Blacks in the South since Ellen’s first visit, in 1988, other than Bambi’s and DiAna’s aging, and their request for younger people to step up—at least as far as AIDS is concerned.

I strive for my (scholarly) output to be just and only as queer as am I. I want it to reflect my adapting commitments to process and method, fierceness and flexibility. It is mine, and suits me. It is not ready-made. I consider and refine it from varying engagements with my changing communities’ histories, needs, and theories. I experiment with (academic) writing to better align words with my committed media practice. For me, and particularly in these contexts, traditional scholarly writing and research—theory-grounded close textual analysis—even if about/for/or by “queers,” can often feel like a received, confining, and/or misaligned format. This is one reason that so much of my work skitters to video or collectives or the internet,²⁶ given the particular and useful multimodal affordances offered outside the scholarly paper or even chapter.²⁷ And all this can be messy, I know. Or perhaps beautiful. Just see the shrine below (Figure 24.4).

Which is to say, at last, that I have been and continue to be a hesitant, on-again off-again “scholar” of “queer cinema” because much of what I study and make or support is not necessarily “about” queers, or about cinema for that matter. How I do this, often (p. 632) with others—my committed media praxis—is most typically understood as a quirky, endearing, maybe even “correct,” but slightly marginal helpmeet to “Queer Theory,” the gold coin of our academic realm. Yes, I know that these many (other) modes of knowing and doing, writing and researching, even about and in “queer cinema,” and even during the (short?) heyday of digital humanities (DH), remain firmly stratified as lesser—and thereby gendered as female—in our hierarchical, sexist professional worlds (like the producer to her director; or the midwife to the Flaherty.)²⁸ Sure, I mind this as a feminist.

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

But it’s what I have chosen to do and perhaps help to change. This very unrolling before you of my own stakes and mutating fears; forefronting of my political and personal commitments; unspooling of (un)certainities of belonging, method, and authority; relaying of my artistic and academic work as always, first, acts of self- and world changing (“I chose to be a lesbian,” I say in my documentary on (my) queer and feminist family, *Dear Gabe*, 2003). That is, all this hesitancy and defiance is what makes *my* media work *queer and feminist* to me. Theory adjacent and conversant, sexual and political proclivities in flux, responsive to communities and collaborators, primarily and definitively process-oriented and often production-based, my committed media praxis (p. 633) in queer cinema is one part of doing my best at living a queer feminist life within queer media and community.²⁹ In a special section of *GLQ*’s “Moving Image Review” on lesbian archives that I coedited with Ming Yuen-Ma, Yvonne Welbon³⁰ describes the Black lesbian archival project of Julia Wallace and Alexis Pauline Gums, *Mobile Homecoming*. Their words beautifully describe linked life lesbian practices: “The project is ‘an intimate embrace of a living herstory, a celebration of how boldness survives the moment of its need ... how we know who we are ... how we live forever.’ ”³¹



Figure 24.4. Art exhibit, as shrine, devoted to objects from the archive of *The Watermelon Woman*, curated by Melorra and Melonie Green, and shown at the conference Black/Feminist/Lesbian/Queer/Trans* Cultural Production: A Symposium Honoring the 20th Anniversary of Cheryl Dunye’s “The Watermelon Woman” at the University of California, San Francisco. One part of our extensive and community-produced twentieth return.

So many other theorists (and livers) of queer media and its archives have been here before and with me, and by that, I mean primarily as a matter of method and practice, living and healing, organizing and world building as much as I do studying AIDS or archives, queerness or lesbians. As just one example, in 2011 Ming and I, organized the aforementioned special section on lesbian archives. There we collected writing about queer/lesbian feminist media archives, objects, and communities as fertile places of defiance, love, and other feelings. Our introduction states: “The history of our queer archive—the quasi-acad-

emic regulations of its sharing, the varied nature of its objects, and the multiple conditions of its reading—is bound by contemporary assumptions about identity, community, and media and how these are, in turn, shaped, understood, and connected to media from the past.”³² Our methods move accordingly. Just so, in her work on queer/lesbian archives, trauma, and AIDS, Ann Cvetkovich carefully mines the affect and memories of her friends and colleagues, so as to live, heal, and know better:

Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge.³³

Trying to make sense of my own personal collection of videotapes in my current project, VHS Archives, I, too, stand alongside queer (and other) people and our things. Since 2016, I have been engaging with librarians, technologists, archivists, scholars, activists, and students to think about and then practice—by working from my own collection as test case—how to best save, share, teach, and research the quickly deteriorating VHS collections we have acquired doing our queer media work. My collection reflects all the work I have just detailed so carefully. As one part of this multifaceted research project, and focusing on only twelve tapes—these focused on women, sexuality, and AIDS—from my unruly but intensive collection of two hundred VHS tapes, I co-taught, in spring 2018, with the multimedia artist Jenn McCoy, a graduate class, VHS Archives, at Brooklyn College, City University of New York ([CUNY]; we taught the course for a second time, Spring 2020). In Spring 2018, our students spent an intimate semester with the tapes: as research, inspiration, and jumping-off point for making connections to contemporary AIDS activism and community. The primary goal was activating queer archives in useful (p. 634) ways, not simply digitizing tapes and plopping them on some cul-de-sac on the Web³⁴ but using them, in community, to make new and linked things, feelings, and ideas.

In this project, and in all iterations of my committed queer media praxis, I attempt to demonstrate how a theory-rich, community-based, outcomes-oriented, applied and adaptive research and production method—medium agnostic—modified to approach specific projects that matter to queers (and our kin), can produce things (websites, videos, chapters, actions, art, classes) that save and can be saved, including when done right or well, what matters most: our queer lives and loves. “The hopeful idealism that can promise future love comes not from denying memory but from transforming memories into an ideally compassionate subculture,”³⁵ write Chris Castiglia and Chris Reed in their kindred project on gay men, AIDS, and the queer past. Which is to say, at long last, that my work to date, on and in the glorious instability of queerness, and through the generative power of feminism, situates and motivates me to consider next, in “Part 2: VHS Archives,” some related questions and processes about (my own) queer VHS AIDS archives. For, if one makes queer community, or collectives, videos, collaborations, or even classes—rather than film or academic theoretical writing—as one’s “queer cinema” work, the associated

delights of this work can create new problems and also possibilities. Questions of data and other loss are formidable, definitive, and highly worthy of our shared efforts as queer feminist media scholars. This is because our archives demand special effort and render patent pleasures. Some of this is what I hope to describe and also enact as “Part 2” of this effort (Figure 24.5).

Part 2: VHS Archives

VHS Archives: An Introduction

Scholars, activists, researchers, and artists of a certain age and inclination are burdened with a soon-to-be-obsolete but always-beloved, carefully tended but perhaps more recently quieted, collection that most likely sits on an office shelf gathering dust: their VHS Archive. Not a personal collection, but a professional one with a continuing or even growing value and same-time diminishing usability, this archive has been lovingly built and used, probably over decades, for teaching and research and in support of the movements or issues that have mattered most to the researcher-collector. My personal VHS archive, about two hundred tapes strong, holds tapes that were made and used for all of the projects described in “Part 1,” and many more. One reason that I detailed my history, motives, and feelings about those projects was to better personalize, and also thereby professionalize, the tapes I collected, which they engendered, which might otherwise only present as another unusable stack of nostalgic predigital dreck. John Ippolito explains: “Whereas storage is the longest-term strategy for old media, it is the shortest-term solution for new media. Equipment left in a crate eventually becomes (p. 635) unusable as voltage standards change, cathode ray tubes blow, and floppy disk drives disappear”³⁶ (Figure 24.6).



Figure 24.5 In this performance for the VHS Archives class, Jazzy’s open-hearted discussion of homosexuality seen on the screen inspires Deborah Latz to make art about her own sexual history.

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

My current multimodal, multisited project, VHS Archives, considers and also models how to transfer, store, share, teach from, and reactivate one such (queer) media archive shuttling between old and new media, analog and digital formats. The project, in many interlinked and still-developing parts—as library collection, working group, class, interlinked websites, all to be described below—considers (by doing) what might be some best (and/or queer) practices about video, archives, activism, teaching, queer/feminist community-making, and the digital. I became concerned with all these uses of my VHS archive—always visible and well-loved to me, but increasingly less usable or used, all the while ever more likely to be seen by others as merely cute or retro office wallpaper—when I boxed, itemized, and moved it to New York City in 2016. Seeing and touching it again newly, and thus realizing both its imminent demise and ongoing relevance, I decided to work with qualified others to try to save and use it as one VHS test case. Through researching, teaching, and writing related to this project (by myself and others), it has been only too well verified that my private intuition and dread about (my) tape is indeed understood as an institutional crisis by archival media professionals. Lisa (p. 636) A. Macklin, librarian and lawyer asks: “What is obsolete? Well, 108 (c) [of the copyright code] defines a format as obsolete ‘if the machine or device necessary to render perceptible a work stored in that format is no longer manufactured or is no longer reasonably available in the commercial marketplace.’”³⁷ Given this official obsolescence, Mike Casey explains why media preservation can’t wait: “It is now widely recognized that audio and video holdings must be digitally preserved within an estimated fifteen to twenty year time window if they are to be available to future generations of researchers.”³⁸



Figure 24.6. Some of my tapes on one of my shelves; note the many formats!

As so much contemporary archival theory and art attests,³⁹ the impact of this broad-based cultural loss is felt with particular acuity by AIDS activists, lesbians of color, feminist families—and the many queer communities whose work my personal collection holds and to which it contributes (see “Part 1: A Hesitant or Maybe Just Slightly Defiant Preamble”)—because our communities are always fighting for a small and fragile hold on representational practice even as the dominant culture resists, powerfully. Kristin (KP) Pepe, a

past manager of Outfest’s Legacy Project for LGBT Film Preservation, explains in her contribution to “Lesbian Archives”:

[T]he preservation and collection of LGBT moving images have historically posed unique challenges for traditional archives. The nature of LGBT films—the how and (p. 637) why they are made—is intrinsic to the lack of support for archiving and restoring these films. Many of them are made from personal experience by people trying to figure out both their sexuality and the world around them ... They are attempts at creating images of love that are different from what we usually see.⁴⁰

Even once these images of love are made, by us, making the most of our hard-won organized communal power (see “Part 1”), the kindred project to salvage and/or save our precious images becomes yet again perilous, politicized, and provisional. This is because our endangered communities are always underresourced in terms of both actual and political capital. What we made and want to save falls outside of known or favored categories for collection.⁴¹

In his curation and writing about the artistic uses of the archive (including the Fae Richards Archive), Okwui Enwezor insists that “the desire to make a photograph, to document an event, to compose statements as unique events, is directly related to the aspiration to produce an archive.”⁴² The Fae Richards Archive, my VHS collection, and other queer archives all share that particular archival aspiration, suffer our failures to reach it, and celebrate our acts of working toward it. “It has come to be my feeling, thinking of queers, thinking of time, thinking of archives, thinking in particular about lesbians, muddling again and yet again through the same old stories about their visibility, or invisibility, as you wish, that something is not being read,” begins Catherine Lord, in her contribution to “Lesbian Archives.”⁴³ I too have learned—particularly as I see the work of my communities remembered, saved, archived, and taught (or not!)—that the project (or field) of committed media practice and queer cinema is thus not only about making our voices seen and heard, as moving and impactful as this may be, but also the harder, less visible, and as or more resource-dependent work of saving, seeing, and using what we made before. Then there’s this work: reading (and writing) all that is not being read, and doing this as queerly as we must.

Of course, some queers have more access to resources, memory, and archives than do others, precariousness and loss can themselves be generative, and the digital can enable both new access and recalibrations of what counts. In my recent book *We Are Having This Conversation Now: The Times of AIDS Cultural Production*, cowritten with AIDS cultural activist Theodore Kerr, we contemplate the real liabilities of the up-to-now patrimonial stewardship of the AIDS media archive, one that has been almost entirely understood, to date, as the property and responsibility of gay White men. While we are beyond thankful for all that these allies have done on behalf of the larger AIDS community, why, we wonder, has this history not been understood as located in the larger provenance of the many communities impacted by HIV/AIDS—say Black or feminist communities—and what results from a mono-situated pattern of holding?

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

Furthermore, the larger VHS Archives Project, in which we both participate, allows us to focus not just on who holds and preserves our queer legacies but how to attend, not with equivocation or apology, but rather with keen attention and even delight, to our community’s small and/or lost/or even never-made archives, on why things weren’t collected, on who didn’t or couldn’t collect them, and what we might do about that now.

(p. 638) CUNY master’s student in media studies, Juan Fernández, another member, as was Ted, of the VHS Archives Working Group (to be described shortly) explains:

I came to the VHS Archives group to gather insights on how to pursue a media history project that lacks in archival footage. I am working only with oral histories and academic frameworks that locate the queer brown body within the Los Angeles landscape but not enough to identify a specific time and place, especially when trying to create an archive of underground T-parties in Los Angeles.⁴⁴

Limited (or missing) data sets are themselves possibly queer technologies to address the troubles of official corporate, governmental, or institutional holdings.

Our queer assets and processes, including those that are missing or impossible to hold—the ways we live that influence, what we do and store—generate new methods and archives. In *Rogue Archives*, Abigail De Kosnik explains how the digital has allowed the repertoire of performance and affect, ever-fertile for queers and nearly impossible to hold with traditional methods, a larger place in the archive:

Those on the edges of power, in real life and in virtual life, continually invent new forms and genres online, prolifically generate and actively spread their digital productions, and establish digital archives, first of all in order to demonstrate that their cultures and creations exist and deserve the status and recognition of being, and second, to refuse those at the center of power complete control of the archive.⁴⁵

The VHS Archives project, across the several linked iterations I will describe, is my attempt to wrestle some control of my own tape archive by sharing it with others.

VHS Archives: The Working Group

The VHS Archives project began in the spring of 2017 through an informal working group of CUNY staff, faculty, and students, and a few interested outsiders, thinking about and through my two hundred tapes now sitting in cardboard boxes. Together, we decided that the first step of this project should be the professional housing and care of my collection, as well as the tapes’ digitization. I donated the tapes to the Brooklyn College Library (in large part because a supportive librarian, Miriam Deutch, was excited about the project and was willing, with the support of the Library’s Chair, Mary Mallory, to devote some resources to the project) (Figure 24.7).

Various librarians and technologists at Brooklyn College, making use of my intimate background knowledge, have worked with me through and with the collection: to determine

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

which tapes are owned by me outright and can be shared openly, which have already been digitized (by others) to which we can point to for access, which are “illegal dubs” that can only be watched in-house for research purposes, and so on. The questions (p. 639) that the collection raises about provenance, access, copyright, findability, metadata, and the like, have been transferred, correctly, to skilled librarians. The work of carefully holding has also been given to where it should be: a library.⁴⁶ But housing the tapes was only the beginning of what these tapes (and others like them—the records of our love) needed to be properly saved.



Figure 24.7. Boxes and piles of my tapes about to be on their way to the Brooklyn College library.

Thus, from 2017 to 2020, I continued and expanded this process by engaging in conversation and related activities with others who are also working with archives of queer tape and other analog materials.⁴⁷ I hosted a working group of the same name sponsored by the CUNY Grad Center’s Humanities Institute.⁴⁸ Once a month, members of the working group presented and discussed the discrete problems and pleasures of their own VHS (or analog) archives or archival research. The group was composed of scholars, artists, and activists from AIDS nonprofits, a variety of humanities disciplines, librarians, and archivists and technologists (including members of the XFR Collective, several archivists from queer media collections across New York City, and the Media Ecology Project at Dartmouth College). We are a loose and lively collection in our own right, composed of about twenty people who come and go depending on each meeting’s topic. The group is heterogeneous (at least within a queer context), made up of people identified as men, women, trans and nonbinary, gay, lesbian, queer, and (p. 640) straight, spanning a large age range across academic disciplines and rank, as well as nonacademics, but all with a shared commitment to the concerns of people of color, people with AIDS, and trans and other vulnerable people, and how the people for whom we care have been attended to (or not) by using (and losing) video.

In our meetings we watched some porn and sexually explicit video, we discussed the ethics of researching in and reactivating archived images of always-vulnerable people, as well as the particular weight, troubles, and provocations of researching in never-made

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

archives. This and much more has been written up in participants’ blog posts about our group’s thinking about queer media archives. For instance, writing about our session on hard-to-find tapes of vulnerable communities, queer archivist Rachel Mattson writes:

Just because you can doesn’t mean you should is maybe a good tagline for the broader overlap between queer history, videotape, and the documentary impulse... . Can we develop queer archival practices that engage subtle questions of power and access, the strangeness of the past, the tension between the individual and collective, and the changing historical contexts that have shaped viewership, authorship, and privacy? Can we somehow account for both the delights and the troubles that our digital technologies facilitate? In short: Can we enact community-engaged, ethically informed, queer approaches to the conundrums that lie at the center of our documentary and archival impulses?⁴⁹

It was my hope that an experimental committed media class could be one such site to work through and do some of the layered, rich, and complicated approaches that might actually improve upon, and queer, the archival impulse.

VHS Archive: The 2018 Class

Contemporaneously to the conversation at the Grad Center, during the spring of 2018 (and again in spring 2020), I taught a graduate course of the same name with video artist and professor Jennifer McCoy to CUNY master of arts students in art history and screen studies, and to grad students in Brooklyn College’s master of fine arts program, PIMA (Performance and Interactive Media Arts). Our class was less queer than the working group (in terms of self-identified participants), but equally or differently queer in the sense of eclectic and responsive research methods and intended outcomes. We set forth to (re)activate my small (queer) archive. This course—again with support from the Brooklyn College Library and a grant for teaching with Open Educational Resources (OERs)—was built into a series of teaching/archiving websites (first in the multimodal authoring tool Omeka⁵⁰ and then in Scalar⁵¹) that hold the twelve videotapes, the course readings about AIDS media history and media archives, as well as the students’ work on and about these issues and the growing archive we are (p. 641) coproducing from all this new research and the use of some digitized tapes from my collection (Figure 24.8).



Figure 24.8. In his remix of my own “Women and AIDS” (with Jean Carlomusto, 1987), Ben Gorodetsky revisits strategies of condom-use education from early AIDS video, and updates this to become a performance he stages with 1980s safer-sex educator Denise Ribble on the screen behind him as he dances with condoms on his head and in his hands.

The 2018 class broke itself into three working groups that were initiated from political concerns and artistic methods that the students identified as resonant in the twelve AIDS tapes and as they were inspired by ethical research practices and archival art impulses that were covered in our course work.⁵² Group One commenced its work from the videos of the prostitutes’ rights and AIDS activist video-maker, Carol Leigh (Scarlot Harlot). They reconnected to Carol in San Francisco, and then to more New York-based sex work activists, focusing their research and project on the current criminalization of bodies and sex panics, particularly in relation to two bills passed into federal law in April 2018: Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA). Their project was GROUP SEX.

(p. 642)

Initially inspired by Carol Leigh’s Safe Sex Slut compilation, we came together as a group to explore sex-workers’ rights, community, and activism. We decided to create a night of performance Our show, Hot to Trot, brought together an intergenerational group of performers and sex workers to honor legacies of activism and resistance. It was performed at Bizarre Brooklyn, Tuesday May 15 at 7:30 pm. Bizarre is a queer-friendly bar and venue, known to the Brooklyn burlesque and performance communities. HTT was hosted by Jo “Boobs” Weldon, an outspoken and articulate advocate for sex-worker’s rights and a legend herself. She gave some background on the political issues for the audience. The politics were also highlighted by video of an interview with Carol Leigh, mixed with clips from her “Bad Laws” video.⁵³

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

Group Two, in dialogue with Juanita Mohammed Szczepanski’s video *Homosexuality: One Child’s Point of View*, and in conversation with her daughter Jazzy (now a mother herself in her thirties), delved into the connections between art, voice, education, authenticity, and children in relation to matters of AIDS and queerness. Their project was DEAR J.

As the deadline approached to present a final presentation/workshop, we were able to interview Jahanara. She was the “child” in the 1990 documentary and is now 35 years with three children and one on the way! This interview injected new energy into our project and we were reminded of what drew us to the initial documentary, “Homosexuality: One Child’s Point of View.” Taking that inspiration, we wanted to develop an event that would celebrate Jahanara and her voice. We hoped that the celebration would help inspire others to use their voice.⁵⁴

The third group, motivated by the defining community-specificity of early AIDS educational video about and for communities of color—particularly Frances Negrón’s *AIDS in the Bario* (1985) and a 1980s “trigger-tape” made by Bebash, an AIDS community organization in Philadelphia, for women of color, modeling how to safely talk about negotiating safer sex with men, particularly in domestic spaces, where violence is always live—partnered with VOCAL, a community-based AIDS organization in Brooklyn, to contribute to their ongoing campaign on safe consumption spaces. Their project was “Release the Report.”

A meeting was arranged with VOCAL and various key agendas of the organization were discussed, but the issue around Safe Consumption Spaces (SCS, aka Safer Injection Sites) stood out. The group had been lobbying the mayor’s office to make public a report on the spaces, which had been commissioned by the City Council in 2016 and, having been completed, remained unreleased. It is VOCAL-NY’s view, based on similar studies and the success of international sites, that SCS strongly reduce overdose deaths and that the communities impacted in New York would greatly benefit from their instantiation.⁵⁵

(Figure 24.9)

From VHS video to contemporary activist art and organizing; from obsolescent tapes to live public performance, from my secluded office shelves to the public parks of New York and burlesque halls of Brooklyn, (my) VHS Archives engenders others’ actions, needs, histories, and feelings. My students’ committed queer media practice, like my own, is a responsibility and a privilege.



Figure 24.9. VOCAL NY protest on the steps of New York’s City Hall to force the release of a report commissioned by Mayor Bill de Blasio about the viability of safe-injection sites. A group of students from VHS Archives shot photos and videos as part of this campaign. We also participated in a weekly protest. The report was released the next day.

Conclusion

“I’ve been spending a lot of my time trying to understand what my responsibility is under the conditions of the tremendous loss of life,” explains Sarah Schulman in her interview with David Oscar Harvey, one of the contributions to “Lesbian Archive” about her long-term work with Jim Hubbard on the ACT UP Oral History Project.⁵⁶ “A lot of the project is about making a record and a lot of it is about the consequences of AIDS ... The oral history project lays the groundwork of data for people to begin to struggle with these questions.”⁵⁷ In my kindred effort here, and those of my many collaborators (p. 644) and interlocutors, I have also attempted to demonstrate how we struggle with these questions: building on our own and others’ (shaky, hesitant, explosive) groundwork from whence queer lives and archives are made, lived, and used. Queer media archives are by definition and desire unstable and a little unseemly; they should be saved and shared, passed on, and used by others. Thus, my committed media practice in queer cinema is about media, to be sure, but always, first, about what it records and activates, the inspiring and improving of our lived experiences, and the learning, loving, and then holding on and sharing that this allows (Figure 24.10).



Figure 24.10. Hillary Preston reads about her own power and vulnerability from pages sewn into her skirt as her fellow performers bind and also support her, at Hot To Trot, the night of burlesque staged by students in VHS Archives in response to Carol Leigh’s VHS video work.

Notes:

(1.) Amy Villerajo, e-mail, June 28, 2018, responding to an earlier communication in which I had offered the editors permission to cut my piece loose if it had gone too far afield. Self-reflexive inclusion of process (as one aspect of my committed media praxis method) is some of what I was worried about but also committed to. Talking about all that here, in the footnotes, is another characteristic of this method that I will be performing, especially in “Part 1,” as a way to enact and also reflect my own practice in a piece about praxis. It also sets into motion the repeating interconnections of a personal, and I suggest field-defining intermingling of authorization and uncertainty, invitation and exclusion.

(2.) Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2001) and its associated feature documentary, available at from the author.

(3.) Yvonne Welbon and Alexandra Juhasz, eds., *Sisters in the Life: 25 Years of Out African American Lesbian Mediamaking (1986–2011)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

(4.) I am currently in the process of revisiting all three of these projects: through a book, Theodore Kerr and Alexandra Juhasz, *We Are Having This Conversation Now: The Times of AIDS Cultural Production* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); a special edition of *Feminist Media Histories* on activism, organized around media feminists, almost all

queer or lesbian, who began their careers in the 1980s (Cheryl Dunye, Juanita Mohammed, Frances Negron, Eve Oishi, Yvonne Welbon), and first featured in *Women of Vision*, sharing media tactics learned under Ronald Reagan with younger feminists who might find this useful against today’s authoritarian regime: Alexandra Juhasz and Angela Aguayo, eds., “Informed Historical Reveries,” special issue, *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 4 (October 2019); and a remaster and rerelease of *The Watermelon Woman*, in 2016. Upon reflection, this question of return looms large in much (or all) of (my) queer/feminist/AIDS media praxis, including the project under consideration in “Part 2b: VHS Archives: The Working Group.” Salvaging lost or easy to lose histories (and people) and then losing them again (to be found) is a cycle definitive of activist visibility politics.

(5.) B. Ruby Rich twice revisits her role in naming this moment and movement, explaining how it emerged from the same lively queer activist film community in which we each played our parts. B. Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); and Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director’s Cut* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

(6.) See Christine Vachon, *Shooting to Kill* (2007) and John Pierson, *Spike, Mike, Slackers and Dykes* (1996).

(7.) Note how many various “co-” prefixes there are across this effort. We needed to share the burden of invention and learning, supporting each other as we went, in that no one else would.

(8.) The role that our film played—along with other queer and feminist art—in political efforts to end or cripple the NEA is a critical component of its place within queer cinema history. In adding my own history to recent returns to the dastardly Republican project of gutting or destroying national arts funding, I take care to recount how it was none other than Alec Baldwin who spoke on our film’s behalf on the steps of Capitol Hill, in an eerie anticipation of roles to come. Try as we might, though we were able to pull off a microbudget feature that accumulated cred as we went, we never had enough *real* cultural capital to get Cheryl anywhere near the mainstream media so that *she* could speak her artistic truths when the film was being debated in the press and Congress. Frank Rich wrote a great op-ed about the film, and Texas congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee argued convincingly on the floor of the House against an amendment—penned explicitly against our little film to defund that year’s NEA budget by the very \$30,000 Cheryl had received, this as punishment for our purported crimes (visualizing a brief interracial lesbian sex scene somewhere near the middle of the film?). Lee argues rousingly and convincingly, in footage captured on C-Span, that the NEA is funded precisely to allow the voices of all Americans, in our definitive diversity, to enter history, what I consider again here. Her words won that day.

(9.) Candace Moore, in her chapter “Producing Black Lesbian Media” in Welbon and Juhasz, *Sisters in the Life*, unearths this story of our bargain and then writes further about the role of producers in lesbian cinema. I traded producing the film—that is, trying

to get it made after Cheryl could find no one else to do so—in exchange for her agreeing to move with me to Los Angeles, where I had just secured a new tenure track job.

(10.) See especially Judith Mayne, *Directed by Dorothy Arzner* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994); and Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight, eds., *Doing Women’s Film History, Reframing Cinemas Past and Future* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

(11.) These many staged scenarios depicting interracial romance, closeted lesbian life, Black women’s roles in race films and early Hollywood, and the life of a White female film director in early cinema were based on careful research into the lives and loves of real women, undertaken by Cheryl and her collaborator on the photos, Zoe Leonard. Although faked for the film, they represent many past truths, inaccessible to our vision today because they had gone largely unrecorded by cameras or archived by institutions.

(12.) In spring 2018, Zoe Leonard’s Fae Richards Archive was installed at both the Whitney Museum (as part of her gorgeous and impressive mid-career retrospective) and at the National Gallery in Washington, DC, as part of a show called *Outlier Art*. I visited both exhibitions. No matter how long I stood by the vitrines holding pictures of me and my friends that were taken twenty or so years ago—today, mugging, posing, waiting to be seen In Real Life—not one passerby or art enthusiast recognized me. I puzzle: is this a matter of my now gray hair and middle-aged face? Or that I don’t, and never did, comport or dress as “butch” in real life? Returns that are not to be allowed by aging are key here, as are my ongoing recognition difficulties, as a “real lesbian,” within and outside the “community.”

(13.) So much queer cinema is made with the loving and/or committed support of the “community,” itself a complex and changing amalgam of people, art, politics, sex, desire, thinking, and power. I try to explain (and theorize from) this aspect of queer media praxis in my piece about the second self-reflexive feature, *The Owls* (2010), which I also produced for Cheryl, even though we had long been broken up and I was no longer a “lesbian.” I was still and will always be one of the “lesbian moms” of our two kids. Alexandra Juhasz, “A Lesbian Collective Aesthetic: Making and Teaching The OWLS,” *Films for the Feminist Classroom 2*, no. 1 (Spring 2010). Many of the authors in *Sisters in Cinema* reflect on how the support of the Black lesbian community explains the disproportionate success of African American lesbians within American film history: a known, active, politicized community of care that activates because no one else is going to do this for us.

(14.) See the extensive cast and crew list, as well as the beautiful, fabricated photo captions created on a faked sticky typewriter. It’s a who’s who of our New York and Philly queer communities of artists, friends, students, lovers, and ex-lovers, quite a few of whom have gone on to contribute substantially to queer photo and film culture themselves. Zoe Leonard and Cheryl Dunye, *The Fae Richards Archive* (San Francisco: Artpace Books, 1996).

(15.) Discussing lessons learned in 2016–2017 from the twentieth-anniversary remaster and rerelease of *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl and I look at the film’s focus on interracial experience, something from which people continue to politely or politically turn away:

Cheryl: People have been intrigued by what I was looking at in narrative and in the deeper thematics of history and representation, but I guess the race part, and particularly the inter-race part, didn’t really matter.

Alex: And we’re here to address how it does really matter. You were brave enough to hunker down in that very territory to dissect how and why and when Black and white people interact in America. Sometimes that relationship is motivated by desire. In the movie there are Black people desiring white people and white people desiring Black people. Sometimes it’s power. In the movie there are white people who have power over Black people, and Black people who have power over white people and it’s even more complicated when sometimes that power is written into the desire. There’s anger, sometimes it’s disdain, sometimes humiliation. All of those, and probably more, made apparent by visualizing and dissecting Black-white interactions across a variety of interactions led by either Cheryl or Fae Richards. (“Inter-racial Conversation,” *Sinister Wisdom 107: Black Lesbians—We Are the Revolution!* [Winter 2018]: 134).

(16.) Fake lesbians have played a significant role in my personal, professional, artistic, activist, and theoretical work. At the time we were making *The Watermelon Woman*, I lost my plum academic position (to a dear friend and colleague; no worries, we managed this fine at the time and I went on to more hospitable climes at Pitzer College and now CUNY, where my media production and even activism isn’t perceived as a hobby, nuisance, or even liability to my job as a “scholar” but actually as core to my value for students and even the institution. At my first job, my committed media praxis was a significant liability.) At this time and at that institution, making media and teaching media production were not understood as part of proper academic film studies or teaching. Then, there was the matter of my uncertain status as “lesbian.” This was during academia’s early foray into queer studies and its related hiring practices. I had only recently begun having sex with a woman, and so wasn’t out about this activity or my “identity.” During hiring for their first queer film studies job, my status as “lesbian” was challenged by the esteemed visiting distinguished lesbian scholar of queer studies who had been invited to lead efforts at the college, including hiring and its associated validations. Her reading of me—one made against many femmes or feminists in our “community”—and then how this was read by cautious straights in the workplace, did help me to win a useful under the table payout. However, her play on authenticity and inclusion would also go on to define much of my personal hesitation about my place in “Queer Film” and queer film studies.

(17.) Contemporary audiences are quick to report how timely *The Watermelon Woman* seems. How *ahead* of its time it is! This is a fertile place for queer (archival media) thinking. For I know it was entirely *of* its time. What does this temporal displacement and con-

fusion mean about our sense of the present and needs for the past? It doesn't seem so dissimilar to the continuing nostalgia for ACT UP from queer (AIDS) activists: a deep and formative misperception about the richness of the past that fuels honest and active returns. It is also a condescending form of authorization of the present by imagining a less-woke past.

(18.) The lovely show at the National Gallery where the photos and film played is called *Outlier Art*. When we made them, I had a PhD, and Cheryl an MFA. Both Cheryl and Zoe had already been in a Whitney Biennial. Many of our cast and crew were also establishing themselves in careers in the arts and academia. Sure, we were “outliers,” as lesbians, I guess. To see the small but steady and still-gaining role *Watermelon Woman* has played in histories of New Queer Cinema, see, for example, Rich, *Chick Flicks*; and Michele Aaron, ed., *Flicks and New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

(19.) This scene is reacted to with particular alacrity and attention by today's audiences, who feel it is particularly “timely” or prescient, as if the consideration of anti-Black, homo- and even transphobic police violence (“Where'd you get that camera, boy?” “I'm not a boy, and it's mine”) is something newly and specially of this time. When discussed in current Q & As, as it always is, we make sure to inform audiences about what would have been the next scene, ultimately left out of the picture. In this scene, Diana bails Cheryl out of jail. It was cut for several reasons. We thought this depiction of the couple's financial relationship was perhaps too heavy-handed. And Cheryl wanted the power imbalances and other dynamics leading to the demise of this relationship, mentioned at film's end, to remain more open to interpretation. Also, the coverage of this scene was weak. It was shot at the end of an already too-long day of what was, I think, a seventeen-day shoot.

(20.) Cheryl has come a long way since this 2010 microfeature. Her newfound (and long in coming) mainstream success is based on the stunning foot up she was provided by Ava DuVernay, whose understanding that only women (of color) are going to create opportunities in Hollywood for other women (of color) has been put into action—by her! The function of the producer, and other kinds of “support” roles, is discussed by Candace Moore in her contribution to *Sisters in the Life*.

(21.) In the credits for *The Owls*—where we put most of the documentary footage we had shot alongside the narrative of this film, documentary footage being one of the three parts of what Cheryl calls the “Dunyementary,” that is, the actual actors talking about themselves, and the actors in character talking about themselves, and then also acting—several of the lesbian and queer cinema icons who volunteered to collaborate on the film (Guinevere Turner, Campbell X, Lisa Gornick) talk with me and the documentary team (Rhys Ernst, Mariah Garnett, and, sometimes, Cheryl) about their thoughts about motherhood, community, aging, and the changing shape of lesbian and queer community, particularly in relation to what was then a burgeoning trans identity and politics. The cast and crew's comments are political, while also being quite personal, given the real state of

Cheryl’s (and my) life: our two very real kids and broken marriage, our current marital configurations and Cheryl’s steady movement toward a more masculine-identified femininity. See Anna Margaret Abuelo’s companion film, *Hooters* (2010), to learn and see more of the behind-the-scenes personal and political mayhem of the collaborative film shoot of *The Owls*, or my own collective look at (that) lesbian film, “A Lesbian Collective Aesthetic: Making and Teaching *The Owls*,” *Signs* 2, no. 1 (2010).

(22.) As is true for *The Watermelon Woman*, the cast and crew of this film, who again all but volunteered to work on it, but who are now all qualified film professionals in our own right (this professionalism built from now twenty years of concerted and successful queer/lesbian activism in the cinema) is a veritable who’s who of Queer Cinema.

(23.) A good deal of my current AIDS writing challenges why AIDS art is primarily considered “queer,” or has been stewarded by the queer community (or perhaps the gay male community, to be precise), given that AIDS has been disproportionately suffered by women, people of color, people from the Global South, and trans women. See “DiAna’s Hair Ego Remix” (2017) or Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani, eds., *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

(24.) Cheryl Dunye, “Alternate Endings, Radical Beginnings Video and Artist Statement: Cheryl Dunye and Ellen Spiro,” *The Visual AIDS Blog*, January 17, 2018, <http://visualaids.org/blog/detail/artist-statement-cheryl-dunye-ellen-spiro>.

(25.) The matter of risk (for queers and others) seems relevant here. Making media, writing creatively, working collectively within cinema and media and/or queer studies is hard-ly risky for me now, as a Distinguished Professor of Film with nothing much to lose or gain. This pales against the real risks of HIV, anti-queer and -trans violence, and structural lack of access to services and care because of systemic sexism, racism, and homo- and transphobia and stigma. But threats within academia are also quite real in the neoliberal academy. Do I advise my queer mentees in SCMS’s Alex Doty Mentorship Program to take such risks, and is that even really possible now that queer studies (and perhaps even AIDS studies) are rather solidly institutionalized? See Matt Brim, *Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). A different but related class that I taught at the Claremont Graduate University, Visual Research Methods, coaxes hesitant grad students in the Humanities to try to write “digitally” and “creatively” as useful methods to think newly, reach new audiences, and better engage digital or visual texts. Given that many of these methods are now the mandates of Digital Humanities (DH)—one of the only places, currently, where there are money and jobs in the Humanities—perhaps some of the risks of (queer) media praxis are modified or mollified.

(26.) This particular facet of my “queer” project—to challenge, bend, or refine the textual/writing norms of the discipline(s) to better suit my changing projects and goals—has been fundamental to my scholarly life and practice. In the late 1980s, I morphed an AIDS activist video project, *We Are: A Video for Careproviders of People Affected by AIDS* (Women’s AIDS Video Enterprise, 1990) into my doctoral research with the permission of

my dissertation committee. I also broke and refigured paper-based writing to better understand YouTube in my born digital, only online, “video-book” (*Learning from YouTube*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). And recently, I have found that really weird writing is the only way to make sense of holding, sharing, and moving affect in queer feminist media networks.

(27.) I’ve been building (queer) collaborative websites for years with others. See www.Femtechnet.org, www.onlinefeministspaces.org, www.mediapraxis.org, and www.fakenews-poetry.org.

(28.) See “Flaherty’s Midwives,” by Patricia Zimmerman, who details how the organizing and support work behind the Flaherty Film Seminar, itself a preeminent supporter of experimental filmmakers when no one else would do so, has always been done almost exclusively by women, in Waldman and Walker, eds., *Feminism and Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

(29.) See Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017): “I decided then: theoretical work that is in touch with a world is the kind of theoretical work I wanted to do” (10).

(30.) Welbon has expanded her massive Sisters in Cinema project to include a brick-and-mortar Media Arts Center in Chicago. It also includes books, interviews, websites, and videos collected and produced “as a resource for and about African American women media makers. Our mission is to entertain, educate, develop and celebrate.” See <http://sistersincinema.com>.

(31.) Yvonne Welbon, “Immersion in Legacy: Coming Home to Ourselves and One Another,” “Moving Image Review,” eds. Alexandra Juhasz and Ming-Yuen Ma, special issue, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 17, no. 4 (2011): 619–620.

(32.) Alexandra Juhasz and Ming-Yuen Ma, “Lesbian Archives,” *GLQ* 17, no. 4 (2011): 619. Perhaps it goes without saying, at this point, that the work of editing collections and others’ words is itself a necessary practice to support queer and/or lesbian archiving, organizing, collectivizing, and community and queer committed media practice.

(33.) Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

(34.) In this sense, I understand VHS Archives as “proper DH”: working within the digital so that tools, platforms, and methods alter and enhance inherited ways of thinking, writing, teaching, researching, publishing, and interacting because of the digital’s affordances.

(35.) Chris Castiglia and Chris Reed, *If Memory Serves Us: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Promise of the Queer Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 210.

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

(36.) Richard Rinehart and Jon Ippolito, *Re-collection: Art, New Media and Social Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 8.

(37.) Lisa Macklin, “Is VHS an Obsolete Format under Section 108?,” August 29, 2016, <http://intheopen.net/2016/08/is-vhs-an-obsolete-format-under-section-108>. See also “Video at Risk: Strategies for Preserving Commercial Video Collections in Libraries,” <http://www.nyu.edu/tisch/preservation/research/videorisk/> VideoAtRisk_SECTION108_Guidelines_2013.pdf; and Mike Casey, “Why Media Preservation Can’t Wait,” *IASA Journal* 44 (2015), http://www.avpreserve.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/casey_iasa_journal_44_part3.pdf.

(38.) From “tenderness in the face of the magnetic media crisis ... & other archival dilemmas,” Rachel Matson, PowerPoint presented to VHS Archives working group. Indiana University Media Preservation Task Force, “Meeting the Challenge of Media Preservation” (2011).

(39.) See Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

(40.) Kristin (KP) Pepe, “Outside of the Hollywood Canon: Preserving Lesbian Moving Images,” in “Lesbian Archives,” p. 633.

(41.) The twentieth remaster and rerelease of *The Watermelon Woman* came about when Cheryl and I understood that no one was going to do this work but us—working with our community—just as had been true for the making of the original film.

(42.) Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), 13.

(43.) Catherine Lord, “Medium: Ink on Paper,” in “Lesbian Archives,” 639.

(44.) Juan Fernández, Nostalgia and “Intellectual Feelings,” May 2, 2018, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/blog/queer-histories-videotape-and-the-ethics-of-reuse>.

(45.) De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives*, 18.

(46.) Although still a work in process, what is now called the “Alexandra Juhasz VHS Collection” can be found online, thanks to the research and archival help of Emily Fairey, a media technologist and librarian at Brooklyn College and Brianna Jones, who worked on this project as part of her Master’s thesis for NYU’s Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program, <https://www.njvid.net/showcollection.php?pid=njcore:105163>.

(47.) The VHS Archives Working group’s emphasis and activities changed over its tenure. Several participants went on to build their own small collections of video through a lightweight archiving tool, Analog Archive, that we developed with the designers Partner and Partners. It allows users to tenderly activate small holdings of analogue materials. See Analog Archives, <https://www.figma.com/proto/n9ekMJ6APEgIe6yA3gA17o/Analog-Archive-10-2-19-Copy?node->

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

id=2%3A3&viewport=504%2C437%2C0.6023789048194885&scaling=scale-down-width. Helena Shaskevich built “Digital Archive of the New York Women’s Video Festivals” as part of her doctoral research in Art History, <https://newmedialab.cuny.edu/project/digital-archive-of-the-new-york-womens-video-festivals/>. Jenna Freeman digitized a single zine, *Sillywish #5*, by Ocean Capewell, with her consent and participation, allowing for a page by page close reading of this text, written by the then 14-year-old queer Long Islander, <https://barnard.padlet.org/jennafreedman/sillywish5>. I, too, worked with the tool, carefully re-visiting the 4+ hour VHS recording of a research meeting I held and taped in NY in 1994, with over 25 media feminists, “Womxn of Vision,” <https://womxn-of-vision.netlify.app>.

(48.) See The VHS Archives Working Group, The Center for the Humanities, The Graduate Center, CUNY, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/public-engagement/working-groups/vhs-archives>.

(49.) Rachel Mattson, “Queer Histories, Videotape, and the Ethics of Reuse,” December 18, 2017, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/blog/queer-histories-videotape-and-the-ethics-of-reuse>.

(50.) VHS Archives class site, Spring 2017, <https://activismvhs.omeka.net>.

(51.) VHS Archives class site, Spring 2020, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film7032/index>.

(52.) The class syllabi, assignments, and activities from 2017 and 2020 can be found on the 2020 class website, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film7032/index>.

(53.) As is true of so many digital (queer) efforts, the Spring 2017 site crashed and much of the student work was lost. Jenn McCoy and Emily Fairey worked selflessly to salvage some but not all of it. See Documentation of Group Work, “Hot to Trot: Sex, Activism, Performance” for some of the statements, fliers, and photos of this live event, <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/film7032/student-projects-2018?path=student-projects>.

(54.) See remaining documentation of “Dear J.” on the Spring 2017 class website, <https://activismvhs.omeka.net/exhibits>. See Project Description in note 5.

(55.) See remaining documentation of “Release the Report” on the Spring 2017 class website, <https://activismvhs.omeka.net/exhibits/show/release-the-report--a-collabor>.

(56.) See Sarah Schulman, *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York, 1987-1993* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021) and The ACT UP Oral History Project website from which much of this stately and comprehensive written history of ACT UP was generated, www.actuporalhistory.org.

(57.) Sarah Schulman, “An Archive of Intimacies,” in “Lesbian Archives.” 630.

Alexandra Juhasz

VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and “Queer Cinema”

Alexandra Juhasz, Distinguished Professor of Film, Brooklyn College, City University of New York