Social Media at the Margins: Crafting Community Media Before the Web

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Carol DeLeon and Richard DeLeon.

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Abstract

"Social Media at the Margins: Crafting Community Media Before the Web" traces the emergence of four community media projects that provide a history of social media before social media. Queer and subcultural communities at the margins embraced new mediated means of being social in the shadows of the privatizing sphere of domestic technological, social, and aesthetic norms in the latter half of the twentieth century. This dissertation maintains that understanding the prehistory of the "social" of contemporary "social media" demands an attention to the marginalized archives of subcultural and queer media production from the period before the launch of the World Wide Web. I excavate this multi-sited history through methods of cultural history including original archival analysis and oral history interviews with subcultural media producers. I argue that "community information formats" are an important precursor to modes of sociality that later flourished online on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook. A community information format refers to the development of social and technical standards for building community and for fostering access to community media production during the period right before the World Wide Web. This analysis of community information formats captures the segmentation of subcultures that was occurring just as the cultural influences guiding the principles of openness and accessibility of the Web were being developed. The concept of the community information format demonstrates how media technologies were made public and contributed to emergent ideas of a media commons despite privatizing forces in media production from the 1970s to the 1990s.

My case studies center marginalized social actors whose work anticipated and informed practices now associated with the rise of a social internet and social media platforms. The second chapter analyzes the infrastructural discourse behind the Community Memory public computing terminal system of Berkeley, California, an overlooked attempt to make computing as public and banal as a payphone. The third chapter contends with the queer temporalities of the home video archive of Nelson Sullivan, whose videos captured the 1980s-nightlife scene of New York City and now live on within YouTube's streaming economy. The fourth chapter explores how the Atlanta public access television program *The American Music Show* built a participatory space of community media production through a satirical orientation to televisual conventions. The fifth chapter reveals how queer punk zine producers and readers constructed a network imaginary through zine distribution across North America. This dissertation draws from a wide range of archival research performed at institutions across North America: the GLBT Historical Society's Dr. John P. De Cecco Archives and Special Collections in San Francisco, California; the Computer History Museum's Shustek Research Archive in Fremont, California; Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library in Atlanta, Georgia; Michigan State University's Special Collections Library; University of Michigan's Special Collections Library; and New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections. This dissertation investigates community information formats such as self-printed zines, videotapes of public access television programs, and ephemera from queer media conventions to perform a cultural history of social media that surfaces understudied voices, lives, and media technological visions.

Chapter 1 Introduction: Community Information Formats Before the Web

Before the World Wide Web made the internet feel like a space of infinite potential to find community, other platforms for community media existed. Media producers who existed on the margins of dominant institutions and embodying diverse identity positions made community the goal of their media projects from the 1970s to the 1990s. Across media technologies and formats such as the public computer, the publicly circulated home video, the public access television program, and the publicly traded and distributed zine, communities were forged through media before the Web reworked the goals and horizon of what community could mean. This dissertation analyzes four case studies of media producers who placed community before commerce in their subcultural media projects.

In the following analysis, I define and explore the "community information format" to situate the encoding of technical and social standards for building community right before the World Wide Web became the norm of networked interconnection. The Web as a space of barrier-free communication that could govern itself was articulated alongside an aversion to corporeality. In a manifesto defending the exchange of information in cyberspace, the open space of communication that the Web promised, John Perry Barlow wrote in 1996: "Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live."[1] Barlow's libertarian fever-dream overlooked the embodied identities that struggled—then as now—to situate themselves within a Web culture believed to be egalitarian but, in reality, was riven with the

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[1] John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," February 9, 1996. Accessed February 17, 2021. http://wac.colostate.edu/rhetnet/barlow/barlow_declaration.html.

hierarchies, the prejudices, and the privilege that structure our waking, meat-space world. The Web and its discursive promise was preceded by the community information formats of marginalized individuals in society who crafted their own pockets of affinity, solidarity, and support in an otherwise inhospitable society. The importance of analyzing community information formats today is to recognize subcultural and queer media producers as contributing to what emergent definitions of sociality meant through media before the Web and "social media" became our norm. The concept of the community information format demonstrates how queer and subcultural media producers marshalled media technologies to imperatives of publicness in use and access alongside emergent ideas of a media commons. That the publicness of a media commons found a separate articulation in the Web does not mean that the prior visions are a fated or failed attempt to articulate community. Rather, the community information formats of this dissertation are precisely what we must reckon with in order to envision alternatives to our staid, corporate social media culture of today. This dissertation analyzes four distinct visions of media built through a commitment to publicness, of exhibiting marginalized voices, visions, and values through the emergent technologies of public computers, home videos, public access television, and zines. I ask across these case studies: How were queer and subcultural media projects allied to a vision of community media? How did people build modes of sociality through community media before the social media platforms that have come to define and to saturate our present cultural moment? In other words, this dissertation asks these questions by condensing them into a more expansive one: what was social media before "social media"? The original archival research, interviews with subcultural and queer media producers, and collection of ephemera analyzed in this dissertation provides a timely and in-depth reckoning with projects that can inform a more just present.

This dissertation examines media projects and platforms that offered a community space for subcultural and queer media producers before the World Wide Web. Scholars in many fields have addressed the important questions of how our social media landscape took shape. Scholars of digital media in a critical humanities tradition have answered research questions including how past countercultural communities of technological tinkering have influenced the rise of libertarian corporate digital practices,[2] how digitization as a sociocultural phenomenon has enacted new structures of feeling and new power relations,[3] and how digital networks and cultures of innovation have transformed and deepened past inequalities.[4] Scholars of digital media in a social sciences tradition have addressed how business models, design practices, and governance strategies have created specific media ecologies on social media platforms,[5] how platforms as dual material and rhetorical entities encourage social participation and act as a marketing strategy for the commodification of community,[6] and how countercultural communities have reconfigured social platforms to meet their own needs.[7] However, scholars across these fields have not adequately addressed a longer timeline to the rise of social practices within subcultural and queer media that stretches back before the rise of the World Wide Web around 1993. By accepting the familiar, successful, and culturally dominant stories that have built our socially connected present, we miss the media producers on the margins who dreamt and built alternative ways of being together through community media projects.

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[2] Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
[3] Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).
[4] danah boyd, "White Flight in Networked Publics?," in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (London: Routledge, 2012); Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).
[5] José Van Dijck, *Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
[6] Tarleton Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms'," *New Media & Society* 12, no. 3 (2010).
[7] Jessa Lingel, *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

This dissertation analyzes four case studies stretching from the 1970s to the 1990s to correct this myopia in film and media studies, ranging from the building of public computing infrastructure in the Bay Area, the transformation of domestic home videos into queer public artifacts in New York City, the satirization of televisual conventions in a queer public access television program in Atlanta, and the establishment of a network imaginary in queer zine distribution from Toronto to San Francisco and across numerous cities in between. This dissertation analyzes what I call "community information formats." A community information format is a context-bound use of a media object, technology, or text to adhere people who share marginalized identity categories into a community. Although each chapter focuses closely on the emergence of specific uses of media technological objects in bounded localities, a focus on the building of community across time and space is a thread that binds together this dissertation. From the public computing terminals of Berkeley, California, in the second chapter, to the network imaginaries built by zines across North America in the fifth chapter, this dissertation encompasses how people imagined and built uses of media as alternatives to mainstream developments in computing culture and privatized media production and consumption. Across these chapters, and woven across my analysis of archival artifacts, media objects, and ephemera of media history, I demonstrate how people built community information formats that *curated* information of value to their identities and communities and that *situated* their position against a mainstream of media culture.

My four case studies provide an extended analysis of social media before the corporatized "social media" behemoths that define our current networked experience, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. I mobilize methods in cultural history including original archival analysis alongside oral history interviews of queer media producers to uncover stories

less commonly told in discussions of digital publics, analyzing along the way how queer and subcultural modes of technological adaptation, tinkering, and use were political goals of crafting social media at the margins. My intervention argues that film and media scholars must reach back to the community media projects of the turbulent and productive years before the World Wide Web when subcultural activism proliferated across a variety of media formats. Analyzing social media before the rise of the Web is instructive for thinking through the levels of economic and cultural investment in social media platforms today. My research agenda answers the following questions regarding a history of social media and networked connectivity: What is the overlooked role of queer and subcultural media production in challenging emergent norms regarding media technological use? How can past social media projects like public computing, home video distribution, public access television, and zine networks help us understand the history behind the experience of sociality on social media today? What does this history tell scholars about the relationship between social media and social justice?

Community Information Formats: Community Media in Formation

In this project, community is a collection of people united by shared identity categories or geographical proximity who produce, curate, and consume media in common. The community information formats discussed in this dissertation offer case studies of community connection through media, and they also signal the many ways subcultural and queer media producers enacted complex challenges to privatizing forces before the Web. Community information formats are about the value that individuals gain from sharing media in common. A community information format refers to the process of emergence of uses of new media technologies for building community and for fostering access to community media production. A community information format is by necessity closely related to processes of media emergence, when

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meanings are in flux and possibility for new practices is resurgent. The cultural idiom of the "format" refers to a process of standard-setting during the emergence of a new medium. I follow the notion of emergence within media historical approaches attentive to variation, difference, and discord in the historical record. Emergence refers to moments in the development of technologies and technological practices when meanings are contested and not yet pinned down: "There is a moment, before the material means and the conceptual modes of new media have become fixed, when such media are not yet accepted as natural, when their own meanings are in flux."[8] Community information formats offer a way to analyze this indeterminacy before the Web, when subcultural media projects in the service of community proliferated across media forms not always connected to computer networking systems.

The community information format opens a perspective on how the emergence of a medium or media technological practice often occurs not in isolation, but in dialogue with pre-existing media. The community information format allows analysis of a mesh of subcultural media production, with "mesh" referring here to the web of cultural influences that determine the course of a media technology's impact on society. My approach of historical analysis of social media before social media offers a way for film and media studies scholars to talk about a mode of cultural production that operates outside of a neat confine of a production studio, corporate structures, or other ready definitional frameworks determined in advance by business imperatives and not community ideals. The connections to any one mode of media production in these chapters are never as tidy as focalizing one mode of production in the viewfinder. Rather, in the fourth chapter, Atlanta drag queens made zines, paraded through public access television programs, and performed in clubs while being recorded on home videos by home videographers

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[8] Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman, "Introduction: What's New About New Media?" in *New Media 1740-1915*, eds. Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), xii.

from New York City. Similarly, in the second chapter, staff members and volunteers working for the Community Memory public computing project were involved in a variety of different computer engineering projects at the same time, a Bay Area dynamic of short-term contract work and "network patterns of organization" that influenced technological ideals of networking disparate groups of people through technology.[9] I excavate the web of media production across queer and subcultural milieus as a type of social media before the Web. By analyzing the media projects of communities located on the margins before the Web, this dissertation will add to our understanding of the history of sociality before social media platforms. Seeing our social media environment as offering a particular type of community information format, though one warped into a corporate and profit-seeking endeavor, demonstrates how other community information formats are possible. In defining the community information format, I signal that platforms are not the only way to understand what "social media" has meant or can mean.

My framework disrupts a present-oriented understanding of platforms to question an inherent and implicit periodization that names contemporary media projects as "social media" while leaving historical precursors to languish as ineffectual attempts at designing sociality through media technologies. In defining the community information format, I follow digital media scholar Tarleton Gillespie's definition of platforms as technologies that afford certain practices and behaviors while also constraining and limiting expression.[10] The concept of a "platform" has changed over time to have both egalitarian and corporate connotations. "Platform" today evokes how social media sites pursue economic end-goals with user information. Through my approach toward the "community information format," I apply

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[9] Turner, *From Counterculture*, 149.
[10] Gillespie, "The Politics of 'Platforms,'" 349-352.

Gillespie's assertion that platforms today "shape the social dynamics that depend on them."[11] Community information formats attempted to craft a social experience of community before the corporatization of the social on social media like Facebook and Instagram. By thinking across time of how media technological objects like public computing, home videos, public access television, and zines were marshalled for the experience of community, I signal how a platform can be extended to media formats that enabled modes of participation in media production and consumption in communities before the Web.

Popular discourse on contemporary "social media" has often encouraged an ahistoricism regarding sociality, community, and media. In a popular and pervasive discourse invented by tech evangelist Tim O'Reilly, a new social experience of the Web emerged with "Web 2.0," an experience of sociality and participation where users could contribute information and act as curators of networks. The concept "Web 2.0" fostered a teleological belief that there was an epochal shift from earlier media forms to a more participatory, user-generated media landscape. "Web 2.0" discourse crystallized an understanding of prior modes of sociality as inferior to the experience of connectivity then in ascendance by the early-2000s. In naming Web 2.0, O'Reilly created a retrograde precursor, Web 1.0, which was retroactively painted as a read-only and hardly participatory experience of the internet. Within O'Reilly's periodization, Web 2.0 offered more participatory avenues to create user-generated content such as blogs, podcasts, and other self-produced media.[12] However, this discourse designated the arrival of "social media" by simultaneously suppressing themes of historical emergence, change, and complex processes of media use by marginalized historical actors. In addition to a rampant ahistoricism to the Web

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[11] Tarleton Gillespie, "Platforms Intervene," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 1 (2015): 2.
[12] Tim O'Reilly, "What Is Web 2.0?: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

1.0/Web 2.0 distinction, we also lose something by attributing the name of "social media" solely to 2000s-era companies and platforms. We lose a vision of how community media projects were "social media" before Facebook was "social media," how a variety of historical factors has created our contingent present experience of online sociality. In this dissertation, I follow digital media studies scholar Megan Sapnar Ankerson's assertion that a discourse of versioning embedded in the presumed upgrade from the so-called Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 transition does not capture the realities of historical change and processes of media emergence: "By demarcating these periods in ways that presume two distinct and internally consistent logics, we lose sight of how the past is also characterized by complex overlaps, inconsistencies, and constant reconfigurations."[13] I contribute to such scholarly work that challenges discourses that presume "social media" is a tidy, inherent product of the ingenuity of contemporary platforms and the world they have inaugurated in the 2000s. I claim throughout this project that new histories of sociality can inform our present to challenge the predominance of profit-oriented constructions of community on social media platforms today.

The periodization I track in this dissertation refers to the pre-Web moment as occurring roughly around 1993. Media studies scholar Thomas Streeter refers to this moment as the start of a marked shift in how networked computers were imagined and experienced, "when the contemporary use of *internet* emerged explosively into broad usage, and 'the Internet' went from being *an* internetwork to *the* network of networks."[14] With the launch of the hugely popular early Web browser Mosaic in 1993 and with CERN offering the World Wide Web on a royalty-free basis in April of 1993, a few years after Tim Berners-Lee invented the browser-based Web idea

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[13] Megan Sapnar Ankerson, "Social Media and the 'Read-Only' Web: Reconfiguring Social Logics and Historical Boundaries," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015).

[14] Thomas Streeter, "Internet," in *Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Science and Culture*, ed. Benjamin Peters (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 187.

while working at CERN, 1993 certainly was an important year for defining the protocols of the Web. The pivotal year of 1993 marks not a definite starting point, but it signals a threshold moment beyond which the Web became an experience that began to enter everyday use. My orientation to networks is about the way cultural influences were being processed in subcultural realms before the World Wide Web and the changed experience of networked connectivity that arose after 1993. This dissertation argues that analysis of community information formats offers one way to see and to understand social media before social media.

I offer the term "community information format" to provide a history that sits within established media histories but that challenges the taken-for-granted sheen of these histories, furthering the project of formats that media theorist and sound studies scholar Jonathan Sterne began. A community information format refers to a set of beliefs about technologies in the service of community that are *in formation* socially and technically. A format arises through a messy process of which we—as consumers and users—only see the result. Sterne defines a format as the result of a standard-setting process that affects how a medium can be experienced: "*Format* denotes a whole range of decisions that affect the look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium. It also names a set of rules according to which a technology can operate."[15] Sterne provides examples of how a single media technology—a record player—can accommodate a variety of media formats such as vinyl records made to play back at 33, 45 or 78, revolutions per minute. In this respect, formats designate how a given medium will play back audio content "stored" in the etched grooves of a vinyl record's wax surface. At the same time, the theory of formats also demonstrates that media operate due to social factors, making a format a dual technical and social artifact. As Sterne explains, formats are codified "sometimes through policy,

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[15] Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 7.

sometimes through the technology's construction, and sometimes through sedimented habit."[16] The case studies of this dissertation document how habits and behaviors regarding emergent technology were challenged and contested before they became sedimented over time. I open up moments in a history of social media to show how community information formats embedded public, community-oriented ideals on the cusp of the Web. Each chapter presents a vision of media technologies that offered a community experience rather than a privatized one, offering thus a format of community information as opposed to a format of privatized media use and consumption. This dissertation thinks critically about formats designed to support the community curation of information across media and seeks to disrupt commonsense understandings of when media became "social" by returning to the heady moments of a pre-Web sensibility.

Method

This dissertation analyzes the cultural imaginaries of social media among four sites and groups of community media production from the 1970s to the 1990s. Analyzing the people who produced distinct "community information formats" of public computing in the second chapter, of the queer home video in the third chapter, of public access television in the fourth chapter, and of queer zine networks in the fifth chapter, this dissertation is itself a careful curation of media objects. The history in this dissertation is thus by its nature partial, imbued with an openness to supplement other established histories, and resonates with a potentiality to enact new horizons of our own sociality built through media. Each chapter grounds a "community information format" in a context, place, and through a media technology. This approach seeks to surface the feeling of sociality forged through the community information format of each chapter.

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[16] Ibid., 8.

Sociality is the theme to which I frequently return in this dissertation, and as such this project is situated alongside media historical discourses that excavate forgotten media. The intellectual orientation of media archaeology has influenced my approach to a history of sociality across four distinct projects and moments. The focus of media archaeology encompasses: "the materialist and archaeological turns which privilege non-progressive history, analysis of failed and dead media, and strong attention to technological materiality and medium specificity (rather than a representational or screen-based focus)."[17] Media archaeology as a set of methods orients itself to building narratives of media history to demonstrate that orientations to technology and discourses of innovation recur over time. The new wears the clothes of the old, media archaeology tells us, through cultural desires expressed within recurring tropes, called "topoi," the plural form of "topos." Erkki Huhtamo, an early proponent of the method, defines this recurrence as the shaping of what media objects can mean: "Functioning as shells or vessels derived from the memory banks of tradition, topoi mold the meaning(s) of cultural objects."[18] However, it is one thing to recognize that cultural narratives embed recurring stories or "topoi," and it is another thing entirely to show what may lurk beneath the dominance of recurring cultural narratives of emergent media. Recurring tropes are themselves products of history. Their dominance need not go unchallenged. The type of media history within media archaeology can obscure diversity and difference by the method's insistence on articulating the recurring tropes and models of media emergence. If media archaeology is "a critical practice that excavates media-cultural evidence for clues about neglected, misrepresented, and/or suppressed aspects of

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[17] Laine Nooney, "A Pedestal, a Table, a Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History," *Game Studies* 13, no. 2 (2013): para. 3. http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney.

[18] Erkki Huhtamo, "Dismantling the Fairy Engine: Media Archaeology as Topos Study," in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 28.

both media's past(s) and their present and tries to bring these into a conversation with each other," then more work can be done on histories of subcultural and queer media production.[19]

By collecting the understudied, the overlooked, and the marginal in media history under the organizing concept of the community information format, I add to a growing body of work by feminist media scholars that analyze individuals and communities of media production not typically deemed "closest" to a particular media text, technology, or company. Such media histories follow "long-established patterns in the histories of both technology and entertainment, wherein the inventor, the director, or the author is figured as the source of historical truths inherent in the act of creation."[20] These hetero-patriarchal approaches cast other, non-originary modes of innovation onto the margins. In this dissertation, I reveal how queer and subcultural media producers crafted critical self-reflections of their peripheral status in media industries, manifesting a self-aware history "writ not large but in the margins," borrowing media historian Amelie Hastie's turn of phrase.[21] I follow Hastie's deft analysis of the personal media production of women in the early film industry, but transfer her focus on the margins to queer and subcultural media producers with an intent to look at how these people also "appropriate[d] a variety of personal or domestic forms to make their lives public, to reveal their presence in history, and to display their theoretical insights."[22] My project embeds a critique of media archaeology by revealing the productivity of the margins. The recurring "topos" or trope of the margins is the community information format.

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Laine Nooney, "The Uncredited: Work, Women, and the Making of the U.S. Computer Game Industry," *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 1 (2020): 124.

[21] Amelie Hastie, *Cupboards of Curiosity: Women, Recollection, and Film History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 5.

[22] Ibid.

My focus on analyzing the community information format in the margins of media history furthers the corrective gesture scholars have called for regarding media archaeology. Laine Nooney argues that histories of digital practices "must be done with a critical care toward what media archaeology so often ignores: human specificity, the way enactments of power fall upon certain types of bodies more than others."[23] Digital studies and critical race studies scholar Lisa Nakamura has similarly contended with the enactment of technologies by people of color:

> The field of media archaeology would greatly benefit from considerations of race, gender, and the body as part of the study of digital artifacts. It is not possible to attend seriously to the 'hardcore' physicality of machines without attending to the specific conditions of its production, and the bodies that make this technology are part of the production process.[24]

Additionally, while not naming the subfield of media archaeology, historian of computing Mar Hicks also furthers this corrective gesture regarding media histories. Hicks addresses the notion of alternative histories that scholars must learn to read through intersectional lenses that combine gender, class, sexuality, and race. These factors determine horizons of possibility for social actors and "play a formative role in what paths and priorities gain momentum and what kinds of impacts and accomplishments are possible—both in the immediate sense and for decades afterward."[25] Following these currents in historical scholarship, I perform cultural history informed by theories of cultural memory that dwell in ellipses, ephemera, and the stories of those who are often overlooked. This approach can surface a story or "topos" of the "community information format" that may not have been necessarily dominant in recurring over time.

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[23] Nooney, "A Pedestal," para. 6.

[24] Lisa Nakamura, "'I WILL DO EVERYthing That Am Asked': Scambaiting, Digital Show-Space, and the Racial Violence of Social Media," *Journal of Visual Culture* 13, no. 3 (2014): 272.

[25] Mar Hicks, "Introduction: Britain's Computer 'Revolution'," in *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 5.

However, analyzing the "community information format" can certainly deepen our historical

understanding of sociality before the Web.

Cultural Memory

Cultural memory is never unitary. It is rather a patchwork collection of feelings stitched

across the markers of identity that situate and define individuals within communities. I follow

queer media scholar Lucas Hilderbrand's definition of cultural memory as "a kind of affective

history comprising (inter)personal pleasures and experiences that are often mediated," an

experience of history emotionally felt as much as it can be intellectually understood.[26] My

methodological approach to a history of sociality delves into cultural memory as necessarily

reconstructed from ephemera and marginal artifacts of media history made by queer and

subcultural media producers. To perform this research, I undertook extensive archival analysis as

well as oral history interviews to reconstruct an understanding of subcultural and queer media

projects before the Web.[27]

Each chapter documents a media project that politicized a publicness of access to

community media production. A community information format entails the negotiations that

queer and subcultural media producers had to undergo against hegemonic media industries that

favored a capitalist orientation to the privatized use and consumption of media. Even though the

Community Memory project, analyzed in the second chapter, licensed software products that

they built for their own system to sell to others, this funding model could not match the ever-

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[26] Lucas Hilderbrand, "Retroactivism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 306.

[27] This dissertation draws from a wide range of archival research performed at institutions across North America: the GLBT Historical Society's Dr. John P. De Cecco Archives and Special Collections in San Francisco, California; the Computer History Museum's Shustek Research Archive in Fremont, California; Emory University's Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library in Atlanta, Georgia; Michigan State University's Special Collections Library; University of Michigan's Special Collections Library; and New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections.

increasing costs of maintaining a system of public computing terminals. Failing to find the funds

to maintain the project, the Community Memory project sold their system to the City of Berkeley

in 1992, after which the system floundered due to lack of expertise to maintain it in constant

operation. By the Fall of 1989, Atlanta's public access station People TV, discussed in the fourth

chapter, was financially suffering. The channel's former owner and financial supporter was no

long funding the operation of the main production studio for the public access channel, which

was an initial high point of public access in Atlanta as compared with other cities like New York.

In addition, People TV had closed its satellite production offices in four of Atlanta's

neighborhoods to cut costs.[28] Public access television in Atlanta had been stripped for parts, and

The American Music Show had survived only due to its ongoing commitment to independence in

production, which had led them to tape their show in Dick Richards's living room. In the fifth

chapter, the queer punk zine conferences called SPEW assembled filmmakers, zine producers,

and queer performance artists into one weekend of frivolity and collaboration, but ended in 1993

after three annual meetings. While the Community Memory project lasted around twenty years in

various forms, and while *The American Music Show* ran on Atlanta public access television for

about twenty-four years, the overarching theme of the urgency to media production in these case

studies is the fight against a forced obsolescence of their community visions of media production

and consumption. The early years of the 1990s, right before the rise of the Web, is the outer

bound of my dissertation since it instantiated a new mode and cultural norm of being social in a

networked way. The rising predominance of the Web overshadowed the sociality of the

platforms I analyze, and I think of the modes of sociality in this dissertation, the community

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[28] Melissa Turner, "People TV - It's a Public Access Road, but Funding Is Just a Trail," *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, October 1, 1989, R4.

information formats revealed and analyzed in each chapter, as so many alternate paths that are worthy of reconsideration to enliven our social media-saturated present moment.

Literature Review

Community

Community is the central mission and purpose of the media projects I analyze in this project. I understand community as a configuration of people in a locality mediated through a commons. The commons refers to media objects produced, distributed, and consumed in common, as a shared resource. I define locality as the embeddedness of a community in a place. Locality is a contextual status that can be understood through a close mapping of social spheres. Locality provides a feeling of connection for people who share identities in common. Cultural theorist Arjun Appadurai provides a rich definition of locality as not always bound by spatial parameters, but organizing a feeling of togetherness through technology: "I view locality as primarily relational and contextual rather than a scalar or spatial. I see it as a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts."[29] This dissertation analyzes how media produced within a community orientation created new modes of sociality. The lessons learned from each "community information format" within each chapter may vary, but I track across this dissertation how discourses and structures of feeling of community emerged, stabilized, and ultimately became absorbed within other cultural movements.[30]

A community information format encompasses media producers with a range of technical abilities that have contributed to the setting of technical and social standards. In this way,

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[29] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178.
[30] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131-32.

community information formats are not only about the actions and innovations of the technically skilled. Community information formats are about the contributions of amateurs who are often left out of stories of digital media developments. In this dissertation, I analyze the innovations of amateurs within communities in order to understand media production from the ground up. Media scholar Cait McKinney terms the concept "capable amateurism" to be a kind of trust in the building of technological knowledge within marginalized communities. The term signals the inherent level of skill amongst those with limited "hard" technical skills. Capable amateurism underlines and values the labor involved in building counterpublics, such as "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."[31] Casting media producers on the margins as "capable amateurs" reframes an orientation to innovation to show how novel uses of technology can occur beyond the original ideals of an inventor or designer of a media technology. Capable amateurism places the cultural production of subcultural and queer activists and media producers into focus, rescuing their histories from marginalization.

The "margins" of this dissertation's title refers to how difference in media history can be a productive site from which to view the center of media history narratives. Amateurism across the dissertation's sustained analysis of community is mobilized as a marginal identity and as a process of media-making with limited resources, which further signals a queer orientation to the mainstream, a perspective that queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz has termed "a refusal of mastery and an insistence on process and becoming."[32] This dissertation catalogues and analyzes

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[31] Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 30.
[32] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 106.

media producers whose insistence on documenting media from their everyday lives, on adapting technologies for their own ends, and on preserving media of their lives in self-built archives crafted new relationships to technology. Digital media scholar Jessa Lingel has termed a similar terrain of subcultural media production as "communities of alterity," which "develop sociotechnical practices in ways that respond to and reflect their relationships to the mainstream, playing out across many different sociotechnical relationships."[33] My definition of the "community information format" also involves a constantly negotiated relationship to the mainstream. A "community information format" acted as a social and technical standard for the building of community before the Web. I would argue that community information formats are by necessity about the period right before the World Wide Web. Community information formats are about a segmentation of subcultures that was occurring just as the cultural influences guiding the principles of openness and accessibility of the web were being developed. As the discourses of an open and accessible Web took off, the dreams of mediated connectivity of this dissertation's four case studies receded in a complex negotiation over the ease and affordances of networked connection. Recuperating the subcultural and queer visions of those on the margins offers a timely reprieve from our always-on social media environment.

Community information formats offer a way to analyze the multi-sited emergence of modes of sociality alongside approaches to queerness and technology. This mesh of approaches offers a window into how the past ideal visions of media producers can impact our present and future in new ways. Queer orientations toward the digital present a widening of the possibilities for thinking digitality across time. Kara Keeling's "Queer OS" thesis defines queerness as a fount of possibilities for thinking of communities and commons: "*[Q]ueer* offers a way of

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[33] Lingel, *Digital Countercultures*, 124.

making perceptible presently uncommon senses in the interest of producing a/new commons and/or of proliferating the senses of a commons already in the making."[34] Informing Keeling's work is the notion of cultural operating systems in the work of media studies and critical race studies scholar Tara McPherson. McPherson defined the cultural imaginaries and epistemologies of race and technology as "operating systems of a higher order." McPherson relates the UNIX operating system to a "separate but equal" logic pervasive in U.S. race relations in the 1960s. The operating systems of cultural bias and technological innovation intertwine, offering "related and useful lenses into the shifting epistemological registers driving U.S. and global culture in the 1960s and after. Both exist as operating systems of a sort, and we might understand them to be mutually reinforcing."[35] Keeling was motivated from McPherson's approach of intersectional analyses of the digital to, in turn, think of queerness as a disruptive element in academic fields: "Queer OS names a way of thinking and acting with, about, through, among, and at times even in spite of new media technologies and other phenomena of mediation."[36] To chart related, but seemingly disparate fields of cultural production "in spite of new media" has motivated my intellectual orientation in this project. Keeling and McPherson's intersectional approaches blend critical orientations to gender, race, and sexuality with an historical urgency. In their work, the past is rife with lessons for understanding how technology impinges upon the present, pressing its weight upon us through a myriad of legacies. Tracing back the technical and social components of our platform-saturated present moment demands a careful method, and my approach in this dissertation is one attempt to mobilize archival analysis, oral history interviews,

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[34] Kara Keeling, "Queer OS," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 2 (2014): 153. Emphasis in original.
[35] Tara McPherson, "U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century: The Intertwining of Race and UNIX," in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (London: Routledge, 2012), 23.
[36] Keeling, "Queer OS," 154.

and close textual analysis to chart the emergence of media that established "community information formats."

Queerness and Media Technology

As the project proceeds across its four case studies, this dissertation documents an historical orientation to futurity as a queer orientation to technology. My approach allows for the interrogation of origin points and paths left unexplored and the pivoting between the temporal orientations to futurity and obsolescence. The waxing and waning of the projects analyzed in this dissertation provide an orientation to futurity that operates within a queer register. Queer theorists have dwelt in discourses by and about queer subjects to understand how nostalgia is related to hopeful articulations of liberatory futures. Queer theory has informed my approach by showing how the mining of the past through nostalgia is also a productive search for new tools for building community, an attempt to disrupt established rhythms, timelines, and modes of being social. José Esteban Muñoz orients queerness as a horizon of possibility. Always deferred, queerness is thus always in formation. Muñoz understands queerness as situated in the future but conversant with the past: "I think of queerness as a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in the service of a new futurity."[37] Queerness as utopic horizon captures well the spirit of hopeful community built in queer and subcultural media projects as they were being idealized, designed, and piloted.

One way that queerness as an orientation to futurity can be understood in this dissertation is through the anticipation of a future norm and designing the alternative. Engineering the alternative while an emergent norm is not yet fully formed is, I argue, a queer orientation to technology. For example, this occurs in the second chapter. Karen Paulsell, the Community

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[37] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 16.

Memory project's communications director in the mid-1980s, captured the group's goal as the engineering of a new standard for networked interaction amid the commercialization of the personal computer: "We're really trying to develop the alternative model, before the thing that we're the alternative to has become pervasive."[38] This orientation to technology encourages both anticipation and action in the present, which can create solidarities, in José Esteban Muñoz's words, "in the service of a new futurity."[39] Such a task is predictive, and the results of such a future-oriented engineering practice can never be fully ascertained in advance. As queer theorist Sara Ahmed reminds us, queer orientations offer a new refracted view of what is considered normal, offering other potential visions: "Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view."[40] As a design practice, the queer orientation to technology in this dissertation offers new perspectives in characterizing past cultures of innovation.

Space and Scene

I understand space as a concept striated with cultural battles over the control of people and over the everyday experience of culture. Space is never neutral. The embeddedness of cultural dominance in commonsense understandings of space encompasses the messy materiality of the social world as well as cultural imaginaries of race and privilege. As Lynn Spigel explains with reference to spatial projects through media in the mid-century:

> [It] was not just that whites dominated *physical geographies through racist zoning laws, transportation policies, and other practices of segregation, they also dominated the culture's* imaginary geographies of the universe at large. Indeed, in order to maintain and reproduce its power a group must not only occupy physical

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[38] Correspondence from Karen Paulsell to Peter Moulton, November 26, 1985, Box 2, Folder 1, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[39] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 16.
[40] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Other* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 107.

space, but it must also occupy imaginary space (the space of stories, of images, of fantasy.[41]

Space is thus formed through material and imaginary registers as part of the social construction of everyday life. I understand the social construction of space as "spatiality," which means the material and symbolic processes that construct understandings of space and relationships of power. Media studies scholar Fiona Allon similarly defined spatiality as operating in multiple registers at once: "Spatiality is something that is simultaneously symbolic, material, and representational."[42] By developing the concept of the "community information format," this dissertation performs an inquiry into how marginalized media production of subcultural and queer media producers also intervenes into the spatiality of social media.

I understand the spatiality of the "community information format" to occur within a scene of media production. A scene is a subset, a snapshot, of a community. My use of "scene" in this dissertation refers to a configuration within a community that may not be synonymous with the entirety of that community. An attention to identifying scenes as sites of media production gains particular resonance with queer lives, stories, and histories. Queer studies scholar Michael Warner has used the concept of a scene to reference shared emotions in queer circles: "Queer scenes are the true *salons des refusés*, where the most heterogeneous people are brought into great intimacy by their common experience of being despised and rejected in a world of norms they now recognize as false morality."[43] A scene is thus a specific type of counterpublic, an arena where queer and subcultural members of society devise discourses that challenge dominant

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[41] Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Duke University Press, 2001), 145.
[42] Fiona Allon, "An Ontology of Everyday Control: Space, Media Flows, and 'Smart' Living in the Absolute Present," in *MediaSpace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age*, ed. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 257.
[43] Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 35-36.

interpretations of their aspirations and needs.[44] Scenes before the web were still social networks; they connected people across space and time fostered through the community information formats that sustained their creation.

My use of scene leaves open the boundaries around social formations, to attempt to capture modes of common action and solidarity that may not be legible in hegemonic institutions. The "capable amateurs" documented across this dissertation filtered in and out of scenes. A scene in this dissertation refers to how the social actors in my chapters had a fickle sense of fidelity to a single project. In other words, no one discussed in this dissertation only ever participated in just one project: the hosts of public access TV shows in Atlanta join, leave, and then come back in guest spots; the publication of zines often followed no regular calendar of publication and distribution; and the engineers behind Community Memory often worked on many different projects beyond building public computing terminals. In referencing queer punk subcultures, José Esteban Muñoz describes a scene of queer media production and performance as a site rife with possibility: "[The] punk rock commons was grounded not only in a time but also a place, a location that was as turbulent as the historical moment…. In the scene, people encountered one another in ways that felt new and unpredictable. They arrived at venues and stages where they could realize their plurality."[45] I build on this implication of a scene as the site of queer media production forged through a lively experience of social diversity. My use of scene builds as well on what queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich defines as a "public culture," a concept that can keep "as open as possible the definition of what constitutes a public in order to remain alert to forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or

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[44] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67.
[45] José Esteban Muñoz, "'Gimme Gimme This...Gimme Gimme That': Annihilation and Innovation in the Punk Rock Commons," *Social Text*, no. 116 (2013): 97.

identities."[46] I follow Cvetkovich's approach in that my case studies have led me to define the

social structures I find at play as scenes, an alternative community formation that is often

emergent and ephemeral.

Ephemerality

I analyze the traces of four communities of media production that allow access into the

subcultural space of a scene. My focus on scenes captures ephemeral media in the act.

Subcultural and queer culture has long been produced through—and despite—ephemerality.

When dominant cultural modes of representation do not allow for the documentation of

subcultures, individuals on the margins must perform this archiving of their culture themselves.

Knowledge made by and about subcultural and queer individuals occurs in fleeting scenes of

media production. Queer culture often retains a fleeting quality over time, which makes it hard to

see a queer culture out of shifting alliances and ephemeral performances. Queer culture produces

a critical and intimate knowledge out of shared practices borne out of intimacy, self-cultivation,

and insider knowledge in response to ephemerality, as Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant have

argued: "Queer culture has found it necessary to develop this knowledge in mobile sites of drag,

youth culture, music, dance, parades, flaunting, and cruising-sites whose mobility makes them

possible but also renders them hard to recognize as world-making because they are so fragile and

ephemeral."[47] I endeavor to surface the ephemeral traces of past community media production,

much of which was about documenting the ephemeral everydayness to the experience of queer

and subcultural media producers. Influencing my critical orientation to the marginal and

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[46] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.
[47] Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 561.

ephemeral within media history, Ann Cvetkovich, once more, discusses the practice of collecting

ephemera as a restorative gesture against the forgetful march of time:

> Queers have long been collectors because they are not the subject of official histories and thus have to make it themselves by saving materials that might be seen as marginal…. [T]he impulse to collect [objects] or to turn collections into archives is often motivated by a desire to create the alternative histories and genealogies of queer lives.[48]

This dissertation understands the community information format as battling the constant threat of

the ephemerality of material media, of social practices, and of irreplaceable lives.

Efforts to capture the ephemeral and to find beauty or transcendence in the everyday are

recurrent dreams of those who experimented with indexical media technologies. Dutch

documentarian Joris Ivens reflected on his near-constant recording practice for his 1929

nonfiction film *Rain* as a living with the camera: "I never moved without my camera—it was

with me in the office, laboratory, street, train. I lived with it and when I slept it was on my

bedside table so that if it was raining when I woke I could film the studio window over my

bed."[49] Ivens' words call to mind, ninety years later, a now built-in component of our mobile

devices today to sleep next to us at night, always ready to capture the passing, everyday moments

of life. However, the unreliability of digital memory restages the ephemerality of prior media

formats like the videotape or the quickly printed zine. Digital media theorist Wendy Chun

defines the digital as "the enduring ephemeral," situating the digital traces that structure our

experience as what is precisely "degenerative, forgetful, erasable."[50] If capturing everydayness is

a central goal of the experience of digital media culture today, in the continuously updating

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[48] Ann Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 275.
[49] Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 32. Cited in Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xix.
[50] Wendy Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 95.

"stories" features of apps like Instagram and Facebook or the ability to go "live" and stream each passing moment, then I seek to analyze everydayness captured in community media projects from the period before the Web. The capture of everydayness before the Web was a fight against a forced obsolescence in the form of ephemerality. The glance backward of this dissertation seeks to recuperate discourses of everydayness through media, including *how* media producers discussed, described, and defended their practices of capturing the everyday through community media.

From Public Computing to Zines: Descriptions of Case Studies

Each chapter, then, analyzes how a "community information format" was built. This process of a community information format *in formation* responds to both social and technical registers of technological change and adaptation. Jonathan Sterne states that a format becomes recognizable as such only after a period of contestation over the formation of a standard: "the equivalent—and much less spectacular—moment of birth for a format would have to be the moment it becomes a standard."[51] My chapters uncover four case studies of overlooked and sometimes forgotten media projects. Each chapter excavates an intense period of debate over the standards of sociality within an emergent media format. In this dissertation, I analyze in turn public computing terminals, home videos, public access television, and zines. The community information formats built through these media objects contested a privatizing strain coursing across American culture from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Chapter two analyzes the community information format of a system of public computing terminals. I analyze the Community Memory project in Berkeley, California, which developed the first computerized "bulletin board" system comprised of public terminals located in public

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[51] Sterne, *MP3*, 22.

spaces. The second chapter excavates the ideology of community at work in the Community Memory (CM) project. The CM project launched in 1973 and went through three phases of operation until the project was sold to the city of Berkeley, California, in 1992, after which it quickly became financially unsustainable and ended its operation. The CM project was designed to provide computing to all, not just to those able to afford a personal computer. Despite the project's contribution to a cultural imaginary of a nationwide system of neighborhood-level terminals, the project only existed in its material form in the Bay Area of California. I argue in this chapter that the CM project developed a public experience of community information curation that believed in users as the co-creators of the system and that relied on chance urban encounters. The CM project desired for computing to be as banal and ubiquitous in urban space as cork bulletin boards, payphones, and utility poles. The CM project provides an initial articulation of community, technology, and space that will serve as a basis for the discussion of these three concepts in the chapters to follow.

Chapter three analyzes the community information format of the queer home video. I analyze the videotape archive of Nelson Sullivan as a material artifact and as a digital artifact in the videos' continued existence on the 5 Ninth Avenue Project YouTube channel. Gay videographer Nelson Sullivan's archive of videos from the 1980s captured a queer nightlife scene in New York City. In turn, the videos today have helped a queer audience locate and share a communal queer history based on how the videos feel like nostalgic "vlogs" sent from the past but which were actually video diaries made in the 1980s and influenced by his friend Dick Richards's own videographic practice. This chapter analyzes the context of Sullivan's life, his video production within a home video idiom of the 1980s, and the context of the reception of Sullivan's tapes in a social media and streaming environment today. This chapter is the sole

chapter to jump somewhat to the present moment in order to contend with the way that nostalgia has been so readily associated with the textual elements of Sullivan's videos. I argue in this chapter that this traversing of temporal distance through a video format that *feels* like something more contemporary is an example of what I call a "queer archive effect." The queer archive effect is a dual inhabitation of queer history. The queer archive effect is the result of the remediation of a queer media archive. The work of Sullivan's friend, Dick Richards, in staging Sullivan's archive on YouTube acts to bridge the third chapter and the fourth chapter on Richards's own work to build community media.

Chapter four analyzes the community information format of public access television, which, in the case of the Atlanta program *The American Music Show*, combined a do-it-yourself approach with a queer orientation to technology. During Atlanta's heyday of public access in the early-1980s, the city had a central Midtown production studio and three neighborhood production studios. Two early producers of public access programming in Atlanta were Dick Richards and James Bond. The two men met while campaigning for the Democratic candidate for president in 1972, George McGovern, and joined forces to produce a radio show, *The American Music Show*, for Atlanta radio station WRFG. They were eventually kicked off the air for playing a Donna Summer song. After Bond's integral involvement in securing public access to Atlanta, Bond and Richards relaunched their show on the new public access channel, People TV. *The American Music Show* went on to have a decidedly queer output, from displaying a variety of types of drag to launching the careers of drag queens RuPaul Andre Charles and DeAundra Peek. I argue in this chapter that the show's commitment to "always low standards" can be read as a queer orientation to technology grounded in the satire of televisual conventions. Queer theorist Sara Ahmed has argued that the "orientation" of "sexual orientation" might be "a

matter of residence," capturing both "how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with."[52] Ahmed's phenomenological approach and spatialized understanding of sexuality inform my desire to think queerness and spatiality through media technology, which offered modes of imaginary travel that expanded the bounds of what public access could offer audiences in Atlanta and around the world.

Chapter five analyzes the community information format of the queer zine. The queer punk zine networks built by queer youths, tech workers, and punk rockers extended from Toronto, Ontario, to San Francisco, and everywhere in-between. Across North America, queer zines modeled a queer network built through ephemeral media objects. Based in a digital media studies approach that understands concepts of "networking" as cultural imaginaries as much as sociotechnical arrangements, this chapter analyzes how networks and zines intersected in the fortuitous combination of network culture and the queercore zine subculture.[53] Zines were an emergent media genre and format in the 1980s that served as a mass medium of networking. I argue in this chapter that zines fostered a network imaginary due to their ability to channel, collect, and transmit information for readers, for other zine producers, and for individuals writing in letters from prisons, from sleepy Midwestern towns, and from coastal metropolises. A queer community formed through the community information format of zines became subsumed by the Web by the early 1990s. Cait McKinney's media studies analysis of Lesbian newsletters motivates my approach to zines as a type of technology that modeled modes of community interaction. McKinney argues that textual media and networks matter in tandem: "Newsletters,

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[52] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 1.
[53] "Queercore" refers to the combination of the slur "queer" and the "core" of "hardcore" punk. The term originated as "homocore" but evolved through use into "queercore" to capture the reclaiming of a queer identity out of the former slur.

archives, and network models work together as interconnected social movement technologies."[54]

In this chapter, I demonstrate how zines are archival in that each individual zine that manages to survive to a later context—stored in boxes in an individual's closet or in a university's special collections library—catalogues a subculture, location, or moment in time. In this way, zines record a "scene." Since all zines are records of an historical moment, any zine that survives to today is a fragment of a historical record, a glimpse into a constellation of social and cultural forces. In their relationship to archival and ephemeral qualities, zines stage a relationship to technology not only brought about by their material manufacture of printing, copying, and the design of layouts through computer programs starting in the late-1980s, but also in their relationship to obsolescence and ephemerality.

Examining these four cases demonstrates how a wide range of communities at the margins embraced new mediated means of being social—and did so in the shadows of the privatizing sphere of the technological, social, and aesthetic norms of their time. Community information formats can inform and transform our present understanding of social media in a variety of ways. Dwelling in the past does not preclude action in the present. Media studies scholar Alexandra Juhasz defines an orientation to nostalgic media projects as offering a "duration solution" built from nostalgia that "creates the possibility of collective action rather than individual stasis" in relation to artifacts from the past.[55] The nostalgic orientation of my approach in this dissertation considers the political, social, and cultural contexts of four distinct scenes of subcultural and queer media production. I begin this dissertation with an analysis of an infrastructural system of public computing in the Community Memory project. I then discuss

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[54] McKinney, *Information Activism*, 28.
[55] Alexandra Juhasz, "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 326.

other media projects that built community through disparate media objects and practices. The sequence of my case studies is purposeful because it demonstrates that community is not only about the bonds engineered through computer networking but also about modes of togetherness built through alternative media projects, objects, and practices.

My concept of the "community information format" allows for a reinvigorated analysis of the standards that have been set in our digital technologies regarding the social uses of media. As this dissertation analyzes social media before the Web across zines, public access television programs, home videos, and public computing terminals, I excavate a reading of the community information format in a way that follows what Jonathan Sterne has argued about the potential for the study of formats in media history:

> [S]ome formats may offer completely different inroads into media history and may well show us subterranean connections among media that we previously thought separate. The study of formats does not mean forgetting what we've learned from the study of media, or, more broadly, communication technologies. It is simply to consider the embedded ideas and routines that cut across them.[56]

When the historical actors discussed here built media technologies and inaugurated practices of media production, use, and distribution to serve communities, they intervened into the setting of technical and social standards of what social media can mean. Across all four case studies, this dissertation offers a sustained analysis of everydayness, ephemerality, and the sustenance of community "scenes" of media production, distribution, and production. The community information formats of this project demonstrate how queer and subcultural media production offers important lessons for understanding richer histories of sociality.

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[56] Sterne, *MP3*, 17.

Chapter 2 Designing Community Memory: Public Computing Terminals and Mobile Publicization

Before our computers became small enough to fit in our hand, tech entrepreneurs like

Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak created consumer microcomputer products that could fit on one's

desktop. These personal computers defined an era of the experience of computing for many.

Underneath this shift from the hulking mainframe computers at universities toward smaller

computers built for the home computing market lies another historical track less commonly

centered in the viewfinder. Instead of mobilizing computers for governmental contracts or

making microcomputers be appealing consumer products, the Community Memory project

designed a system of publicly accessible, networked computing terminals that would intervene

into public spaces and remind a city's residents that information can be curated and shared *in* and

as a public. This trend is precisely the antithesis of the priorities of the home computing tinkerer-

hackers, who have made computers individualized, controllable, and akin to an object of home

furniture. The Community Memory project's development of a community information format

based on public computing infrastructure, which this chapter will closely analyze, shows how

computing itself was made *public* before the Web. [57]

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[57] Infrastructure refers to the material systems that make media distribution happen. Satellites, fiber-optic cables, and telephone lines are all modes of delivery of media and information. The Community Memory public computing terminals were an infrastructure of community connection and adhesion. Media infrastructure scholars Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski define infrastructures as "situated sociotechnical systems that are designed and configured to support the distribution of audiovisual signal traffic." Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, "Introduction," in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, eds. Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 4.

This chapter focuses on the construction of a subcultural computing project that sought to make publicness of access and use a central design goal. The "community information format" of the Community Memory (CM) project's public computing terminals was set up as a challenge to the emergent norm of personal computing, occurring largely in domestic spaces.[58] As the first case study of this dissertation, the goal in these pages is to sketch an alternative path explaining the shift from mainframe computers to smaller microcomputers. The common understanding of this shift had a commercial imperative attached to it: as computers became smaller, they also became attached to a commodified product of the home computer. The CM project interrupts this historical narrative, introducing a publicness of access that disrupts a teleology that sees in smaller, domestic computers the inevitable end result of computing by the 1990s.
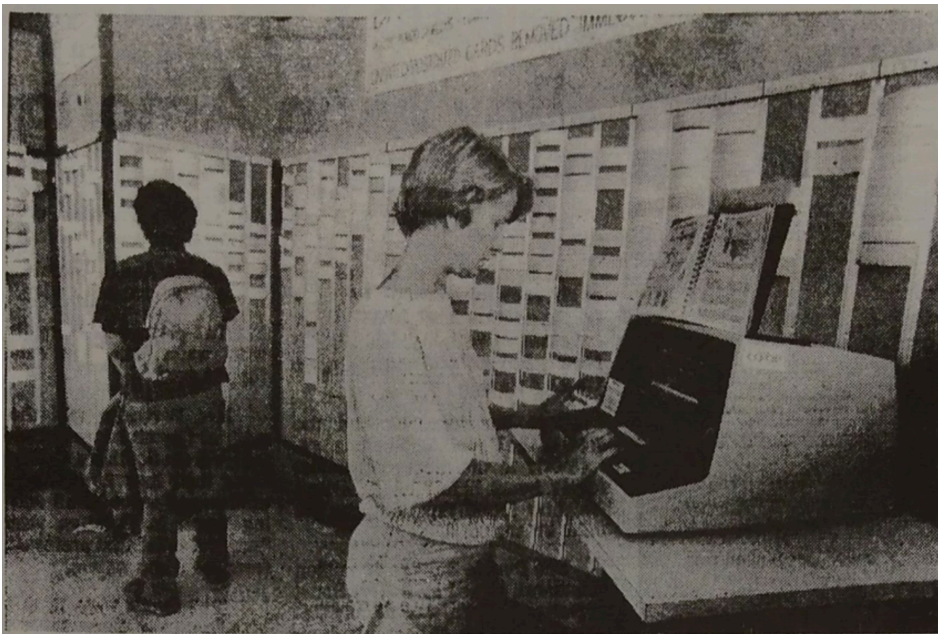
Figure 2-1: Karen Paulsell in 1984 demonstrating a Community Memory terminal. San Francisco Chronicle, 29 August 1984. Box 12, Folder 25, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

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[58] The engineers and staff of Community Memory referred to their organization as both "The Community Memory project" or "the CM project." I will adopt both terms interchangeably in this chapter.

By making computers public, the CM project showed how community ideals could be embedded in the design of an alternative communications infrastructure, and the rest of the dissertation will go on to examine how such a vision of community could reemerge and take different forms throughout different technological and cultural locales before the Web.

This chapter will analyze how the Community Memory project mounted a discursive and spatial challenge to the taken-for-granted movement of the computer into the home from the late-1970s to the early-1990s.[59] The designers of the CM project earnestly believed computers could build community, and they attempted to design equitable access to neighborhood information curation through public computing terminals. This chapter will discuss how the CM project incorporated countercultural beliefs into a definition of networked community before the Web. The social practices idealized and built into the CM project's public computing terminals have potent resonances that can impact how we view our always-on social media environment.[60]

The method I perform in this chapter is a cultural historical approach to the understudied history of Community Memory and the technical and social standards that the project inaugurated. Through my approach to the Community Memory project's archival materials, and an array of other primary and secondary source materials, I follow the call by media historians Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey B. Pingree who argue against two naïve tropes of media history: "supercession, the notion that each new medium 'vanquishes or subsumes its predecessors'" and "transparency, the assumption that each new medium actually mediates less, that it successfully 'frees' information from the constraints of previously inadequate or 'unnatural' media forms that

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[59] See for example Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

[60] danah boyd, "Participating in the Always-On Lifestyle," in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2012); Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013).

represented reality less perfectly."[61] In this chapter, I challenge the notion that the technology that wins in the public consciousness is the best, the most immersive, or the most liberating. Computing predominantly took a path throughout the 1980s that gave users more individualization and personalization at the expense of building modes of public access through neighborhood terminals, which is what the Community Memory project's designers piloted and launched. In order to excavate the CM project's alternative countercultural visions of public computing, I have dwelt in archival documents from the Community Memory project's records at the Computer History Museum's Shustek Research Archive in Fremont, California. These documents helped me to assess and to follow the evolution of the CM project through their own self-published pamphlets, internal memoranda, meeting minutes, and a host of ephemeral artifacts. I analyze the discourses of community and infrastructure at work in the Community Memory project. I argue that the community information format of the Community Memory project revealed an early *spatial* intervention into computing viewed as a public technology.

Focusing on the Bay Area and one group of countercultural technologists, this chapter asks in a first iteration what the next three chapters will explore regarding other community information formats: How was a media technology leveraged to combat privatizing forces? How did subcultural media groups before the Web challenge the dominant practices, norms, and standards of "mainstream" media industries? How can the contributions of subcultural and queer media producers on the margins of the mainstream inform a richer history of sociality before the Web? This chapter seeks to answer these questions through close analysis of the CM project's commitment to placing computing—materially and discursively—in public spaces.

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[61] Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman, "Introduction: What's New About New Media?" in *New Media 1740-1915*, eds. Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), xiii.

Situating Community Memory

In 1973, the Community Memory project launched its first public computing terminal in Berkeley, California. Located in the entranceway to a student-run record store called Leopold's, the terminal sat beneath a large cork bulletin board. When Berkeley residents would enter Leopold's, they would be greeted not only with the bulletin board on the wall, but a computer encased in a wooden terminal, with a volunteer attendant sitting beside it, ready to show curious onlookers how it worked. The new terminal was the materialization of a dream of the counterculture for public computing. The public computing terminal at Leopold's was the inaugural site of the Community Memory project, which ran in three phases from 1973 to 1992. The CM project aimed throughout their decades-long existence to provide computers for *public* access with limited technical and financial barriers to use.

Community Memory was an important and distinct attempt to create a community communications infrastructure for members of society typically left out of both the computing revolution of the late-twentieth century and the spatial reorganization of urban and suburban areas. The discursive construction of "public infrastructure" in the CM project reacted to a "suburban imperative" that is at the root of discourses of home and personal computing and of the racialized spatial reorganization of post-WWII American life.[62] Community Memory's staff members, engineers, and volunteers formed an important and overlooked part of the counterculture's contribution to computing throughout the 1980s. The CM project built computing in public locations with a goal to make neighborhoods into community information

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[62] A suburban imperative refers to how post-WWII life in the United States became suited to living far from urban centers through a culture of automobility, through the mobile privatization of broadcasting technologies, and through the largely segregated spatial arrangement of the country's suburban areas. For discourses of technological suburbs as "clean," and thus positioned as upper-middle class and white, see Margaret Pugh O'Mara, "Uncovering the City in the Suburb: Cold War Politics, Scientific Elites, and High-Tech Spaces," in *The New Suburban History*, ed. Kevin M. Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

ecologies. The terminals could be a changeable, evolving repository of information that residents in a neighborhood would curate. The CM project stands as a precursor to social media in our current sense of the term, since it was the first networked "bulletin board" system, well before the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL) and USENET. However, for my purposes in this dissertation, I maintain that the Community Memory project is important precisely as an intervention into the building of a community information format through computers before the Web. As an understudied moment in the history of computing and digital media studies, the case of the CM project broadens what "social media" can mean. The Community Memory project created a community information format through public computing technology. This community information format sought to give users control over their access to information and to build users' awareness of how media infrastructures work. The CM project was about liberation through public access and curation of information.

A "Silicon Valley mythology" permeates the history of computing. This mythology encodes a discourse that sees personal liberation in the transition from the hulking mainframe computers of the mid-twentieth century to the personal computers created by the 1980s and popularized as tinkerer's play-things in California hobbyist groups like the Homebrew Computer Club. The mythology of a cultural and economic story of the rise of personal computing usually endorses a typically white and masculine idiom of geeky "genius" and innovation, which misses other intersectional identities, cultures of creativity, and spatial experiments out of the counterculture. In computer historian Joy Lisi Rankin's estimation, the Silicon Valley mythology presumes that computing technology "is far removed from everyday life until it reaches the users."[63] A predominant trope of computing history is also the managerial enthusiasm of a

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[63] Joy Lisi Rankin, *A People's History of Computing in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 2.

"Californian ideology," which linked "the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies" to envision a vast emancipatory horizon for information technologies within business and popular culture.[64] Even though Community Memory primarily built their system in Berkeley and Oakland, across the San Francisco Bay from the tech-enterprise hub of the Silicon Valley peninsula, the case of the CM project complicates how a "Silicon Valley" mythology embedded a "Californian ideology" in the history of computing. The Silicon Valley mythology—seen from the perspective of the rise of the personal computer—had certainly traveled far and wide by the 1990s, implicating a vision of computing as a gradual shrinking from mainframe computers toward the smaller microcomputer, all accomplished by the pantheon of geek entrepreneurs like Bill Gates and others. In contrast, the Community Memory project attempted to reconceive the ends to which computing was put and to create a network of openness and public computing for all as a technical and social standard.

The Community Memory project simultaneously questioned, contested, and redefined what it meant to *do* computing and to *be* in a community. Evelyn Pine and Carl Farrington were CM project board members by the project's close in the early-1990s. They wrote in 1991 to define their vision of community for the purposes of the project as "a group of people linked by a communications structure supporting discussion and collective action."[65] Community in the CM project meant infrastructural connection and a common cause.[66] The next section of this chapter will analyze the foundations of the community information format of the CM project in the San

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[64] Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "Californian Ideology," in *Crypto Anarchy, Cyberstates, and Pirate Utopias*, ed. Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001 [1996]), 364.

[65] Carl Farrington and Evelyn Pine, "Community Memory: A Case Study in Community Communication," in *Reinventing Technology, Rediscovering Community: Critical Explorations of Computing as a Social Practice*, ed. Philip E. Agre and Douglas Schuler (Greenwich, CT: Ablex, 1997 [1991], 220.

[66] Locality refers to a feeling of connection for people who share identities and spaces in common. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178.

Francisco counterculture. The foundation of the project is important for demonstrating how spatial experiments in the counterculture presented a different horizon for computing than the use of computing for private, domestic purposes. Throughout the group's phases and physical locations, the CM project's main staff consisted of a community of technologists who emerged from the Bay Area counterculture to create a different vision of computing from what has been primarily discussed in the history of computing. The CM project's vision was from the start grounded in public spaces with low financial and technical barriers of access. The network that CM created was an alternative infrastructure of community computing for individuals unhappy with the rising corporate control of information throughout the 1970s and 1980s.[67]

Community Information Formats: From Hippie Houses to Public Computing Terminals

Seeing the CM terminal from its earliest stages as defining and building a "community information format" helps to distinguish the project from other media technological projects that arose out of the counterculture. A "community information format" includes both an attention to the identities of the designers of a system as well as the modes of curation of "community information" itself. Within the CM project, a "community information format" centered the translation of counterculture ideals into infrastructure.

A spatial critique of everyday life within the counterculture influenced the beginning of the CM project, with the spatial forms of housing in the Bay Area impacting the spirit of collaboration amongst the earliest engineers involved with CM. The group's spatial critique of computing originated in hippie housing experiments in the Haight-Ashbury of San Francisco and

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[67] The engineers of Community Memory stage a similar critique of the mainstream computing industry to those who wrote in the pages of *Processed World*, a San Francisco zine published throughout the 1980s. *Processed World* collected the ire of information and technology workers, those who "file, sort, type, track, process, duplicate and triplicate the ever expanding mass of 'information' necessary to operate the global corporate economy." Quoted in Tom Athanasiou, "New Information Technology: For What?," *Processed World*, no. 1 (1981): 16.

in an experimental warehouse cooperative called Project One. The Community Memory project

desired a wider populace gaining knowledge of what networking could bring to the

counterculture and their community. To achieve this vision of public computing terminals, the

CM project had to offer a novel reading of how people could interact in public space.

The "Life House" was a communal housing arrangement created by hippies who fled to

San Francisco following the Berkeley Free Speech protests in the 1960s, of which Lee

Felsenstein, one of the co-founders of the CM project, was an active participant as a staff

member of underground newspaper *Berkeley Barb*. In 1970, another Berkeley underground

newspaper, *Berkeley Tribe*, profiled a novel housing arrangement, the Life House, as one

component of a new and ecologically radical rearrangement of US housing patterns:

> Ecology Action...first offered the idea of a Life House and has ideas about the
> ways in which they can help community ecology, recycling paper, cans and glass,
> composting, etc. The neighborhood Life House can also house *bulletin boards,
> libraries on relevant and less relevant topics, community tools* and bicycles.
> People who could dig the job would most likely be needed to keep the place in
> order and to watch the back door.[68]

The possibilities offered through communal housing presented a reorganization of what the

single-family home could mean. In the Life House, community information curation was paired

with an ecological consciousness. The community information exchanges of the physical bulletin

boards in a Life House would be nested among the practical tools of a reorganized American

urban environment complete with bicycles and compost bins. Each Life House would offer an

infrastructural node in a physical infrastructure of a community network made of people and the

"community tools" held as a type of commons, or resources shared by all. The Life House

offered a public site of information exchange across varying modes of access and mobility, such

as a bulletin board, a library, and a community lending area for needed items. The public

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[68] "And But For the Sky There Are No Fences Facing," *Berkeley Tribe*, March 13-20, 1970, 16. Emphasis added.

exchange of information and material items was made possible by the Life House as a node in a network of like-minded hippies.

The concept of the Life House compelled early CM engineers like Lee Felsenstein, Efrem Lipkin, and Ken Colstad, to imagine how the novel forms of co-habitation in the Bay Area could be applied to their knowledge of networking gained in their day jobs at Silicon Valley electronics companies. An early motivation for the CM terminal was the technical process of decentralization using computers. After learning the BASIC programming language for his engineering job at the AMPEX corporation, Felsenstein attended a training course on file-sharing across networked computers located miles away from one another. After witnessing the decentralization of communication during the Free Speech protests, when informal networks helped protect protestors from police brutality, Felsenstein saw in the distributed file-sharing across space a construction of a community without the trappings of hierarchy: "I realized that a network of computers could facilitate formation and re-formation of communities of interest without requiring centralization."[69] Felsenstein took these ideas of decentralization and combined them with the guiding example of the Life House. He remarked years later: "I began to conceptualize a network of Life Houses residing on a computer network able to instantly exchange information of all kinds, allowing users to match needs and resources in order to further community formation and re-formation."[70] Community Memory was born in part from this interest in creating a networking system that was built off the Bay Area counterculture's experiments in redesigning human connection in urban space. The ideal form was to translate the

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[69] Lee Felsenstein, "Community Memory: The First Public-Access Social Media System," in *Social Media Archaeology and Poetics* ed. Judy Malloy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 93.
[70] Ibid., 98.

physical infrastructure of the Life House into the new capacities of a networked computer system.

The influence of the Life House on the CM project meant that the CM project's spatiality was throughout its existence dedicated to an alternate conception of space than that which informed the discourse of the home computer.[71] Spatiality means the material and symbolic processes that construct understandings of space and relationships of power. Spatiality encompasses how "imaginary geographies" support the very real physical spaces that structure power relations: "Spatiality is something that is simultaneously symbolic, material, and representational."[72] The Community Memory project challenged imaginary and physical constructions of privatized space with their public computing terminals. The CM project followed trends in the Bay Area to render material the communication strategies behind the New Left, to turn the ideas of the counterculture into physical infrastructure.

If the preceding anecdote is the history commonly told of the CM project, it is only a partial one. A focus on the material culture of countercultural engineering projects like the Community Memory project reveals a broader social portrait of computing that accounts for the integral contributions of women in securing the CM project's vision. Beyond the Life House, Project One, a hippie housing cooperative in a repurposed candy manufacturing warehouse in San Francisco, and one female engineer, Pam Hardt-English, provided the material means to launch the alternative infrastructure of the CM project. Project One brought the CM project to fruition. Project One had proposed a critique of a privatized, suburban use of technology. Project

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[71] Lynn Spigel argues that spatiality is about both materiality and a cultural imaginary of space: "Indeed, in order to maintain and reproduce its power a group must not only occupy physical space, but it must also occupy imaginary space (the space of stories, of images, of fantasy)." Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 145.

[72] Fiona Allon, "An Ontology of Everyday Control: Space, Media Flows, and 'Smart' Living in the Absolute Present," in *MediaSpace: Place, Scale, and Culture in a Media Age*, ed. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (New York: Routledge, 2004), 257.

One stated their position about technology, community, and space in a *Mother Jones* article

profiling the group: "Any one of the residential and suburban neighborhoods of the nation would

yield street after street full of garages and basements and part-time workshops, where tools and

skills for possible community sharing waste away."[73] The Californian Ideology of innovation in

garages, meshing information sharing and entrepreneurialism, takes shape here precisely as the

target of Project One's critique. Securing computing power for activist ends, the leader of Project

One, Pam Hardt-English, made a pioneering deal in the Spring of 1972 to receive a SDS-940

computer as a donation from the TransAmerica Leasing Corporation. [74] The SDS-940 was a

$150,000 mainframe computer, and it had been retired as Stanford's former ARPANET host

computer. Hardt-English had convinced TransAmerica that the computer would be worth more

as a tax-deductible donation than as a machine collecting dust in storage. The SDS-940 then

became the central organizing hub of Project One by 1972.

The computer, newly minted the "Resource One," allowed for experimentation with

translating the networking vision of the counterculture into a material reality. Without the

foundation of Resource One and the ingenuity of Hardt-English who secured its donation, the

Community Memory project would have never materialized. Additionally, fundraising efforts

allowed Hardt-English to purchase a 50mb hard drive, which was the size of two refrigerators. If

the Life House provided the ideological and idealist inspiration behind the CM project in Lee

Felsenstein's telling, then the initial material impetus behind the CM project came in fact from

the securing of the SDS-940, which was sustained by the contribution of the women engineers,

tinkerers, and staffers involved with Community Memory from its earliest years.

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[73] Charles Raisch, "Pueblo in the City," *Mother Jones*, May 1976, 34.
[74] Claire L. Evans, *Broad Band: The Untold Story of the Women Who Made the Internet* (New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2018), 98.

After Pam Hardt-English inaugurated the SDS-940 as the "People's Computer," engineer Efrem Lipkin then wrote the software for Resource One out of the Project One warehouse. Resource One Generalized Information Retrieval System, or ROGIRS, as it came to be called, allowed for a networking of the community switchboards within Project One. After designing their own software for the SDS-940, Project One articulated their mission in 1973: "to make technology, especially computers, available to people on a community level for the purposes of communication."[75] Resource One had built a community information format out of the raw materials of computing. Finding themselves outside of industrial formations of computing, they built their own infrastructure.

The immediate precursor and infrastructural foundation behind Community Memory was the community switchboard project at Project One. The switchboard was intended to be a central hub for social services in the city, many of which ran off commercial switchboards and were thus disconnected from one another. Once all the switchboards were networked, then anyone could access the hippie community's information database using a teletype terminal. Wary of a centralized network and of the prohibitive cost of a teletype terminal at each community organization or social service provider (a terminal cost around $150 in the early-1970s or around $2700 in 2020's currency), Project One dreamed of alternatives. The founders of the warehouse collective saw control of information flows as the primary site of struggle:

> Both the quantity and content of available information is set by centralized institutions—the press, TV, radio, news services, think-tanks, government agencies, schools and universities—which are controlled by the same interests which control the rest of the economy. By keeping information flowing from the top down, they keep us isolated from each other…. Computer technology has thus far been used…mainly by the government and those it represents to store and quickly retrieve vast amounts of information about huge numbers of people…. It

[75] Lee Felsenstein, "Whodunnit?: Loving Grace Cybernetics," *Berkeley Barb*, August 17-23, 1973, 16.

is this pattern that convinces us that control over the flow of information is so crucial.[76]

Using the mainframe computing power of the SDS-940, Project One's goal was to build an "urban data base" that could consolidate data from the census, from election results, from property valuations, and from various social services in the Bay Area. Project One believed that building an alternative "community information format" could challenge the emergent norm of computing power in the service of control and could benefit countercultural visions of community.

It is out of these two countercultural spatial experiments, the Life House as a novel neighborhood sharing structure and Project One as a hippie technology hub of community-oriented innovation, that the Community Memory project emerged to fulfill community information needs and to challenge the corporatization and centralization of information in the Bay Area. The Community Memory project itself began and was ran by a group of people based out of the Project One commune who called themselves Loving Grace Cybernetics, which included Lee Felsenstein, Efrem Lipkin, and others. The group's name came from a Richard Brautigan poem titled "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace." In the poem, Brautigan enfolds technology within nature, dreaming of "a cybernetic meadow," one in which "mammals and computers" live together "in mutually/programming harmony."[77] Brautigan's vision was no doubt enticing for several New Communalist, back-to-the-land types who also designed and engineered computing technologies. The poem ends with a desire for a caring technology that can watch over a community-to-come: "I like to think…of a cybernetic ecology/where we are free of our labors/and joined back to nature,/…and all watched over/by

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[76] Cited in Theodore Roszak, *The Cult of Information: The Folklore of Computers and the True Art of Thinking* (New York City, NY: Pantheon, 1986), 139.

[77] Richard Brautigan, "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," *TriQuarterly*, no. 11 (1968): 194.

machines of loving grace."[78] The nearly religious tenor of "loving grace" is attributed to

machines capable of overseeing humans with care. The poem's inclusion of the word

"cybernetic" speaks to the allure of cybernetic ideas in the counterculture, but blended with what

was then seen as a more human application of cybernetics to better human communities.[79]

Loving Grace Cybernetics took the vision behind Brautigan's poem and set themselves the

mission to make computing technology that could care for a community. The Community

Memory project, running first in a time-sharing capacity off the power of the Resource One

mainframe computer, was the result.

Community Information: From Passivity to Infrastructural Literacy

The Community Memory project was born from the desire for a non-hierarchical

community network that would also offer low financial and social barriers to access. The vision

of a community defined at the time of the first terminal's installation in 1973 was in distinction

to the nuclear family: "Real communities are hard to find in cities, because everyone is cooped

up alone or with a small nuclear family, being told the mass media version of what's happening

and behaving like a spectator at a show."[80] The Community Memory project sought to provide

interactivity and participation that would serve to build computing power for the people.

When a user positioned themselves in front of the first terminal in Leopold's Records in

1973, informational signs next to the screen told the user that they can either search for a key

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[78] Ibid.

[79] Cybernetics refers to the building of technical systems that could self-regulate. Cybernetics turned into a synonym for a defense-industry brand of implementing computing for tactical purposes, such as plotting Cold War missile launch scenarios and game theory applications. See Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (New York: Anchor Books, 1950). Digital studies scholar Seb Franklin summarizes the critical posture to cybernetics with the following: "According to the logic of the interdisciplinary field of cybernetics…an individual human or animal, a brain, a social group or a group of such groups, a complex of interlocking markets, and a battlefield are intelligible and analyzable as self-regulating machines, just as a computer is." Seb Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 4.

[80] Lee Felsenstein, "'Community Memory' Now Wires Us Up Together," *Berkeley Barb*, August 17-23, 1973, 16.

term in the index of all the posts, or they can post a message themselves. Users were encouraged to write anything they would post to a cork bulletin board—sale ads, notifications of events, or jokes. Writing of the CM pilot project in 1974, two of the project's engineers, Ken Colstad and Efrem Lipkin, explained how the positioning of the terminal next to a cork bulletin board was an intentional channeling of potential uses of the system: "Initially the location of the terminal and its popular characterization as an 'electronic bulletin board' determined the public's expectations and use of the system."[81] The spatial intervention of the inaugural terminal from the beginning of the project was intended to encourage a happenstance, public, communal use.

Figure 2-2: The first Community Memory terminal is depicted in Project One's own newsletter as a novel, community experience. Resource One Newsletter (April 1974).

As most photographs from the project's first year demonstrate, the terminals were a community space, where like-minded bystanders inquiringly joined those sitting at the terminal to post and to read messages. The project's designers believed that the terminals would further adhere an individual into their local community, instilling a solidarity with their neighbors and avoiding the isolation of the suburbs. In the project's later phases, a few co-op grocery stores and two laundromats in Berkeley each had a Community Memory terminal. In the map of public

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[81] Ken Colstad and Efrem Lipkin, "Community Memory: A Public Information Network," *ACM SIGCAS Computers & Society* 6, no. 4 (1975): 7.

computing that the CM project charted from 1973 to 1992, quotidian spaces of Berkeley and Oakland became sites of a networked community. The CM project stands as an early moment of promise that challenged the movement of the computer as a personal, domestic technology designed for the home. For the CM project, the computer could be a public, not a private, technology.

The decision to install a computing terminal in public places changed the social fabric of a space, changing in some ways how computing technology could be used. In the CM project's plans, the terminals would alter a public sphere in public places. The notion of a "public" has long been an explanatory tool for the basic social status of free communication within a democratic populace. Terming the realm in which individuals come to debate and discuss beliefs and opinions a "public sphere," Habermas argued—in his essay popularizing the concept—that such a sphere had only been realized in an era before the technologies and mass media of the twentieth century. Only in the 19th-century development of the bourgeois nation-state, where individuals became "private" in relationship to a state with defined borders and a monopoly on the use of force on its own inhabitants, did the public sphere flourish. The public sphere of this era staked out a space of polite resistance to authority, through the printed word:

> The bourgeois public sphere could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated 'intellectual newspapers' for use against the public authority itself. In those newspapers, and in moralistic and critical journals, they debated that public authority on the general rules of social intercourse in their fundamentally privatized yet publicly relevant sphere of labor and commodity exchange.[82]

With the rise of the large welfare states of the post-WWII era, Habermas saw a "refeudalization" of the public sphere that falsely staged forms of publicness rather than offering it through the

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[82] Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere," *New German Critique*, no. 3 (1974 [1964]): 52.

idealized bourgeois public sphere consisting of an active and critical press.[83] The public sphere

became weakened through the dislodging of the spontaneous manifestation of a "public" and its

reemergence as an instrument of corporate goodwill as "public relations." In many ways,

Habermas's death knell for the public sphere rings true in a contemporary era of accessing

"public" forms of communication through private, corporate platforms, where one's personal and

relationship data have turned into marketable commodities for advertisers.[84] However,

Habermas's vision of the public sphere, no matter how influential for characterizing the political

structure of twentieth-century mass media audiences, should not be the final word on how

publics have historically formed in relation to media formats, technologies, and infrastructures.

By revisiting the publicness of the Community Memory project in this chapter, I argue that the

counterculture's contributions to computing were not just in designing the computer for personal

use. The counterculture also made the computer public and quotidian.

The Community Memory project made the placement of the computer into a political

object, challenging the emergent personal computing norms of their time with a different spatial

understanding.[85] Space is not a neutral backdrop but an active catalyst, at times an instrument of

countercultural ideals and at other times a lynchpin in discussions of the disintegration of urban

community. I view space not as inert, but active and imbricated with social structures: "Space is

not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and

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[83] Ibid., 54.

[84]. Digital studies scholar Christian Fuchs argues: "Corporate social media have hijacked the concept of free access and turned it into an ideology that tries to conceal the existence of a mode of capital accumulation that is based on the commodification of personal data and targeted advertising." Christian Fuchs, *Social Media: A Critical Introduction* (London: Sage, 2017), 276.

[85] Edward W. Soja defines spatiality as a "medium" that intervenes between individuals and collectivities. The CM project can be seen as addressing a spatiality that intervenes in this way between the self and society, between an individual's desire for information and a commons of information built by a community. "[S]patiality is socially produced and, like society itself, exists in both substantial forms (concrete spatialities) and as a set of relations between individuals and groups, an 'embodiment' and medium of social life itself." Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 120.

strategic."[86] Community Memory created a new spatiality through their public computing terminals.

For example, the very first terminal installed in the entranceway to Leopold's Records was situated directly below a cork bulletin board, providing an analogical relationship of intended everyday use. Both technologies—the one made of cork and the one made of microchips and a beige plastic shell—were designed to capture similar social purposes. The first terminal was up from 12pm to 6pm every day except Sunday. The terminal itself consisted of a Teletype Model 33 ASR, a commercial teleprinter released for office use in 1963.[87] Described simply, each individual terminal could communicate to other terminals through time-sharing via the Resource One computer. Information posted from one terminal could be accessed by other terminals, if not in real time than at least with a limited delay. Upon launch of the system, the designers were quick to point out that the system was meant to evolve beyond the immediate ideas and design of the engineers involved with the project. The "continuously-unfolding possibilities for creative and fulfilling action" would occur by users themselves.[88] In the designers' perspective, the public placement of the terminal would create a more user-guided system. Each user could pitch in their share of an idea and wait for someone else with the knowledge or skills to make the idea a reality: "If your idea is only half-baked, you can leave it in the memory as a comment or suggestion for others who may have the other half of the idea."[89] As a technological extension of the desire for allowing computers to watch over new human ecologies in Brautigan's poem "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," Community

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[86] Henri Lefebvre, "Reflections on the Politics of Space," *Antipode* 8, no. 2 (1976): 31.
[87] It was an influential machine. Rumored to be the first computer Bill Gates ever encountered, the model also was the system for which BASIC was first written. Paul Andrews and Stephen Manes, *Gates: How Microsoft's Mogul Reinvented an Industry and Made Himself the Richest Man in America*. (London: Touchstone, 1994), 25.
[88] Lee Felsenstein, "'Community Memory' Now Wires," 17.
[89] Ibid.

Memory built in a reliance on the community posting of messages in order to make the system work, to make the database a reliable source of information and a site for the creation of new ideas.

The decisions of where to place the terminals throughout the project's run emphasized a publicness and an embeddedness in the everyday. These facets became priorities for the placement of the terminals. Shortly after the first terminal opened in Leopold's, the terminal was moved in January of 1974 to the Whole Earth Access store, the brick and mortar shop of the Whole Earth Catalog, in Berkeley.[90] That terminal lasted only a year. After an infusion of funding by Steve Wozniak in 1984 helped to secure the project's second phase, CM terminals were then in four Berkeley locations by 1985: the Whole Earth Access; the La Peña Cultural Center, a Chilean-American community space; the Shattuck Avenue Co-Op store; and the Telegraph Avenue Co-Op store.[91] Those locations closed in 1988. After new funding in 1989 through the Telecommunications Education Trust, set aside from a 1983 class action suit against AT&T, new locations sprang up in the project's final phase.[92] Lasting the final few years of the project's run before being sold to the city of Berkeley in 1992, the city's final terminals were in spaces marked primarily by a more banal, municipal focus: for example, four Berkeley public library branches; the North Berkeley Senior Center; and two locations of Milt's Coin-Op, a 24-hour laundromat.[93] CM responded to currents traversing the Bay Area computing landscape through a constant reinvention over twenty years while remaining invested in public spaces as the ideal on-ramp to building a networked community.

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[90] In an interesting historical coincidence, the first Whole Earth Access store is now a Whole Foods, owned by Amazon.

[91] "Welcome to the Community Memory Workshop," [ca. 1985], Box 18, Folder 19, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Fremont, California.

[92] Lisa Lynch, "The Maturing of Community Memory," *East Bay Express*, February 23, 1990, 35.

[93] "Laundromat Launches Novel Telecommunications Network," Press Release, January 12, 1990, Box 12, Folder 12, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, Californias.

Throughout these phases of operation, the Community Memory project situated their

system of terminals as a public infrastructure. Community Memory sought to build their own

networked computing infrastructure grounded in the local experience of a geographical

community. Each terminal would be a "node" in a network of computers. Recent work on the

history of the cultural imaginaries of networks have argued for the palimpsest quality of the

layering of networks over time:

> Seen properly, the structure of the Internet resembles a graft: a newer network
> grafted on top of an older, more established network…. As a graft, the Internet is
> always already a historical object, and the next stage of its development is never a
> complete rupture from its past.[94]

The CM project's public network influenced the culture of networking in the public interest,

even if the CM project is not as widely remembered today. The CM project committed for nearly

20 years to its initial mission of creating public computing terminals for those without the

economic, educational, or technical means to access computing in their own everyday lives.

The CM project stands as a testament to one group's vision to bring computing to a city's

public spaces, to help bring an awareness of the role of computers in everyday life to people left

out of the computing revolution. By 1983, Community Memory saw its promise as part of a

larger vision, as an infrastructural form that could unite the emergent bulletin board

phenomenon:

> It remains to be seen if the Community Memory project catches on in the larger
> world. Thanks to the popularity of personal computers, the concept has become
> widespread through the notion of sharing information via bulletin boards.
> Community Memory's ultimate role may be to pull together all of the bulletin
> boards and resources of the country into one network that is accessible to
> everyone.[95]

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[94] Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 7-8.
[95] Michael Swaine and Paul Freiberger, "Lee Felsenstein: Populist Engineer," *InfoWorld*, November 7, 1983, 107.

Such a hopeful vision for Community Memory's role as a bulletin board of bulletin boards is a testament to how significant the CM project can be for conceiving of how the sociality of our social media platforms relies on the practices, behaviors, and definitions of "information" at work in networked computing projects of the past. The Community Memory project envisioned computing power for the people before the rise of the World Wide Web.

The CM project sought a publicness to encourage an awareness of the community surrounding the terminal. The publicness of access was only the entryway to a larger goal of the project, to encourage a media infrastructural awareness. From a mid-1980s planning document, one staffer said that the goal of CM was bigger than the public terminals themselves. Rather, it was about making the publicness of the terminals reveal something more profound about the role of communication technology in one's life: "The purpose of [Community Memory] is to increase peoples' awareness of the effects of communications technology in their lives, and to motivate them to act to influence those effects."[96] To impart the larger goal of an awareness of the role of networked technology among users, the CM project's engineers sought to create an infrastructure that would teach its users about how corporate infrastructure regularly obfuscates the power relations it materially embeds. CM desired to impart to its users an awareness of how media infrastructures often hide the reality of their own operations. The CM project was thus about "computer literacy" in a larger sense than learning a coding language or technical shortcut. The CM project encouraged a type of play with computers to demystify them as objects but also to encourage a sense of ownership over them. One engineer described their goals for the system in 1979 as "just one big open playspace [sic]."[97] The CM project sought to build an infrastructure to

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[96] "On the Future of CM," [ca. 1984], Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[97] Letter to Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz, July 28, 1979, 2. Box 6, Folder 24, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

show communities that other computing futures were possible, that computers as an emergent technology entered into a set of relations defined in part by—but not entirely beholden to—defense industry prerogatives and corporate interests.

The CM project built an infrastructure with this media literacy goal and paired it with a belief in the user as a co-creator of the system. The trust in the user as a co-creator of the Community Memory system was a belief in everyday uses of technology as inherently skillful. In the Community Memory project designers' eyes, the right design of a terminal could encourage a use of computing that could instill a self-sustaining system. Queer media scholar Cait McKinney has defined "capable amateurism" to draw attention to the inherent skill of users in figuring out, troubleshooting, and making technical systems work for their needs. McKinney's term underlines and values the labor involved in building counterpublics.[98] Diverse skillsets build knowledge, and thinking of everyday users as "capable amateurs" implies that innovative uses can occur beyond the intentions of the designers of a technical system. Applying capable amateurism to subcultural and queer media projects elevates their activities from an enforced marginalization to take center stage as distinctive and innovative in their own right. Lee Felsenstein, co-founder of the CM project, spoke of his mission in designing the system in a 1985 issue of *MicroTimes*, a California-wide computing magazine. Felsenstein explained that his goal was more to shape an orientation to technology and less about an explicit engineering goal toward the technology itself. The shaping of a new imaginary toward computers and the *space* in which computing takes place was a goal of the project: "And it's [a] process of imagination that I'm interested in empowering as much as possible with the technology I'm developing. It

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[98] Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 30.

basically means building the imagination of the user into the system in operation."[99] In featuring

the co-creation of the system by the user, each CM terminal would provide a user's own

information archive of their neighborhood, their own "Community Memory."

The public placement of the terminals encouraged an approach to the system as an

unobtrusive technology. By placing the first CM terminal adjacent to a cork bulletin board, the

CM project designers sought the benefits of the analog bulletin board's *spatial location* as much

as the analog bulletin board's tactile community functionality. Throughout its existence, the CM

project's vision of its public terminals was constructed from a social vantage point of valuing

"publicness" that depended on diverse urban areas with the ability for users to stumble across the

system and discover its potential. From the CM project's inception, publicness and openness

were the political fundament of the project. In April of 1983, CM staff members reported that the

ideal location of the terminals should cover the geographical and cultural diversity of a

community with an emphasis on "high-traffic areas."[100] The emphasis on high-traffic areas

reveals how the CM project relied on access to technology in spaces of urban proximity and

exchange, not in private or secluded spaces. The CM project sought to build this public openness

into a community of information sharing.

To capture this feeling of stumbling upon the system, the project would invite users to

reach out and touch the terminal. Standing in front of one CM terminal in Berkeley's Telegraph

Avenue Co-Op in 1985, a user would find a booklet sitting on top of the terminal.

[99] Vanessa Schnatmeier, "Building the Electronic Neighborhood," *MicroTimes*, August 1985, 56.
[100] Sue Bloch, "Summary of Pilot Project Questionnaire," Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
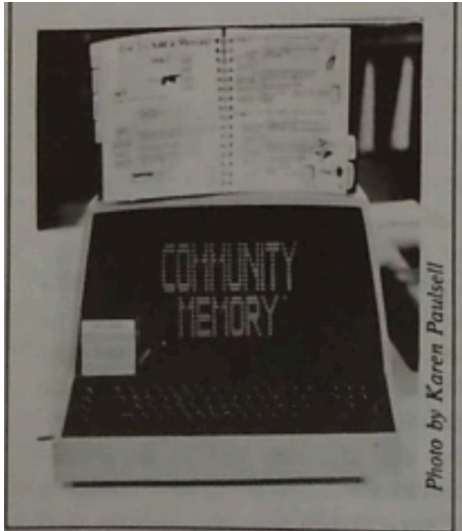
Figure 2-3: A Community Memory terminal in 1984 with an informational guide attached to the top of the monitor. Community Memory News 2 (1985): 4. Box 12, Folder 16, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

The booklet was a users' guide to the terminal and to the CM project's system. From the booklet's section on "How to Add a Message," helpful arrows and pointing finger graphics direct users' attention to pictorial renderings of how messages look once they are posted on the screen. Users could press four major buttons to accomplish one of four major tasks: FIND, INDEX, ADD, and EXIT. By pressing "ADD," a user could then type directly the content of their message. Next came the typing of a title for the post. Users were prompted to add INDEX words for their post. On the one hand, the textual display of the functionality of the terminal implied that the system was in the mid-1980s oriented to those who had no idea how to use the machine. The booklet would be a resource for users curious enough to step close to the machine and flip through the ring-bound manual on top of the monitor. The terminal's location within a co-op grocery store may have aligned the system with a vision of community ownership, alternative spaces, and a distrust of corporate control. The location also meant that the use of the space as a site for grocery shopping made the terminal not necessarily stand out in shoppers' itineraries through the store. Other photographs of this same terminal in the Telegraph Avenue co-op

grocery store show its position in a corner wedged between a wall containing a corkboard and a window.
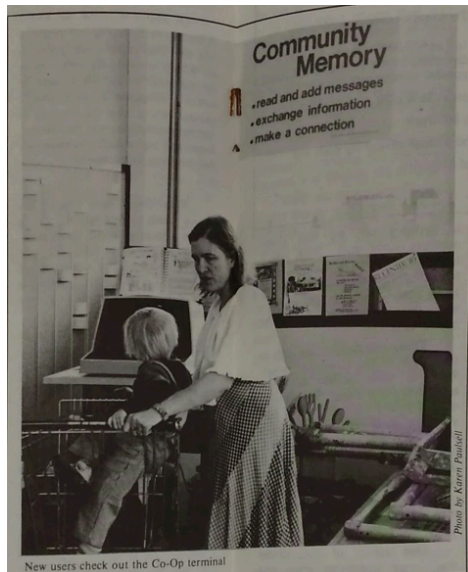
Figure 2-4: This terminal's location in a grocery store setting seems to position the terminal as an afterthought to shoppers, such as this mother and child walking away from the terminal. Community Memory News 2 (1985): 4-5. Box 12, Folder 16, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

From its corner, the terminal invited co-op grocery shoppers to "exchange information" and to "make a connection." The terminal beckoned users with the invitation to take a gamble on the system. "Take a chance, touch the keyboard," the screen would say. Inviting these chance encounters through the instructional booklet and invitations on the screen were a sign that the project still had to encourage users to try out their system and witness for themselves the power it had to network themselves into their community.

The construction of a public spatiality to computing in the Community Memory project pushes back against other recent histories of computing that similarly challenge histories of personal computing but that still place computing within institutional spaces like schools. This chapter follows and responds to recent histories of computing that center power, gender, and race. I argue that histories of computing have not yet fully contended with the spatial challenge that the CM project brought about. Historians of computing have analyzed the public precursors

to personal computing in the 1970s and 1980s. Computing historian Joy Lisi Rankin has argued that the emergence of personal computing was a time of the foreclosure of other radical projects to envision computing as a social utility. I agree with Rankin's approach to excavating alternative sites of computing cultures in the twentieth century: "Personal and social networked computing thrived before personal computers… [T]he post-1975 turn to personal computers represents a time in which possibilities were foreclosed, connections were severed, and computing communities waned."[101] Rankin's focus illuminates cultures of computing in educational settings like public schools, but the focus on educational institutions misses the extra-institutional locations of computing groups like Community Memory.

The student-run record store of Leopold's was itself an important site of the rise of a new social use of computing affiliated with an educational institution, but it occurred not in a Computer Science classroom. Later sites of the project were all locations in Berkeley catering to Leftist lifestyles and causes, such as co-op grocery stores, and a perspective that looks to a single category of institutional space and how it contained a computing culture can miss the heterogeneity of the spaces where the Community Memory project established itself. The university setting clearly demonstrates a rich context that deserves further inquiry. However, a university is not just the school's buildings and classrooms but the social world surrounding a campus. The Community Memory project existed in para-institutional spaces in Berkeley and nearby sites in Oakland, places where members of the university community would encounter other people they would not necessarily have encountered on the UC-Berkeley campus. The shared use of computers in educational settings was already determined by the school as an

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[101] Joy Lisi Rankin, *A People's History of Computing in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 229.

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institution with hierarchical roles. Another female engineer of the CM project, Sandy Emerson, articulated a similar idea in relation to one terminal that was built in a public library:

> It may be that a 'school' setting (in which the student expects to have to be taught and to feel passive) is not the best place to test self-reliance in computer use. I really don't think most people will inherently fear a micro[computer] presented to them in a non-institutional setting…. In our pilot project, the terminal in the public library was the least used, and we think the setting made the difference.[102]

The archival materials of the Community Memory project present a parallel track to dominant discourses of computing in the counterculture and to the educational projects that other computing historians analyze. The Community Memory project envisioned a type of computing grounded in public spaces marked by a casual intimacy and by community connections.

In constantly signaling that the Community Memory terminals were for "diverse" constituents of neighborhoods and with an attention to maintaining low costs to use the terminals, the CM project oriented itself toward fostering computer use by marginalized members of society, including the poor and people of color who have helped build the San Francisco peninsula's economy throughout the twentieth century. By the project's end, an enclosed terminal and an installed coin-box represented a retreat from this ideal vision of a computing terminal for maximum public use. The discourse of designing a community interface in the CM project will be analyzed in the following sections. Tracking the notion of community across the shifting infrastructural orientations in the CM project can reveal how the terminal design always carried with it a focus on banal placement outside of the home and can illustrate the stakes of the hard battle that the CM project waged by the early-1990s against a more corporate computing culture.

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[102] Letter to Peter and Trudy Johnson-Lenz, July 28, 1979, 3. Carton 6, Folder 24, Lee Felsenstein Papers, Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, California.

Designing a Community Interface

The second phase of the project's run represents in some ways the most emblematic phase of the project. After the short run in 1973-1974, when the banner of countercultural idealism was a feature of the project, a more sober approach to maintaining a system in use was part of the project in the 1980s. Coin-boxes became installed in this period in order to recover some operational costs, and the emphasis on a publicness that relied on "casual, 'drop-in' use patterns" were seen as established design features of the system.[103] This section analyzes several concepts about the design and positioning of the system that encouraged urban encounters and not the privatized experience of personal computing.

Against the naturalization in news and amateur computing discourses of the personal computer for the home, the CM project was committed to using public computers to bring a community closer together. The vision of "publicness" that CM based its project on was decidedly urban, carrying with it the residues of countercultural spatial projects in San Francisco. In this sense, the CM project was also about what I call "mobile publicization." This term references and extends Raymond Williams's landmark definition of how media and social space reinforce one another through a "mobile privatization." "Mobile privatization" refers to the way that communications technologies began to link the private, suburban home with the industrializing city after the Second World War. The ideology of privacy that built post-WWII suburbia also encouraged a culture of private media consumption through broadcast media such as radio and then television. The television allowed for the imagined experience of travel, which substituted a physical mobility with a mediated mobility within the confines of the home. The television fulfilled "an at-once mobile and home-centered way of living: a form of *mobile*

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[103] Farrington and Pine, 221.

privatization. Broadcasting in its applied form was a social product of this distinctive

tendency."[104] Media forms, infrastructure, and social needs align and intertwine in Williams's

conception of the changing spatiality of American life. Lynn Spigel furthers these ideas, namely

that a discursive construction of suburbia based on the family unit became a discursive space, or

spatiality, of the experience of community mediated through television: "The central

preoccupation in the new suburban culture was the construction of a particular discursive space

through which the family could mediate the contradictory impulses for a private haven on the

one hand, and community participation on the other."[105] A mobility constructed through the

ideology of privacy that the suburban home and the television formed helped to make the home

"a vehicular form, a mode of transport in and of itself,"[106] one that provided "imaginary transport

to urban spaces while allowing family members to remain in the safe space of the suburban

home."[107] Such an argument on the spatiality of domestic media technologies, written during and

after the 1990s, had by that time a material evidentiary weight to it; desktop computers did

indeed come to populate the home by the new millennium, and the overcoming of space through

the one-to-many technology of the television was now secured with the popular networking

protocols of the many-to-many structure of the World Wide Web. Histories of the CM project—

and other community infrastructure projects—have more nuance to offer about a historical trend

parallel to the tidy, domestic spatialization of our screened technologies.

Rather than bring in the outside world to the domestic confines of the home, the CM

terminal brought individuals out into public sites in their local neighborhood. Community

Memory project built a "mobile publicization" that referred users spatially to the neighborhood

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[104.] Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York: Routledge, 2003 [1974]), 19-20.
[105] Spigel, 32.
[106] Lynn Spigel, "Media Homes: Then and Now," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (2001): 392.
[107] Ibid., 388.

surrounding them. The CM project would counter the mobile privatization of domestic

technologies within a rapidly expanding home media culture by offering a "mobile

publicization," a mobile, public, and urban-centered way of experiencing community.

Community could be built and accessed through technologies shared with others who you do not

know. The CM project had the stated mission to design a community information interface that

could instill "an awareness of one's neighbors and how one is like them."[108] Understanding the

CM project as a "mobile publicization" brings to the fore how the project sought to build a new

orientation to space through their computing project.

A mobile publicization encapsulates the CM project's critique of the suburban experience

of media consumption, which blinds individuals from the power relations behind media

distribution and control. Instead of a mediated experience of proximity while far away in the

suburbs, CM's intervention into computing saw an important battle ground in computing to be

the fight for public space. The group identified that the computer's discursive and material move

into the home diminished spaces of publicness. CM staff critiqued the technological basis of

mobile privatization in the early 1980s:

> Direct social interaction increasingly has been displaced by a network of
> industrialized social relations. Modern alienation, perfected with the aid of
> electronic media, has become identified with these media—particularly with the
> computer and television. The Community Memory Project is an attempt to
> demonstrate the possibility of using computer technology to support an expansion
> of public space rather than to reinforce passivity and powerlessness.[109]

The Community Memory project's designers and staffers believed that the privatizing ideology

behind the rise of the suburbs was influencing the political potential of computing to encourage

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[108] "Mission," April 19, 1988, Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[109] "The Community Memory Project," [ca. 1980], press release, Box 12, Folder 24, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

alienation and powerlessness. Their technological project was one mode of stopping such a wholesale shift of the promise of computing to the private ideology structuring the suburbs.

Community Memory's mobile publicization sought the expansion of public, mediated spaces through the same technologies that otherwise encouraged privatized use of media technologies. In his prehistory of the cloud, Tung-Hui Hu also demonstrated how the 1970s witnessed the creation of alternative physical networks "that attempted to hack or reconfigure the shape of the network system" through the Truckstop Network.[110] The Truckstop Network, a project by artist collective Ant Farm, also revealed what I see as a mobile publicization in the decisive shift to disrupt received notions of a privatized media and computing culture. In a modified Chevrolet van, Ant Farm strapped on new Portapak camcorders, recorded video at colleges and hippie strongholds, and then brought these alternative video visions to fellow travelers across the country. Hu argues that the Truckstop Network built a proto-network that was a "statement about mobility itself" for "media nomads."[111] Hu's historical repositioning of the infrastructure beneath cloud computing arising not only through the defense industry-funded ARPANET but also through the Truckstop Network's decentralized system of cars traveling between nodes parallels Community Memory's vision of making computing public through public computing terminals.

The mobile publicization that CM designed rested on public and open access to the terminals by the widest possible social audience. Building from the desired location of "high-traffic areas" in which the CM designers sought to place the terminals, the design was engineered for the type of spatial tactics that encourage alternative uses of spaces.[112] In a planning document

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[110] Hu, 27-30.
[111] Ibid., 28.
[112] Michel De Certeau defines a "tactic" as "a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to

from 1988, CM staff list the potential audience of the terminal as purposefully broad, encompassing activists as well as individuals with various social and educational skills. The list of those who are ideal participants in CM are: "those who can read," "those with money," "information freaks," and "change agents."[113] The social portrait of intended users of the system here emerge as both those considered to be activists—"change agents"—but also those seen as hackers, the rich, and those with a minimum level of education. The appeal to these multiple social categories was also organized around design elements such as the terminal design, the availability of the system, and the archiving of messages.

Standing Terminals and Access

An important element in the design of a community information format that could offer a "mobile publicization" is the shift to a standing terminal. After the seated terminal at Leopold's record store and the Whole Earth Access from 1973-1974, the terminal design by the project's second and third phases was changed to a standing terminal. Evelyn Pine, director of the project in its final phase, said that the form of the standing terminal was meant to evoke the casual urban experience of walking up to an ATM machine.[114] Such a vision of its public terminals centered on a publicness that borrowed modes of interaction from other urban technological interfaces, which engineered an ability for users to stumble across the system and discover its potential. Describing the appearance of the system, reporter Lisa Lynch wrote in 1990: "Go to any of the sites and look for something resembling a video game with a rack of turquoise-blue instruction

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the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance." See Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xix.

[113] "Agenda," 5, April 7, 1988, Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

[114] Evelyn Pine in discussion with the author, July 27, 2018.

leaflets and a coin box attached to either side."[115] By this point in the project's run, the group's

discursive war against the home computer had become outpaced by other technological

developments. Once payphones and videogame arcades began to determine the public's

expectations of the CM terminals, the public terminals felt less novel by the public and more

banal.

The standing terminal, however, raised issues of accessibility that were never properly

fused with the design goals of the project. A terminal from the early era would invite a user to sit

down in front of it, which could also have accommodated those with differing abilities or limited

mobility. The inequity of the standing terminal was at least acknowledged internally in the

group's internal communications, including several action items during a board meeting on June

18, 1990, including: "A key issue in the user interface is the hardware and the terminal itself….

[A] sit-down terminal, larger screens or enlargement screens, a place to hold manuscripts, pencils

& papers or printers on sites, and stools for stand-up terminals" were discussed as components of

making the system more accessible.[116] Designing a community information format appears here

to be less about the "user interface" materialized on the monitor's screen and more about the

space and the media that surround the computing terminal. These features of the spatial

accessibility of the project are here presented as an afterthought to the design of the information

curation and retrieval aspects of the project's design. The accessibility concerns that arose deal

with users' experience of using the terminal. Since the system was by the second and third

phases oriented toward senior citizen's and youth groups, two widely different social

demographics, the group's thoughts on accessibility reach back to ask one of media studies

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[115] Lynch, "The Maturing," 3.
[116] Memo from Evelyn Pine to Community Memory Board of Directors, June 18, 1990, 1, Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

scholar Elizabeth Ellcessor's main elements in her toolkit of studying access: "How is a medium experienced and defined by various groups or individuals, in relation to particular embodied identities, material forms, or social contexts?"[117] While this moment in the Community Memory project's history is just one small anecdote, one takeaway is that the "mobile publicization" built into the project confronted the designers of the CM project with a different set of accessibility concerns than what may have emerged for individual users of personal computers. The CM project had to confront the issues of accessibility to reach the widest public possible with their system, a concern that major tech companies did not have to hold foremost in their design and engineering thoughts when designing computers for domestic consumption.

The standing terminals were also designed due to the modularity of the equipment that the CM project had at the time. For the project's second phase, rather than purchase an individual teletype terminal as in the project's first phase, the CM project secured three "not-so-state-of-the-art" Soroc-brand terminals from Apple.[118] Since Apple did not manufacture Soroc's "dumb terminals," which means a display monitor with no computer processing abilities, the terminals must have been a gift from Apple, echoing the original donation of the SDS-940 that helped secure the first phase of the CM project back in 1973. Competition with the lower price of personal computers meant that the system could run by the mid-1980s with individual personal computers installed in each terminal. The shift toward the use of personal computers in a project of mobile publicization shows the extent to which the system began to be seen by its engineers as fighting a losing battle against the personal computer. Nevertheless, one way the CM project

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[117] Elizabeth Ellcessor, *Restricted Access: Media, Disability, and the Politics of Participation* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 19.

[118] *Community Memory News* 2 (1984), 2. Box 12, Folder 16, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

aimed to differentiate their system was through a 1980s vision of "always-on digital technology" or a near-constant infrastructural availability.

Availability

Another element in the design of the CM project as a community information format that offers a mobile publicization is the notion of constant availability. Infrastructures are made to run without intervention. When infrastructures break down, then we realize the immense support that they provide to our connected and networked lives.[119] The initial Community Memory system ran until the end of 1974. The three-terminal system was in use up to 70% of the time it was available, and users posted around 8000 entries by the time the system shut down.[120] In the CM system, ideal qualities such as "trouble-free availability 90% of the time," "as few revisions as possible," and "maximum system downtime [of] 24 hours" were based in an image of availability for potential users. These features oriented the system toward being an ideal public utility akin to a light pole, not a private appliance.[121] Even if these metrics were overly ideal approximations of what the system could achieve, the desire to see computers as a public infrastructure is important. No matter what happened to the corporate world of private computing, Community Memory would continue to exist to encourage community information exchange, which was considered by Felsenstein to be "a very significant element of community organization, the community infrastructure. We're much more interested in that developing than we are in a particular kind of computer system developing."[122] The cultural imaginary of the CM

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[119] Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

[120] "Proposal for a Community Memory Pilot Project," Box 1, Folder 14, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

[121] Sue Bloch, "Summary of Pilot Project Questionnaire," 5, Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

[122] Vanessa Schnatmeier, "Building the Electronic Neighborhood," *Microtimes*, August 1985, 55.

project hinged upon the availability of access to the public infrastructure of community information. The system carried forward this notion of "availability" akin to the analog bulletin board, but with a wider social footprint within a community.

Availability also meant an intuitive interface design. The interface of the Apple II and other personal computers with a graphical user interface (GUI) were seen by CM's designers as a helpful corrective to the way that users interacted with the terminals in 1987, which required users to click on "YES" or "NO" commands for each individual option in a series, rather than let the user select the specific option they wanted with a mouse, for example.[123] The cultural shift to a graphical orientation to the interface also meant that the CM project staff desired a more graphical representation of the way messages and replies in the system were interconnected.[124] By the point that the GUI became more widespread, the CM project was no longer creating an alternative but following in the wake of the more cemented cultural and technological norms of personal computing. The Community Memory project began to adapt, even while continuing to advertise the potential benefits of their project of mobile publicization to as many people as possible.

The concept of availability also included the widespread efforts to publicize the terminals, which was a hard-fought battle against the encroaching norm of personal computing by the mid-1980s. Attempts to publicize and spread the mission of the Community Memory project occurred on a variety of fronts. Community Memory Community Meetings (or CMCMs

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[123] Sherry Turkle explains this desire for a "transparent" interaction with the interface not to refer to going "below the hood" of a computer as in earlier eras but rather a shift toward the expectation of "having things work without needing to look into the inner workings of the computer. This was, somewhat paradoxically, a kind of transparency enabled by complexity and opacity." Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York City, NY: Touchstone, 1995), 42.

[124] Catherine Dunford, "Campaign Begins for Community Support," *Community Memory News* 3 (Summer 1987), 6. Box 12, Folder 16, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

for short) were drop-in informational meetings held by CM project staff for individuals interested in learning more about the system. The meetings aimed to spread awareness of "threats to human freedom arising from coercive applications of 'information' technologies."[125] Additionally, a roving terminal was built that could be transported to sites interested in hosting a terminal. "Rover," as it was affectionately called, was a terminal on wheels that would be brought into community centers and other sites to demonstrate what having a terminal in their space would look and feel like.[126] These efforts to make the CM project terminals friendly and approachable show that a mobile publicization was not self-evident through surface level engagements with the terminals. The restructuring of American society and space made for a distrust of resources like public computing held in common and shared with one's neighbors, and the CM project tried many avenues to break down this frequent distrust of computing as a public good.

Ephemeral Archives, Information Exchanges: Users as Co-Creators

In the project's second major phase, users' contributions—and the proto-hyperlinking they created—were still at the forefront of the internal discussions and the public marketing of the project. A further entrenchment of the community ideals of the project took place in the design of the terminals in a spatial sense. The public dimension of the CM project's terminals was defined before the system's second launch in 1984. In 1983, the group decided during a board meeting that a "local group should decide" where the terminals should go, with the added observation that "terminals should cover [a] neighborhood geographically and culturally."[127] The

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[125] Ibid., 1.
[126] *Co-Op News* (March 3, 1986), 4. Box 12, Folder 25, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[127] Sue Bloch, memo to Community Memory Board of Directors, April 25, 1983, 1, Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

embeddedness of the Community Memory terminal in a neighborhood would even extend to the hiring of local staffers "from the neighborhood to be site supervisors."[128] While these ideals only partially guided the set-up of a system (setting up deliberative mechanisms for deciding where to place terminals was difficult to enact in practice), the trust in a community's users did indeed guide the design and use of the system.

The vision of networking that Community Memory sustained, and its building into the system a trust in users, was in no small part due to the radical visions of communication that the women of Community Memory brought to the design of the terminals. Before joining Community Memory in the late-1980s as communications director and acting as the project's last executive director in the early-1990s, Evelyn Pine was a staff-member of the Foundation for Community Service Cable Television. Pine wrote in 1986 on the importance of access to video distribution in the context of cable television: "Organizing means connecting individual concerns to a broader context, creating new networks of information and support which challenge and transform the status quo."[129] As early as 1976, Karen Paulsell, communications director of the CM project in the mid-1980s, had attended an NGO forum at the UN Conference on Human Settlements in Vancouver, Canada. Her attendance led her to conclude the following about communication technology as a tool of spatial power:

> The world has become a communication-space, and control over communication and information has become power: power to make things happen, or to prevent things from happening, power to control the minds and behavior of people by controlling the images they see and the information they receive, power to control the imagination of people by controlling the visions of alternative futures which pass through the media.[130]

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[128] Ibid.
[129] Evelyn Pine, "Exchanging Tapes Creates New Communities," *Community Television Review* 9, no. 1 (1986): 28.
[130] Karen Paulsell, "Karen Paulsell Organizing Support to Expand Transnational Network for Alternative Communications," *Media Report to Women* 6.9 (September 1, 1978), 10.

What these women contributed were orientations to a variety of media forms and formats that foregrounded the political expression of a community and the will to control access to information curation from the ground up. Their involvement in distinct spheres of political action toward sustaining communities of media production are evidence of how their involvement was integral to sustaining the vision of public computing within the CM project. Their involvement in the CM project as non-engineers is important to recuperate and to remember. Pine, Paulsell, and the other women of the CM project brought out the same "feminist commitments to craft techniques, collectively organized work, and figuring things out on the fly" that have long characterized a type of skillful amateurism that sustains communities and works to make spaces more inclusive.[131] As activists for the expansion of public access and control of media, they follow what media scholar Cait McKinney highlights as a capable amateurism. Paulsell, Pine, and others benefitted "from a lack of professional baggage, including firm ideas about protocols, standards, and what we might call 'best practices' today."[132] The Community Memory Project's commitment to "positive applications of computer technology" can be understood as issuing as much from the career trajectories of the women involved with the project like Pam Hardt-English, Karen Paulsell, and Evelyn Pine as much as it can be attributed to the ingenuity of men like Lee Felsenstein, Ken Colstad, and Efrem Lipkin.

These ideological contributions to the vision of publicness impacted the CM project's trust in users. This trust was a design solution to the ways that existing means of communication distorted the ability of individuals to work together for a common cause. This was in distinction from systems like the WELL, another landmark cultural moment in networking community before the Web. Community information curation in the CM project would sidestep the

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[131] McKinney, 30.
[132] Ibid.

constraints posed by "commercial 'information providers.'"[133] A cross-indexing of user-produced messages would create "connections [people] might not otherwise make."[134] Despite the orientation of the CM project, which was from 1973 a "public" technology, chroniclers and journalists often see the primary impact of the counterculture to be how the hippies and commune-dwellers strapped on their pocket protectors, built smaller microcomputers, and then gifted computers back in the hands of "the people" as a private technology in the home. As journalist Howard Rheingold explained this historical moment: "Personal computers and the PC industry were created by young iconoclasts who had seen the LSD revolution fizzle, the political revolution fail. Computers for the people was the latest battle in the same campaign."[135] In 1984, just before the WELL launched in 1985, Community Memory launched its second phase of public terminals, and their ideals created a rather different orientation to the system design than that found in the WELL.

The WELL is often cited as an influential bulletin board forum that set the stage for participation in virtual communities on the World Wide Web. The intellectually-oriented WELL spurred important developments toward the computer becoming a "personal" technology with access to networked communities, as Fred Turner argues: "Over time, the [WELL]'s members and forums helped redefine the microcomputer as a 'personal' machine, computer communication networks as 'virtual communities,' and cyberspace itself as the digital equivalent of the western landscape into which so many communards set forth in the late 1960s, the 'electronic frontier.'"[136] The Community Memory project, however, represents another flank of

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[133] Letter to Moe's Books, December 9, 1987. Box 5, Folder 6, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Howard Rheingold, "Daily Life in Cyberspace: How the Computerized Counterculture Built a New Kind of Place," in *Social Media Archaeology and Poetics*, ed. Judy Malloy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016 [1993]), 70-71.
[136] Turner, 6.

this historical movement that guided computing technology away from government and industry *out into public spaces*, not just *into the home*. In other words, the Community Memory project group had other political horizons for their community computing activism than just the "salon" atmosphere of the WELL, where Grateful Dead fans—affectionately known as "Deadheads"— and Biosphere 2 enthusiasts could exchange their opinions on living in a commune. The competition with the WELL was seen by members of the CM project as a particular hurdle. When considering the challenges facing the CM project, one planning document wrote that it was "easier to subscribe to the WELL than to help develop CM."[137] The belief in users as co-creators of the system involved tactics such as non-moderation of content, which sets the Community Memory project apart from other computing projects of its era.

Community Memory departs from the WELL in the cultural imaginary the project desired to build. The WELL design team had seven goals when the WELL was founded, which has been analyzed as a system built both as "a countercultural conception of community and [as] a cybernetic vision of control."[138] Some of these rules stipulated that the WELL should be "profit making," "self-governing," and "a community."[139] Preceding slightly WELL's seven foundational rules, the Community Memory project articulated in 1984 a list of "mythic" elements that they intended to perpetuate through the system.[140] The development of "mythic" elements shows how their project was about spatiality, or the blending of imaginary orientations to space as much as it was about installing computers materially in public spaces.[141] Their list departed from the WELL's 1985 list and offered propositions that the designers wanted users to

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[137] "Planning Questionnaire," Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[138] Turner, 143.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, 145.

realize through engagement with the system. These myths centered on building a resonant form of solidarity that users would take away from their engagements with the CM system. The focus on users building the system is made plain in the following myths: "CM can be owned and operated by the kind of people I know or with whom I live," "CM is a way to help people you don't know but care about," and "CM doesn't work automatically—people have to help each other use it."[142] On this latter point, the founding myths of the Community Memory project position collaboration of users as a socio-technical standard. This is how the CM project built a community information format, by attempting to teach users how to see their fellow citizens as a resource with whom they can build networks in common. The definition of the commons that the project's members decided upon at this stage was grounded in the continual maintenance of the system through use: "CM is a commons—the information in it is available to everybody and everybody has to help keep the information useful."[143] In encouraging the use of the system as a commons, specifically as a repository of user-generated information based in a specific locality, the Community Memory project articulated groundbreaking ideas of networking localities in the before the Web, parallel to other systems like the WELL but distinct from them in the history of computing.

The commitment to community-curated information in the CM project signals how a belief in free expression relied on a commitment not to moderate messages posted by users. Throughout the project's existence, content moderation was strictly off limits. On the decision not to moderate content, Ken Colstad spoke of the group's position as an outside observer, not a mediator: "The whole trick is not to mediate. If you start mediating, you start making

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[142] Memo from Publicity Committee, May 8, 1984. Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[143] Ibid.

assumptions about what the system is used for."[144] The Community Memory group idealized the creation of a new awareness amongst individuals in relationship to computers, to instill a sense of community adherence and engagement through public terminals.

One design feature built into the terminal concerned the storage of information and the retrieval of messages. Just like human memory, the system of terminals was designed to be forgetful. Messages posted by users during their visit to the public library or to the co-op grocery store were to last in the system as long as they were accessed. If messages stopped being accessed, then the messages would be deleted after a duration of time. Ephemerality, while not highlighted by the designers as such, was thus an integral part of the design of the system. The ephemerality of the system design modeled how human memory worked, and it also echoed how people accessed information that was sometimes unreliable in other information-sharing contexts such as with a cork bulletin board, which could become cluttered repositories of messy notes. The ephemerality of posting also highlighted that user activity would decide the content of the system, without the outside involvement of anyone in the CM project.

The design of the system lowered the hierarchy between designers and users, resulting in a system that relied on users' contributions and the retreat of involvement by the designers. The user curation of community information led to a range of uses, many of them unexpected. Users on Community Memory terminals did develop uses of the system beyond the intentions of the creators of the system, developing "mythical CM 'personalities' that [would] banter back and forth with one another."[145] The use of the CM system would be defined by users and not

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[144] John Hubner, "Computer Power to the People!," *San Jose Mercury News/CAL Today*, August 7, 1983, 10. Box 12, Folder 25, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[145] Carl Farrington, "In the Works: New Hardware, Software for Community Memory," *Community Memory News* 3 (Summer 1987): 1. Box 12, Folder 16, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

modified by CM staff. As a result, attention to information overload was already on the minds of the CM staff from the earliest stages of the project: "How do you wade through all the garbage?" wondered one concerned participant in the Homebrew Computer Club during an early discussion of the project.[146] In a later survey among the CM staff members, an array of "very extensive and diverse" material in the database is encouraged, such as: "local and general info, jokes, entertainment, [a] community calendar" as well as "CM history."[147] The open encouragement and appreciation of a diversity of types of information revealed how the CM project's designers desired the public management of public information. Such a public management would have low technical barriers to access, with the following imperative: a "newcomer must be able to find specific info easily."[148] Community Memory used computers to create a networked space of everyday life, as opposed to the naturalization occurring in popular press accounts and tinkerer discourse of the computer migrating toward the home. The mobile publicization that the project encouraged relied on an anti-suburban mode of sociality.

The project's "uncompromising policy of noncensorship" paired with a lack of widespread publicization of the terminals, the system, and how to use them, meant that when people would stumble upon the terminals in public spaces, they would interact with the machines playfully, exploring the screen by typing in random strings of letters to see what would happen on the screen. Understandably, this feature of the publicness of the placement of the terminals "caused a lot of nonsense messages to appear in the database."[149] I sit with the junk messages

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[146] Fred Moore, "New Club Starts in San Francisco," *Homebrew Computer Club Newsletter*, no. 3 (May 1975): 1. Box 9, Folder 34, Silicon Valley Ephemera Collection, Stanford University Special Collections, Stanford, California.
[147] Sue Bloch, "Summary of Pilot Project Questionnaire," 7. Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[148] Meeting Minutes, January 16, 1990. Box 1, Folder 6, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.
[149] Farrington and Pine, 223.

here to read how the CM project—in building a public computing system and defining a "community information format"—dealt with messages deemed not in the spirit of the system, despite the messages being a result of the system's operation, design, and placement.

The result of "trying out" the terminals by walking up to it and entering in random words, letters, and strings of characters as a message meant that the CM project staffers and volunteers did not have to filter out or remove messages, they primarily had to weed through the "junk" in the system. The policy of non-censorship in the CM project was adhered to quite steadfastly—only 5 out of over 10,000 messages were ever removed.[150] The junk messages on the other hand formed up to 10-20% of the database's contents, according to Carl Farrington and Evelyn Pine, both of whom oversaw the project in its last phase.[151] The junk messages appeared to regular users of the system as an unordered, messy aspect to the system. The junk messages lowered the quality of the system in users' eyes, creating "a negative impression among browsers as to the quality of the database."[152] One decision to address the junk messages was a log-in feature. A log-in feature was added in the mid-1980s, which meant that users could return to any terminal and access the prior messages they posted without having to search by the keywords that they appended to their posts.[153] This feature was also intended by the project's designers as a way to better capture who was posting junk messages.

The language of a user-constructed community emerged in the internal design documents of the Community Memory group. In a report on the first pilot phase of the project, one staffer

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[150] Ibid.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid. The reception of social media interfaces in the Community Memory project finds a later resonance in danah boyd's analysis of teens preferring Facebook over MySpace over the former's perceived "safety" and "cleanliness." Such preferences come freighted with racist and class-based assumptions on aesthetics and taste. See danah boyd, "White Flight in Networked Publics?," in *Race After the Internet*, ed. Lisa Nakamura and Peter A. Chow-White (London: Routledge, 2012).

[153] "New CM Network Gets Good Response," *Community Memory News* 2 (1985): 2. Box 12, Folder 16, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

saw the users of Community Memory as actors within a cybernetic drama, each individual an efficient, betterment-seeking organism: "There is no anticipating the breadth of the uses [individual users] will make; nor any way to provide for these, except by making the flexibility and useability [sic] of the tool as great as possible."[154] The system was not only to serve a wide public beyond the counterculture, but it also was supposed to expand through use. The CM group was engineering for adaptive use, not for a final product. By engineering the system in this way, competition with the emergent norm of personal computing and the need to instruct, guide, and teach users how to post the "right" kind of message created a large amount of labor for the CM project staff.

The CM project's battle against personal computing looked increasingly unwinnable by the early-1990s. "It didn't look like the site of a telecommunications revolution," wrote reporter Lisa Lynch at the launch of a CM project terminal opening in Milt's Coin-Op Laundromat in Berkeley in early 1990.[155] Lynch's article interviews CM staff member, Tom Nemcik, on the decision to install a terminal in the laundromat. Nemcik said: "If telecommunications is going to become a hit in the '90s, people are going to demand that the system handle a wash and a quick dry while the user is online."[156] The focus on a banal, public placement underlines the tension in the project's later years of becoming a quotidian, municipal technology at the expense of its earlier dreams of inciting a communications revolution. In other words, if CM did not discard their earlier ideals of an alternative infrastructure as a type of revolution, they were at least going to make their infrastructure part of a practical revolution, to make networking convenient to do alongside folding laundry. The banality of the project here is underlined in order to see how the

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[154] Michael Rossman, "Implications of Community Memory," *ACM SIGCAS Computers & Society* 6, no. 4 (1975): 8-9.
[155] Lynch, "The Maturing," 3.
[156] Ibid.

arc of the revolutionary tenor of Community Memory became subsumed within an idiom of everyday and banal technology use.

Within the project's later phase, a couple features that served to keep the project in operation also served, I argue, to enclose the project. This enclosure was both literal as well as symbolic, a physical enclosure in an attempt to prevent perceived vandalism as well as an analogous enclosure and cutting off of the vision of community that the project first supported. The introduction of the coin-box was a moment of reconfiguration of the political agenda behind the project. Charging users for time spent on the terminals was in 1985 the way to recoup the costs of running the system.[157] Posting a message in 1987 cost $0.25. Installing a coin-box was projected to give the project around ten thousand dollars annually.[158] Desperate for a funding source, the design choice was implemented. The coin-box was rationalized as comparable to the nominal fees to access modes of urban communication dotted around cities already. The coin-box was described as "similar to ones found on pay phones."[159] The CM project evolved from being akin to the bulletin board into functioning like a pay phone, and with it meant an increasing distrust of the user the system was meant to empower.

The enclosure of the system was meant to discourage vandalism, even though such an occurrence was a rarity. The main problem of the system was not vandalism but making sure the system was working consistently, so that people could count on it.[160] Even if "theft and vandalism" never arose, the fact that the group *feared* that they may have such problems with the

[157] *Community Memory News* 2 (1985), 6. Box 12, Folder 16, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

[158] "Memo on the Future of Community Memory," 2, Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

[159] Tom Nemcik, "The Telecommunications Revolution Is Now at Your Laundromat," *Gateway News* (April 1990): 11. Box 12, Folder 2, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

[160] Evelyn Pine in conversation with the author, July 27, 2018.

terminals speaks to an unease with the very publicness of the terminals, the lynchpin of the project.

If users were designed as co-creators of the CM system of terminals, then the shift already underway among users toward personal computing ushered in the end of the project. Without a change in belief about what computing could bring—without a shift in users' belief in the spatiality of computing—Community Memory could not sustain itself. By 1990, the project's organizers recognized the inability to maintain a profitable system of publicly accessible, low-cost computing terminals. The group's attention shifted in the third phase of the project to modeling the system as a software/hardware package for potential buyers of the system. Tom Nemcik described the outlook of the group in February 1990:

> What we want to do is create a cookbook on how to establish a community communications system. We want to put in this cookbook the proper recipes of people, talent, and energy so that someone can go in with a certain amount of money and come out with a self-sustaining system.[161]

The Community Memory project could be a recipe for a community communication infrastructure, a community information format that could program a vision of community media access and participation. Indeed, one additional motivating factor for the installation of the coin-boxes in 1987 was to make sure the system could be profitable specifically to attract outside funding. Rather than continue to preach the revolution, the system's design was sold to the public as "elegant" in its design and with an ability to "maximize utility while minimizing costs and resources."[162] CM ran up against the established mode of accessing networked society by its design elements and its mission for public access when computers were by that point established domestic technologies. Users had posted in the "suggestions" forum of CM in 1990 expressing

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[161] Lynch, "The Maturing," 35.
[162] "What Is the Community Memory Project?" Press Release, [ca. 1990], Box 12, Folder 12, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

their frustration "to have to stand up while on-line," another iteration of the disconnect between addressing accessibility concerns and sustaining public use for the project.[163] With the home computer now a norm of access to networked connection and bulletin boards by 1990, gone was the ability to convince users of the specific design and affordances built into Community Memory. The CM project was sold to the city of Berkeley in 1992, after which the terminals failed to be maintained. Community Memory had ended.

Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the history of the Community Memory project in order to surface how the CM project built a community information format of public infrastructure. The practice and infrastructure of community information curation was the template that the designers realized they were most interested in building all along. The historical case of Community Memory shows that prior radical visions of networking are not just precursors to other electronic Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) such as USENET, which had by the 1990s become the home for alternative communities to gather from across the world on topics of interest. The Community Memory project marked an important and distinct moment in the cultural trend to make computing "public" alongside the movement of the computer into the home in the eventful period before the World Wide Web.

A stray archival image, found nested within a series of news articles related to the Community Memory project, is an apt image upon which to close this chapter. A terminal from the mid-1980s phase of the CM project sits on a bed of grass, its screen enclosing a fresh bundle of flowers. The Community Memory project initially aligned its vision with the Brautigan poem of being watched over in nature by "machines of loving grace": "I like to think…of a cybernetic

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[163] Lynch, "The Maturing," 35.

ecology/where we are free of our labors/and joined back to nature,/…and all watched over/by machines of loving grace."[164] This stray archival image feeds this particular spatial and cultural fantasy of computing. It also speaks to the potential of returning to the past visions of subcultural tinkerers and "capable amateurs" whose commitments to building public computing have been largely forgotten in our own social media environment.

Figure 2-5: This archival photograph, lodged in a folder of news articles, displays flowers bursting out of the mid-1980s Community Memory terminal monitor. Box 12, Folder 25, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

The women of Community Memory gave the project its distinctive voice and tenor by both Evelyn Pine and Karen Paulsell serving as communications directors. Evelyn Pine also made the hard decision to sell the system in 1992, which in the history of alternative technological projects is as significant a moment as the founding of a project. The hopeful visions of the CM project are still there, in the archive, waiting for scholars to retrieve them.

What is important in the history of the Community Memory project analyzed here is that the project intermittently recognized their work with language akin to how I situate the community information format, though without using that term explicitly. This is because the

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164 Brautigan, "All Watched Over," 194.

designers and engineers of the CM project understood the terminal system as a way to meld not just emergent computing technologies to new uses, but to bend the social meaning of computing to craft a new way of articulating community media access and participation in information curation. As a countercultural project that theorized a "mobile publicization" of computing, with computing power given to everyday people in a community, the CM project envisioned computing power for the people before the rise of the popular technology and experience of the World Wide Web.

The history of computing must not merely rubberstamp the present, as if today's technologies were all that past individuals yearned to accomplish through their assiduous labor. A popular discourse that establishes an imaginary line separating a text-based, read-only web called "Web 1.0" set against a participatory, interactive, and immersive "Web 2.0" actively distorts our vision of how computing was already "social" before the arrival of our contemporary social media platforms.[165] The discourse of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 positions software defined as "social" as purely 21st-century phenomena. If many of our digital networks arise on top of older networks, such as internet cables replacing former telegraph lines, Community Memory's community information format sought a rupture from this paradigm and is an important case to understand when imagining alternatives to the networked culture and digital platforms that surround us today. In an era of rapidly growing distrust in social media platforms amid a rise in vitriolic, racist, and white nationalist hate speech online today, understanding how past community information formats fostered community information curation offers alternative paths and overlooked models for being social through media. The CM project's constant aim to create a system of networking "to help people you don't know but care about" is an important

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[165] Megan Sapnar Ankerson, "Social Media and the "Read-Only" Web: Reconfiguring Social Logics and Historical Boundaries," *Social Media + Society* 1, no. 2 (2015): 1.

case study to imagine new horizons and new solutions to fix our fractured, interconnected world.[166]

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[166] Memo on "CM Myth," May 8, 1984, Box 1, Folder 13, Community Memory Records, Computer History Museum, Shustek Research Archive, Fremont, California.

Chapter 3 Nelson Sullivan's Video Memories: Home Videos and the Archive Effect of Queer Media

If the second chapter was about the community information format of public computing infrastructure, then this chapter expands on the notion of the community information format to excavate a vision of community built through the distribution and archiving of the large corpus of home videos recorded by gay videographer Nelson Sullivan throughout the 1980s. Whereas the second chapter recuperated a past community information format as an important precursor to social media as we experience it today, then the third chapter peers through the other side of the looking glass, from contemporary social media to a collection of videotapes from before the Web that have become a type of queer commons, a reservoir of meaning for audiences eager to experience the history recorded in Sullivan's tapes.

Similar to my approach toward the public computing terminals of the second chapter, my orientation to Sullivan's videos seeks to identify past media technological visions and uses for recuperation in the present. Sullivan's videos were, for him, video diaries of a life he found thrilling, full of performance artists, queer friends, and drag impresarios who used the backdrop of the bustling downtown New York City scene of club-going as their stage. After Sullivan's lifelong friend Dick Richards uploaded Sullivan's archive of home videos to the 5 Ninth Avenue Project YouTube channel from 2008 to 2018, Sullivan's work now offers an apt case study for analyzing how a "community information format" of the home video has become important for viewers today.

Figure 3-1: Nelson Sullivan's home videos frequently capture his everyday experience in New York City in a first-person frame of reference, with Sullivan frequently addressing the camera lens directly. "Nelson Sullivan's Cable TV Show (as imagined from his videos)," uploaded June 11, 2015, video, 28:38, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed March 8, 2020,
https://youtu.be/mPbGEBYEk_Y.

I argue that Sullivan's home videos reveal a community information format that offers a participatory orientation to history out of the everyday, mundane experience of Sullivan's videos. More specifically, an "archive effect" particular to queer media content courses across Sullivan's videos as they move from being an analog archive to a digital archive on YouTube, demonstrating that practices of collection can transform queer media from the past into community documents.

Home video and queer intimacy embedded in the mundane are two facets that appear across Sullivan's video archive. These concepts are significant in the context of media produced during the first decade of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which sought to reframe the discursive space upon which meaning is made about AIDS and about LGBTQ-identifying people. My contribution to media history that bridges the past and present restages the question media scholar Alexandra Juhasz asked of re-watching 1980s AIDS activist videotapes in the mid-

2000s: "Thus I make this contribution…not merely to get stuck in remembering AIDS images but rather to relodge those frozen memories in contemporary contexts so that they, and perhaps we, can be reanimated."[167] As Sullivan's videos have circulated and gained new social meanings on YouTube, their status as a community information format from before the Web can now be analyzed as similarly "relodged" memories that speak to how home videos can be felt and experienced as community artifacts.

The Archive Effect on Demand

Sullivan's videos are media documents that carry with them in their itinerary to YouTube not only the bustling 1980s Downtown New York City nightlife scene he frequently recorded with various performers in and out of drag, but also the abiding imprint of Nelson Sullivan and Dick Richards's friendship as gay media producers who stitched together rich media life-worlds with their work. In numerous videos, Richards and Sullivan's friendship resounds off the screen, such as when they tested out Sullivan's new video equipment, or when Richards helped Sullivan convalesce after Sullivan's hernia surgery, or when the two would take long car journeys together.[168] The continued curation and archiving of Sullivan's videos over time reveal an archive effect of queer media, which signals both a remediation of past media chronicling queer lives paired with an earnest practice of collecting. Documentary theorist Jamie Baron termed the "archive effect" to recognize how archival moving-image media make meaning in contexts often far from their officially sanctioned storage locations such as university libraries. Instead, the

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[167] Alexandra Juhasz, "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 320.

[168] "Nelson Sullivan tests his camera for a possible malfunction," uploaded January 27, 2018, video, 6:22, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed November 12, 2020, https://youtu.be/xSAaqIE1Ax0; "Naszomi brings Nelson a bouquet of flowers as he recovers from a hernia operation," uploaded January 22, 2018, video, 17:04, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed November 12, 2020, https://youtu.be/XQvfvv8lCDg; "Stopping at McDonald's in 1989," uploaded March 24, 2016, video, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed 12 November 2020, https://youtu.be/EZJAtkqiV8U.

archival qualities of a given moving-image text can be an "experience of reception."[169] As

nonfiction or "home mode" media appear in new mediated locations, the determination of their

archival status is left up to viewers and their interpretive strategies.[170] Adapting Baron's concept

for Sullivan's archive on YouTube, I argue that the archive effect also occurs where queer media

content meets practices of collecting of marginalized media producers, a dual stamp of an

inhabitation of history that has a direct relationship to negotiating dominant power structures.

Queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich has argued that the creation of alternative archives can occur

through an obsessive orientation to collecting: "To love the wrong kind of objects is to be queer

(as is perhaps an overattachment to objects in the first place), and the impulse to collect them or

to turn collections into archives is often motivated by a desire to create the alternative histories

and genealogies of queer lives."[171] Although Baron locates the archive effect primarily within the

repurposing of home-mode video within other media, creating an accretion of the personal, my

approach asks what happens to queer home video from the 1980s when viewed through a

platform such as YouTube. I ask in this chapter how Sullivan's videos have become a

"community information format" through successive instances of archiving.

In shifting the "archive effect" to think about media of queer lives located in home video

archives, I further one aspect of Baron's definition of the "appropriation film," a term that

provides the central demonstration of the archive effect for Baron, including "works created in a

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[169] Jaimie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London: Routledge, 2013), 7.

[170] I follow James Moran's definition of the home mode as documentation of a subjective coming-to-terms with one's place in the world, less as a signifier purely of domestic spaces, which can carry forward heteronormative understandings of space and time. As James Moran writes, one function of a home mode is the creation "of a liminal space in which practitioners may explore and negotiate the competing demands of their public, communal, and private, personal identities." James M. Moran, *There's No Place Like Home Video* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 60.

[171] Ann Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 275.

variety of media so long as they repurpose materials—thus, 'film' here includes films, videos, and digital media works of all kinds."[172] By thinking of the YouTube channel as one such type of "appropriation media" that repurposes videotape archives, I shift the focus of the archive effect to a digital media platform to account for both Richards's curation of Sullivan's home videos on YouTube *and* the fan responses that the 5 Ninth Avenue Project channel has created. Dick Richards uploaded Nelson Sullivan's videos and invested them with new value in a streaming environment. The uploading of Sullivan's work to YouTube furthers what media scholar Alexandra Juhasz has called a queer archive activism: "A practice that adds love and hope to time and technology…, ungluing the past from its melancholic grip, and instead living it as a gift with others in the here and now."[173] Rather than allow his friend's videos to become lost to time, Dick Richards stored them, obsessively. After holding onto Sullivan's material tapes after Sullivan's death, and then uploading clips of them regularly onto YouTube from 2008 until his own passing in 2018, Dick Richards' curation has created a public archive out of his practice of collecting his friend's home videos, enshrining an archive effect in our contemporary moment that relishes the subculture of queer performers that Sullivan put to tape.

Nelson Sullivan: Life and Reception of a Southern Video-Eye in the City

Nelson Sullivan was born in Kershaw, South Carolina. Sullivan grew up alongside Dick Richards in their small town, and the two men's lives would continue to intertwine throughout their lives. Sullivan received a deferment from military service in the Vietnam War due to a metal screw in his ankle after falling down a mine shaft in Kershaw as a child. After attending Davidson College with Richards in North Carolina, Sullivan moved to New York City while

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[172] Baron, *The Archive Effect*, 9.
[173] Juhasz, "Video Remains," 326.

Richards, a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War, moved to Atlanta. In their respective gay metropolises, both men pursued media production. While in New York City, Sullivan took intermittent film courses. In the 1970s, he captured a gay cruising culture at the west side piers and on Fire Island in his earliest Super 8 film footage. His roving camera eye was from this early period committed to capturing gay haunts of the city, spaces that have now been lost to gentrification and the changing politics of public sexual life in New York City.[174] Having learned piano at a young age, Sullivan's dreams were set on a performing career, though he ended up working part-time at the renowned Patelson's music store behind Carnegie Hall. Meanwhile, in Atlanta, Dick Richards was active first in radio, co-hosting a program called *The American Music Show* on Atlanta station WRFG with collaborator James Bond, and then moving the show with Bond to Atlanta's public access channel, People TV, in the early-1980s. After Dick Richards purchased a Panasonic VHS camera with a portable tape deck in the early 1980s for his public access program, Sullivan followed suit and bought the same camera in 1983.[175] Having a desire to write a book about his revered Aunt Nancy, whom he admired greatly, Sullivan had begun recording the audio of his frequent phone conversations with her in the early-1980s. With his Panasonic camera in hand, Sullivan soon began to record videos of himself talking on the phone, which then quickly turned to a constant recording process that captured his entire world. This desire to capture kernels of intimate, domestic, and familial relationships marks also an early adoption of portable video recording technology, an emergent medium in Sullivan's time.

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[174] Examples of this early footage can be found on the 5 Ninth Avenue Project YouTube channel. See "The Piers in New York City in 1976," uploaded February 15, 2012, video, 2:34, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed March 8, 2020, https://youtu.be/RISU5rjfi9E; "The Summer of '76 at Fire Island," uploaded February 15, 2012, video, 4:41, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed March 8, 2020, https://youtu.be/v0Zg9OZRIws.

[175] David Goldman, telephone conversation with author, August 6, 2019.

Sullivan would go on to record much of his everyday life with his camera in hand, and his home would be the locus of a wide-ranging performance culture that he recorded as it unfolded.

Nelson Sullivan often talked right to the camera, as an active documentarian of his own life, recording observations and narration over his video capture as an active participant in his recording of history. His body of work provides extensive videotape diaries of the life he lived in overlapping queer media cultures: that of the downtown arts and club scenes; that of the public access television scene in Atlanta and New York City; and of his own private practice of domestic videography. Sullivan's reception in written work has mainly focused on his signature technique of mobile, fluid camera work and on the vibrant nightlife scene that he captured in New York City. Sullivan would become known for his balanced, fluid camera work, where he would hold his camcorder in one outstretched arm with the lens pointing back at him. Sullivan would compose the shot by the using the lens as a mirror and a monitor, as Richards recalled years later: "Nelson had figured out how to look on the lens of the camera rather than through the lens to compose the shot and somehow incorporated that with a natural physical grace that produced such sleek views. The smooth, flowing style was his own creation."[176] Performance studies scholar Ricardo Montez sees in Sullivan's deft camera work "an enactment of queer form," arguing that Sullivan's tapes "illuminate a queer mode of apprehension: a way of seeing and being that manufactures a historical narrative of downtown New York."[177] Montez reads Sullivan's mobile media production as reminiscent of De Certeau's model of improvisatory walking as the insertion of unforeseen, radical texts into the everyday experience of a city.[178]

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[176] "Interview with Dick Richards," David Goldman's personal website, accessed 8 October 2020, http://www.bettyjack.com/funtone/nelson/johnwithdick/.

[177] Ricardo Montez, "Virtuosic Distortion: Nelson Sullivan's Queer Hand," *ASAP/Journal* 2, no. 2 (2017): 398.

[178] Michel De Certeau, "Walking in the City," in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 93-110.

Aided with a mobile videorecorder and camera, Sullivan captured the fleeting and adapted the reality he recorded: "His video practice captures a technologized, embodied commitment to the ephemerality of events and recognizes that the experience of the present will be codified in indeterminate ways."[179] While Ricardo Montez does argue that Sullivan's videos do important cultural work in the present, he does not discuss at length the YouTube account maintained by Dick Richards from 2008 until Richards's passing in 2018. I take up the call that Montez hints at in his work, that the existence of Sullivan's videos on YouTube provides something especially "binge-worthy" paired with YouTube's construction of Sullivan's videos as a queer archive: "As a collection of videos that moves beyond the club—onto the streets and into the domestic environments of queer worldmaking—Sullivan's archive produces its portrait of queer life through an extended elaboration of difference within the quotidian."[180] My approach takes seriously how the quotidian and everyday qualities of Sullivan's archive, its recording of queer intimacy, does particular cultural work on YouTube, a platform that invites nostalgic viewing practices. Through the idiom of a queer intimacy, Sullivan created a community information format that resonates with audiences seeking a picture of the 1980s outside of trauma. The community information format of home video finds a welcoming, receptive environment on YouTube due to the archive effect that capitalizes off past media chronicling queer lives.

Sullivan's reception occurred not only through a remediation to YouTube in our contemporary moment. Sullivan's work lived on in a few precise venues between the Summer of 1989 and Richards's uploading of clips from Sullivan's videos to YouTube. One video—the last one Sullivan recorded—stands out for its multiple layers of archival intervention. Instead of the video beginning upon pressing play to the YouTube clip, a brown screen appears with small

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[179] Montez, "Virtuosic Distortion," 399.
[180] Ibid., 412.

black text in the center of the screen saying the date the video was recorded, with a yellow title

underneath, added digitally, that says that the video was edited by Steve LaFrenière. The video

uploaded to YouTube was the version of Sullivan's final video that was screened at the Gavin

Brown Enterprise art gallery in 2001.[181] Steve LaFrenière, a friend of Richards's from Chicago,

helped create new exhibition environments for Sullivan's tapes.
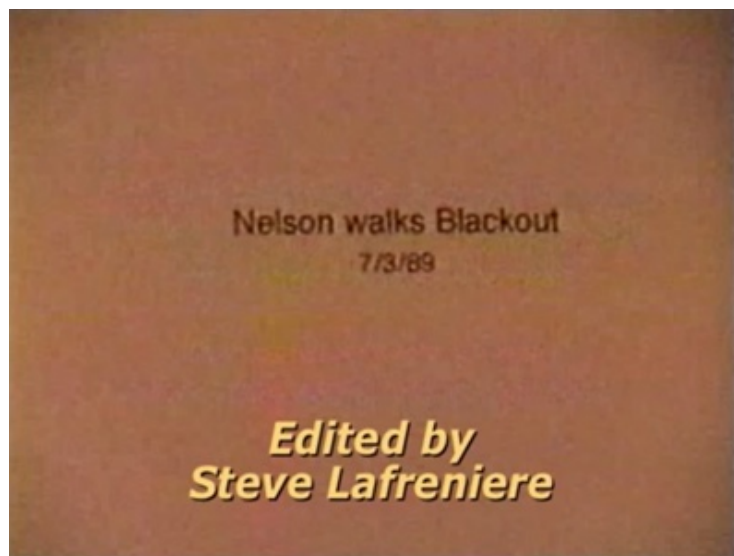
Figure 3-2: The start of Sullivan's final videotape opens with an unexpected title screen. "Nelson's Last Tape – July 3, 1989," uploaded March 21, 2015, video, 9:41, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed October 26, 2018, https://youtu.be/6t0kPyTeZps.

Multiple moments of past archiving and exhibition mark this specific video as a special archival

object, one marked out as important and edited for screening at least twice—once for the Gavin

Brown Enterprise art gallery and later for YouTube. The paratextual elements of this video

exemplify the way that the videos themselves display a history of archiving and exhibition within

the clip versions that exist on YouTube. The titles within and underneath these videos on

YouTube are paratexts that situate the videos as objects of memorialization, with the titles and

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[181] Steve LaFrenière, "Nelson Sullivan Downtown – '83-'89," David Goldman's personal website, February 2001. Accessed November 20, 2020, http://www.bettyjack.com/funtone/nelson/steve/.

descriptions acting akin to museum placards that informatively describe the videos while also placing the videos into a historical register and timeline.

Within the nexus of the collection and archiving of Sullivan's video memories, I focus on the queer mundane in Sullivan's archive. This approach allows for an understanding of the videos as intimate objects preserved through a practice of collecting queer media. Throughout his video work, Sullivan did indeed record his wide circle of friends who were performers, including drag queens RuPaul, Lady Bunny, and Lahoma Van Zandt, as they bounced between Downtown New York City haunts such as the Pyramid Club and the Limelight. However, Sullivan also captured a world of smaller, more mundane moments, with his camera as his constant companion for cataloguing moments of boredom as he waited for friends to arrive, capturing the street scenes outside of his apartment windows and preserving slivers of everyday life while the AIDS epidemic raged beyond his townhouse walls. In locating the capture of the mundane in Sullivan's work, I follow Montez and queer media studies scholar Lucas Hilderbrand's calls for expanding how scholars view amateur and activist video work from the 1980s. Montez argues that approaches to 1980s queer video have solidified into one interpretive framework, that such video "has come to signify AIDS in a generic way," in that media objects showing evidence of direct action have become the baseline to which other queer 1980s nonfiction media refer.[182] Similarly, Lucas Hilderbrand has argued "against remembering AIDS activism exclusively in terms of trauma," due to the generational divide between those who experienced and documented the AIDS crisis directly and those for whom it exists as an historical event.[183] Sullivan's videos on YouTube show how the platform opens up an interpretive framework onto video from an era before the Web, namely that Sullivan's videos create an affective solidarity, a shared sense of

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[182] Montez, "Virtuosic Distortion," 419.
[183] Lucas Hilderbrand, "Retroactivism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 307.

inhabiting history through publicly accessible media from a pre-digital age. The "community information format" of Sullivan's videos is of a queer community that offers a different affective picture of the 1980s and of what being a part of Sullivan's queer community felt like. The interpretive framework that viewers apply to Sullivan's work is marked by nostalgia in response to the "home mode" found in Sullivan's videos. Sullivan's work instills a nostalgia for videotape that flits between past and present.

Nostalgia for Videotape and the Archive Effect of Queer Media

An archive effect of queer media flourishes through everydayness captured on videotape. The particularity of Sullivan's queer archive effect on YouTube presents the potential for a dwelling-together as a community through his home mode videography. Sullivan's videos provide a queer orientation to the home video format and genre. Amateur film historian Patricia Zimmerman writes of the codes that embed cultural functions to home video. Zimmerman explains that one way of viewing home videos that are not of one's own family or inner circle is to mine them for evidence of a particular way of life: "The photograph or home movie, frequently accompanied by a first person narrative from its maker explicating the intention, functions simultaneously as a cultural trace or clue and as a translator and mediator between the social and linguistic rules of a given culture and participants."[184] Sullivan's videos carry forward this function and viewing strategy of home mode media texts on YouTube. This happens somewhat paradoxically on YouTube, an ad-driven, commercial platform, due to how viewers interpret Sullivan's recording practice. YouTube has given viewers a shared interpretive strategy for the videos' establishment of a queer community at a distance and across time. Hilderbrand

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[184] Patricia R. Zimmerman, "The Amateur, the Avant-Garde, and Ideologies of Art," *Journal of Film and Video* 38, no. 3/4 (1986): 65.

locates an "intergenerational nostalgia" at work in the belated viewing of AIDS activist videotapes from the 1980s.[185] Sullivan's archive reveals how YouTube can foster an "intergenerational nostalgia" through the temporal restaging of queer media texts, creating community-oriented archives despite YouTube's profit orientation. An intergenerational nostalgia accounts for a different affect in re-watching videotapes from the AIDS epidemic after the early-2000s. Rather than an affect of direct loss of the disintegration of one's close social circle, Hilderbrand locates the intensity of alternative AIDS media in their capturing of a "queer intimacy," which Sullivan's videos evoke in a similar vein. Intergenerational nostalgia in the viewing of home mode videotapes like Sullivan's, a refuge of queer intimacies, can carve out a niche for a caring community on the corporate platform of YouTube. A queer archive effect helps to surface Sullivan's own recording of cultural memory, conveying "a sense of shared experience that is not reducible to dates and places but rather history that is felt."[186] Sullivan's video practice carries forward aspects of the affective texture of AIDS activist video through mobilizing the home video as an intimate genre, which has become preserved for viewers today within the structuring context of the YouTube channel.

The archive effect of queer media consists of the restaging in a new platform of the queer media of the past. One example of this occurring in wider realms of popular culture beyond YouTube is in the groundbreaking television series *POSE*. In the first episode of the second season of *POSE*, the main characters in the House of Evangelista become integral participants in ACT-UP's Stop the Church demonstration on December 10, 1989, in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. *POSE* specifically adapted a video documentation of this protest for the episode. Patrick Hilferty's video documentation of the protest, *Stop the Church* (1991), captures how the

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[185] Hilderbrand, "Retroactivism," 307.
[186] Ibid., 306.

protest disrupted the church service with piercing cries of "Stop Killing Us!" with protestors

lying down in the aisle of the Cathedral while protestors dressed as altar boys passed out ACT-

UP pamphlets.

Figure 3-3: ACT-UP activists performing a "die-in" between the pews of St. Patrick's Cathedral in Patrick Hilferty's Stop the Church (1991).

The adaptation of a queer activist video into the fictional program of *POSE* offers a parallel

example of the reverent collecting and remediation of queer media texts that has happened with

Sullivan's videos on YouTube. With the adaptation of an activist video within the narrative of a

television show documenting the lives of transgender and gender-nonconforming people of color

in the ballroom scene of New York City, the past is marshalled through a nostalgia toward queer

media content. While the show does not nod to the Patrick Hilferty video explicitly, for example

through splicing in video footage from Hilferty's own tape, the episode visually quotes from the

videotape source material, restaging the protest for a new generation.

Figure 3-4: POSE quotes from Hilferty's Stop the Church video, including a grainy videotape aesthetic. POSE, Season 2, Episode 1, "Acting Up," directed by Gwyneth Horder-Payton, aired June 11, 2019, on FX.

The reproduction of this historical moment in queer activism through a videotape aesthetic in

POSE parallels what Dick Richards performed to Nelson Sullivan's work, a remediation that

processes care alongside the uploading of a converted media object into a new environment. The

archive effect of queer media adds "love and hope to time and technology."[187] This reading of

the archive effect furthers Roger Hallas's definition of Queer AIDS media and adds to it a

recognition of changing platforms that may transfer, consolidate, and transmit queer media into

new social realms. Hallas asserts that "Queer AIDS media are therefore not merely media of

direct address but of direct address reframed."[188] A reframing of past media creates new

relationships to queer media content while creating the grounds for an historical orientation to

that media. That the remediation of videotape occurs within popular queer media like *POSE* in

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[187] Juhasz, "Video Remains," 326.
[188] Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 10.

addition to video uploaded to YouTube like Sullivan's also signals that the archive effect as a

theory can describe different moments of reframing nostalgic media content germane to

particular marginalized groups. For this chapter, I analyze how Sullivan created a "community

information format" that ushered in an archive effect through Richards's dedication to upload the

video clips to YouTube.

The reception of Sullivan's videotapes online has a nostalgic allure. Sullivan's work

offers a bridge between earlier media studies work on AIDS activism, written by those who were

there on the front lines, in the late-night collaborative video-editing sessions, and chanting

together in the streets, and between later work that reflects on generational divides in the queer

reception of 1980s media. Video provides a link with a past that is in the process of receding. I

analyze nostalgia as a bridge to the past that values videotape and its grain as somehow offering

a more direct access to the 1980s in Sullivan's videos. My turn to Sullivan parallels recent

academic work that looks back on video that muses on loss—of lovers, friends, communities,

and social movements. By musing on loss, such authors have engaged with the medium

specificity of video and its relationship to loss and, thus, nostalgia. Alexandra Juhasz questioned

in 2006, upon watching an old videotape of her long-departed friend Jim: "Video enters the

scene. I am forced to ask, what if you can return? What if the nostalgic romance is not with a

fantasy? What if the past is videotaped and so you can prove that it was there? *What does video

do to or with nostalgia*?"[189] Loss witnessed and experienced anew through video is not a

melancholic mourning that stunts the possibility for action.[190] Rather, nostalgia can be a

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[189] Juhasz, "Video Remains," 323. Emphasis added.
[190] In the 1980s, Douglas Crimp has critiqued the assumption that activists don't mourn, and that mourning itself
can't be productive as activism. Crimp turns melancholia on its head and argues for seeing mourning as productive:
"We can then partially revise our sense—and Freud's—of the incompatibility between mourning and activism and
say that, for many gay men dealing with AIDS deaths, militancy might arise from conscious conflicts *within*
mourning itself, the consequence, on the one hand, of 'inadvisable and even harmful interference' with grief and, on

productive force, reanimating collectivities and linking present viewers into a community. I understand nostalgia as linking of self and collectivity, as cultural theorist Svetlana Boym argues: "[nostalgia] is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory."[191] Video is a flexible technology— allowing for continued editing for insertion into new compilations with an ease of circulation. These features allow videotaped events to last, providing a "duration solution" to loss in the historical record. Videotapes are archival media that display a lagginess in their wear and degeneration through use.

How can we read the trace of the past in videotape? Textually, we recognize "past-ness" in videotapes through witnessing outdated aesthetic styles in clothing, in references to past media and current events, and in different uses of language. Materially, videotape contains a grain. Viewers recognize videotape through the material dissolution of videotape: "The specificity of videotape becomes most apparent through repeated duplication, wear, and technical failure: that is, we recognize videotape as tape through its inherent properties of degeneration."[192] This notion of recognizing tape through wear is what Lucas Hilderbrand calls an "aesthetics of access." An aesthetics of access is important for analyzing how duplication of video from commercial sources such as broadcast TV, home videos watched over and over in a family living room, and the degeneration of consumer videotapes rented from video stores can all have a similar aesthetic signature as a media format. Video in the popular imagination is a laggy format, one that wears itself down through use. However, a virtual "aesthetics of access" has now drifted away from

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the other, of the impossibility of deciding whether the mourner will share the fate of the mourned." See Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (1989): 10.

[191] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York City, NY: Basic Books, 2008), xvi.

[192] Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 6.

videotape run through a VCR and now appears unmoored from its original media format. Applications for mobile devices now incorporate filters that can process digital video clips to look like analog videotape, and trends in streaming culture incorporate a wobbly VHS aesthetics as a marker of a 2010s nostalgia for the 1980s. Sullivan's videotapes from the 1980s emerged on YouTube just as this cultural attitude toward videotape aesthetics was ascendant.

Sullivan's tapes are a personal archive that was made into a public artifact through uploading them to YouTube. Through this mediation of Sullivan's private archive into a publicly available archive, the aesthetics of access is not as apparent as other video artifacts. Just like Juhasz's private videos of her friend Jim, video can be a faithful recorder of the past, that it "stays the same; it shows what was."[193] Now that the videos have been digitized and uploaded to YouTube, the nostalgia that characterizes them is different from the "aesthetics of access" defined above. If viewers indeed "recognize videotape as tape through its inherent properties of degeneration," then how do Sullivan's videos signal something *beyond* mere videotape for viewers?[194] Hilderbrand has elsewhere argued that screenings of ACT-UP video activism in the 2000s gain an affective immediacy and charge through an aesthetics of access: "the dating and degeneration of the video aesthetic mediate this past."[195] The viewing of Sullivan's tapes on YouTube are mediated by a lack of degeneration, by an immediacy of a queer community through a format that feels familiar and, at the same time, indelibly of the past.

Sullivan's videos, then, invoke nostalgia not only for the grain of videotape, their aesthetics of access, but also for their accessibility as videos that approach a genre viewers recognize as a precursor to the more contemporary, first-person video diary genre known today

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[193] Juhasz, "Video Remains," 323.
[194] Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 6.
[195] Hilderbrand, "Retroactivism," 313.

as "vlogging." The reception of the tapes on YouTube relies on a fact-finding mission for traces

dually of what has and has not changed in New York City between then and now. Beyond this

generic nostalgia for a past New York City, a specific nostalgia is blended with Sullivan's own

gay identity and the texture of loss indelibly embedded in queer media of the 1980s due to the

HIV/AIDS epidemic. Sullivan himself died of a heart attack, though his work resounds within a

cultural continuum of queer media during the AIDS crisis. I read the indeterminacy in placing

Sullivan within a category of "AIDS videographer" to be productive, for his archive of home

videos demonstrates how an "intergenerational nostalgia" thrives on YouTube through Sullivan's

first-person video recording style, regardless of Sullivan's former serostatus. Sullivan's untimely

passing stages a relationship toward loss that is not solely the province of those who passed away

from AIDS complications. Dick Richards lamented that Sullivan's lack of access to health care

was one major factor in his early passing. Sullivan's tapes record a community reeling from

loss—of queer performers and friends—while preserving a mundane mode of access to the

downtown New York City queer community. The community information format of Sullivan's

videos moves from the everydayness of Sullivan's singular recording practice and captures a

community in formation all around him.

Queer Mundane: Recording the Everyday

In the summer of 1987, the bodily exertion of carrying around his camera equipment for

the past four years left Sullivan with a hernia. His constant video practice painfully inscribed

itself on his body. Sullivan's practice was a living with the camera. It recalls how Dutch

documentarian Joris Ivens described the process for shooting his nonfiction film *Rain* in 1929: "I

never moved without my camera—it was with me in the office, laboratory, street, train. I lived

with it and when I slept it was on my bedside table so that if it was raining when I woke I could

film the studio window over my bed."[196] A dream of bodily extension and surrogacy through

media capture is a tradition to which Sullivan ardently committed himself. Despite his hernia

surgery, Sullivan's camera was at his bedside at the hospital while he recovered. Sullivan gave

the camera to his friends to document the immediate moments of his waking up from general

anesthesia.[197] A few days later, while his friend Nozomi visited him with a floral bouquet while

he convalesced at home with Richards at his side, Sullivan had picked up the camera again. As

Sullivan trained his camera down from the second-floor window at Nozomi at his front door,

Nozomi laughed and shook her head in disbelief upon seeing Sullivan with his camcorder

peeking from the window, the very practice that caused him such accumulated bodily harm. As

she climbs the stairs with Dick Richards, Nozomi tells Richards in jest, "Nelson seems well."

Sullivan, likely aware of the absurdity or shock for Nozomi to see him continue the practice that

caused him such prior harm, shrugs off his recording as something diminutive, unobtrusive. He

greets Nozomi at the top of the stairs, saying "I've been keeping a little document… I'm not

really doing this."[198] This moment crystallizes Sullivan's approach to self-documentation.

Sullivan brought together a recording technique always in movement, capturing Sullivan's

friends and his home life in equal measure, with his 5 Ninth Avenue townhouse as a focal point

of his archive. I think that Sullivan's offhand remark defining his incessant recording as the

capture of a "little document" is revealing. This was just one moment out of shelves of VHS

tapes that document Sullivan's life, and something about the style, length, and format of this

"little document" is evidence of Sullivan's obsessive practice (recording mere days after his

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[196] Joris Ivens, *The Camera and I* (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 32. Cited in Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xix.
[197] "Nelson Sullivan's Hernia Operation in 1987," uploaded 6 January 2018, video, 13:46, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed 19 November 2020, https://youtu.be/cwSUZzpRoYc.
[198] "Naszomi [sic] brings Nelson a bouquet of flowers as he recovers from a hernia operation," uploaded January 22, 2018, video, 17:04, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed November 12, 2020, https://youtu.be/XQvfvv8lCDg.

hernia surgery) while also demonstrating how the domestic space of his home was the launching pad for his videos that served as a community information format, a collection of recordings that show Sullivan knitted into a fabric of friends.

A queer mundane in Sullivan's archive brings to the surface a textual layering of affect and a reconsideration of community. Everyday life lived on the margins of heterosexual culture has not often been documented nor archived. If the second chapter's discussion of publicness was through the Community Memory terminals positioned in places of casual, everyday urban encounter, then the everyday is also similarly forefronted in the media practice of Sullivan's constant recording practice. As a video diary, Sullivan's commitment to recording any and all aspects of his life, good times and bad moods, make apparent aspects of everyday life that often go undervalued in studies of 1980s queer video.[199]

In Sullivan's archive, the queer mundane appears through the frequency of Sullivan's recording and screening of videotapes at home. These videos manifest not simply a "home mode," but they also record the mundane everydayness borne through Sullivan's waiting, a use of video technology to fill the interstitial moments of his life. "Home mode" refers to a type of media production that occurs in domestic realms and that helps people to process their multiple, overlapping identities. David Moran defines the home mode as "a changing expression of culture rather than a static reflection of false consciousness," locating home video specifically as "the amateur practice of video in the home mode."[200] Home mode videos help individuals to enact their identities. Sullivan's videos stage a processing of identity across categories of solitude and of community. The time and texture of the queer mundane impacts Sullivan's archive.

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[199] Hilderbrand, "Retroactivism," 312.
[200] Moran, *There's No Place*, 36.

An attention to the mundane emerged within discursive constructions of camcorders geared for the home market. Video at a fundamental level changed what spaces and practices could be preserved, at least for those with the means of buying a camcorder. Video was a portable technology that entered spaces formerly seen as distant from media industries. Broadcast television would not enter the gay clubs of New York City, and private homes were not the site for mainstream media production except in rare occasions such as for a news report. The portability, longer recording time, and relatively cheaper price-point of video camcorders by the mid-1980s made them suitable for capturing the more quotidian events in consumers' lives and not just ritualistic moments like a child's first steps, birthdays, weddings, or other grand life moments. Even a 1.5lb Sony Handycam advertisement from the early 1990s encouraged consumers to use the technology more frequently to record the mundane: "Something happens between the milestones. Between the weddings and the birthday parties. It's called the rest of your life."[201] Encouraging a recording of the mundane speaks to technical changes that allow for longer VHS record times as well as battery packs that hold a longer charge than the initial 1-hour charge in the 1983 Sony Betamovie camcorder. However, the way that the mundane is cast in promotional materials and in academic discourse largely keeps the mundane to be the province of heterosexual familial life, not often capturing the mundane moments of queer culture. Sullivan's queer mundane helps to bring a new nuance of experience to our understanding of sociality before the Web through the media technology of the videorecorder.

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[201] Quoted in Geraldine Baum, "Private Eyes: Making a Home Video Has Become So Easy That Nothing Is Too Mundane or Too Weird for Tape," *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1991, E5.

The Video Diary, Waiting, and the Queer Mundane

Remarking on his new all-in-one camcorder a few months before his death, Sullivan remarked in 1989: "I think this year is the year that everybody's going to turn the camera around."[202] While Sullivan did not create the video diary, he certainly is an early adopter of the format. His archive is one of the most surprisingly long-lasting versions of such a video diary. Sullivan's self-reflective orientation to the portable video camera and recorder technologies meant that he often talked of his practice while he recorded, embedding in his videos his philosophy of recording while he recorded himself in moments of mundane waiting. Sullivan's work records a reorientation in the use of camcorder to capture the subjective state of the self within Sullivan's everyday experience.

The archival intervention of Dick Richards at times also emphasizes the mundane nature of Sullivan's work through reminders of Sullivan's solitude. For example, the description of one video Sullivan recorded after going out for his 39th birthday paints an uncharacteristically somber picture of Sullivan. The text description put in by Richards reads: "He returns to the vast solitude of his townhome at 5 Ninth Avenue."[203] The diagnosis of Sullivan's solitude in descriptions of his videos is more a revelation of Richards's own wistful remembrance of his long-departed friend than revealing a truth about Sullivan's life. What's so spectacular about queer solitude? Sullivan was often surrounded by friends, and documented the act of being surrounded by friends so much that it seems his solitude still evades us. We don't have evidence of Sullivan truly *alone*, for we only ever see Sullivan today through his camera, his constant companion. He would frequently document moments of waiting, with a direct address to the camera, and in this

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[202] "Nelson Sullivan and his new Camcorder - Part 1," uploaded March 23, 2016, video, 8:03, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed October 23, 2018, https://youtu.be/Gp9e1YkWqAA.

[203] "Nelson Sullivan's 39th Birthday: Nelson Goes Home Alone," uploaded August 21, 2018, video, 6:51, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed 26 October 2018, https://youtu.be/IaaNq0odDBE.

companionship with the camera Sullivan never was without an implied future audience, even if Sullivan was often by himself recording. In viewing Sullivan's tapes, an audience today sees a queer media producer alleviating boredom through self-documentation.

Sullivan's video work resonates with other queer media work structured as a video diary, such as experimental filmmaker George Kuchar's *Weather Diaries* (1986). Sullivan's video work recalls Kuchar's *Weather Diaries* by also relying heavily on in-camera editing and including quotidian, banal shots. *Weather Diaries* documents Kuchar's yearly trip to Tornado Alley in Oklahoma to chase storms while staying at roadside motels.[204] Similarly, Sullivan was self-aware of his video recording practice and the cultural trend to record the self. The similarity between Sullivan's home mode recording practice and larger currents in video art worlds demonstrates how notions of "outsider" or amateur video production are not sufficient frameworks to recuperate queer media visions of the 1980s like Sullivan's.

Lingering on the interface between self and other, between past and present, between illness and healing, is a queer temporality that hovers between certainties. The duration of a temporal gap encompasses queer subjects, between a childhood of doubt and a dreamed future of liberation. Sullivan's videos intervene into this queer temporality of waiting. Sullivan's self-recording becomes a subjective commentary on his world through the use of his camera to alleviate boredom. Sullivan's own reflection on his technique occurred during one moment of waiting, a break in the day that allowed Sullivan to reach into his diaristic practice and pull out a conceptual framing for his work, which he called "active-passive observation." On his birthday, March 15, 1987, Sullivan mused on what his dialogue with the camera meant. He made a

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[204] Christine Tamblyn, "Qualifying the Quotidian: Artist's Video and the Production of Social Space," in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, ed. Michael Renov and Erika Suderberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 19.

resolution for his 39th year: "I'm going to learn how to point the camera at myself, talk to it…. I should talk to it like there's some kind of information I'm trying to get across to it. To you, to me, when I watch this. And if Eric and Liz and Lana weren't late I wouldn't be doing this."[205] From one mundane moment in Sullivan's life, with his camera faced back at him, Sullivan's experience of boredom becomes a moment of defining his practice for a future audience. He admits later in this video that he wouldn't be doing this—recording, reflecting—if his friends were not late. The mundane moments of his archive, boredom soothed by his active-passive observation of himself, become moments of reflection on his technique.

Sullivan developed and named his style of looking at the camera, talking to it as if it were a friend, as a type of lay media theory. He theorized his work as a type of recording that was participatory yet observant. As an active-passive observer, he both recorded bits of reality and shaped the feeling of the moments he recorded.[206] That he called himself an active-passive *observer* and not an active-passive *recorder* also points to how Sullivan believed his mobile camera movement was more an act of observation than conscious recording. The active-passive recording technique allowed Sullivan to practice a narcissistic mode of video recording while capturing a community around him. This is precisely how Sullivan's archive contains a community information format. Sullivan is always present, but rarely feels intrusive in the videos. Sullivan's technique and practice captured his social world with himself as a guiding presence. He spoke frequently of mobilizing a technique that could capture and abridge the social world around him. Sullivan trained the camera on himself to provide a continuity to his videos, something that linked the videos into a body of work. In one interview, he remarked:

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[205] "Nelson Sullivan's 39th Birthday - Waiting for Eric and Liz," uploaded August 15, 2018, video, 13:20, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, Accessed October 26, 2018, https://youtu.be/AjL6goBP0Kg.

[206] "Nelson Sullivan Discusses the reality of video in the chelsea hotel," uploaded January 14, 2017, video, 13:45, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed November 20, 2020, https://youtu.be/mDXDWUTLhKU.

When I first got the video camera, I was desperate to have an anchor to focus on in my videos. Somebody or something that would move through everything. Well, I tried that with [actress] Sylvia Miles, I tried that with Michael Musto. These are people that get around, they see everything, perhaps more than anybody else sees. I decided that the simplest way to make the videos I want to make is to anchor them on myself because, after all, ***I'm the most convenient thing there is***."[207]

Sullivan decided that anchoring his videos on himself provided the right perspective onto the community he wanted to document.

As an active-passive observer, and one anchored on himself, Sullivan also used a wide-angle lens to capture more of his panoramic social world. The wide-angle lens serves as an apt metaphor for how his technique captured both the private mundane as well as the public sphere of out gay 1980s life. Sullivan frequently used a wide-angle lens, which entranced him with its possibilities to capture himself and the wider world. Sullivan liked being able to capture himself, the anchor of his shots, alongside his friends. "I love this wide-angle. We're both in the picture," Sullivan exclaimed to Richards, adding, "I'm finally beginning to feel at home." Richards asked: "What, at home holding the camera?" Sullivan replied: "Yes, I feel at home in the world."[208] Sullivan's use and belief in the wide-angle lens capturing a wider social portrait lends his home videos a social embrace, one that resonates with viewers today with a nostalgia for accessing and experienced past modes of queer community.

Sullivan's technique created a community information format through everydayness. Sullivan learned from his friend Dick Richards to frame his videos within the familiar. Dick Richards's public access show, *The American Music Show*, was for years taped in Richards's home, with the elaborate set design installed permanently in Richards's living room in Atlanta.

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[207] "Nelson Sullivan - Video Vampire: a short film by Laurie Weltz," uploaded March 30, 2009, video, 2:30, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed January 18, 2021, https://youtu.be/5Q5srHHUZVY. Emphasis added.
[208] "Nelson Sullivan and his new camcorder - part 1," uploaded March 23, 2016, video, 8:03, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed 19 November 2020, https://youtu.be/Gp9e1YkWqAA.

Richards's couch in that context became a springboard for journeys into the obscure Atlanta drag

and queer performance scene. It is meaningful, then, that Sullivan's own start to his video

recording practice borrows this domestic framing by recording his first video diary from his own

couch.

If 1983 marked an auspicious year for the Community Memory project, when its second

major phase launched, 1983 also marked the beginning of a new phase of Sullivan's domestic

media production. 1983 marked the start of Sullivan's regular, ambulatory video recording.

Backstage, outdoors, and between sets, Sullivan began recording not by capturing the

indeterminate, in-between spaces and sites of the downtown queer arts scene as he is often

remembered, but by recording himself at home and then at a small dinner party at a friend's

house. On the 5 Ninth Avenue Project YouTube channel, Sullivan's first video dates from May

28, 1983.[209] His first video opens with him on his couch with his pets, talking of a house party at

his friends Mary Kay and Bobby's place.

Figure 3-5: Sullivan's first videotape dates from 1983, the start of his regular video recording practice. "Nelson Sullivan's First Video Blog in 1983," 5 Ninth Avenue, uploaded 5 December 2011, accessed 23 October 2018. https://youtu.be/8Qc9sISu5yc.

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[209] "Nelson Sullivan's First Video Blog in 1983," uploaded December 5, 2011, video, 7:29, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed October 23, 2018, https://youtu.be/8Qc9sISu5yc.

Before leaving for the party, Sullivan spoke of what he hoped to capture while his cat walked over his lap:

> That's what I'm going to do—see what kind of a housekeeper Mary Kay is. Of course, I don't know if she or Bobby does the housework. I don't even know who else lives with them either! Could be a whole house full of people. There should be a lot of pretty interesting types there tonight, however. You know, rock'n'rollers, freaks.[210]

Sullivan's remarks point to how frequently his friends included wide circles of overlapping cultural professionals and performers. Before setting off to Mary Kay and Bobby's apartment, Sullivan remarks that he'll disguise his video equipment and take it on the subway to go to the house party. The awareness of multiple gazes on the act of public videography—where an awareness of difference in behavior from the straight world gets combined with a use of new technology—is present at the start of his regular videographic practice as an experience of the closet, as another social practice to hide from prying public eyes. The video then includes an in-camera edit that cuts to Sullivan recording himself alone in the mirror of his friend's bedroom, estranged from the party in other rooms. What is most important about Sullivan's first video in his regular recording practice is his dwelling within the space of the mundane. Rather than join the party happening in other rooms, Sullivan's video gaze turns in on himself while at his friend's house, an apt metaphor for how his practice was a production of a "community information format" through his focus on himself as an anchor. Sullivan's focus on himself as narrator and as a guide through the social worlds he documented is an important feature of his mode of "active-passive observation."

This first video contains not only his private musings to himself, to his staged camera, and to his audience, but also to others. Eventually, at Mary Kay and Bobby's house, Sullivan

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[210] Ibid.

finally sits around to talk with people. After Sullivan toured his friends' apartment in this video

from 1983, he steps into the bathroom mirror once more to announce "We're gonna have to go

see who's at the party now, so talk to you in just a minute."[211] Only then does Sullivan show the

hosts of the party sitting in a windowsill. The staging of this video provides an allegory for

Sullivan's technique: beginning at home, with the camera turned back on himself, Sullivan

addressed an unseen future audience and set out in his social world of downtown New York City

to document the details of his friends' lives. All the way, behind the funny façade of his own

narration, Sullivan reveals his practice as an alleviation of solitude, of a loneliness present when

he turns off his camera. Film scholar David E. James has argued that every film is an allegory of

its own mode of production.[212] For Sullivan as well, his tapes register, record, and thus reveal the

community of which he was an integral part.

The video diary is also marked in advance by its own end. Through losing the taste or

habit for keeping up with the diary, or through death, a video diary one day stops. Perhaps one

appropriate lens for understanding the queer mundane in Sullivan's archive is by attending to its

terminus on July 3rd, 1989. His final video encodes a nostalgic weight through the mundane.[213]

The video echoes with the impending loss of Sullivan, the loss of his continued video practice,

and the loss of his future planned television program New York City's public access channel.

Sullivan's impending death does not materialize in any way in the video. All that the viewer sees

in the video is a casual stroll through Manhattan's lower west side, one final walk along the piers

with a friend before a cookout.

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[211] Ibid.

[212] David E. James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 12.

[213] "Nelson's Last Tape – July 3, 1989," uploaded March 21, 2015, video, 9:41, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed October 26, 2018, https://youtu.be/6t0kPyTeZps.

Figure 3-6: Nelson's last tape records the preparation for a pre-4th of July cookout. "Nelson's Last Tape – July 3, 1989," 5 Ninth Avenue, uploaded 21 March 2015, accessed 26 October 2018. https://youtu.be/6t0kPyTeZps.

The mundane texture of the video has encouraged viewers to seek out clues as to whether

Sullivan knew he was ill, spurred by Sullivan's poignant comment midway through the video

while walking through the piers and commenting on the joggers running past: "It's July the 3rd

and it's the last day I'm going to have *not* to be running." The banal nature of both the act of

walking through his neighborhood and out onto the piers is striking for its indistinguishable

characteristics from so many other of his videos, made all the more poignant for it being his last

one.

Performing Queer Community 1: The Space of Queer (Home) Video

Sullivan's video practice was an extension of his social circle. He began to document this

teeming social world as a novelistic project of potentially endless scope. Indeed, various

accounts attribute Sullivan's start in video-recording as not only about recording his Aunt Nancy,

but also about desiring to write a Dickensian account of the lives of the major figures in the

downtown arts scene in New York City: "Originally planning on writing a book similar to

Charles Dicken's *Great Expectations* on his experiences in New York, Sullivan suddenly

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realized that it would be easier and more effective to turn on his video camera, showing his audience what was happening."[214] When drag queens RuPaul Andre Charles and Lady Bunny moved from Atlanta to New York City, they moved in with Nelson Sullivan at 5 Ninth Avenue. Knowing Sullivan through Dick Richards in Atlanta, Charles wrote of Sullivan in his first memoir fondly: "Nelson was our New York liaison, and he introduced us to the city. Every time I walk around New York I think about him all the time."[215] Sullivan's impact in his social circle was to make his friends experience the city anew through his camcorder lens.

When recording a performance at the Pyramid Club, Sullivan would capture the club, not just the performance. As the manager of the Pyramid Club described years after Sullivan's passing: "It's amazing because he would [record] the whole thing; he would start in the dressing room and then take you onstage and then take you afterwards."[216] Sullivan's videos document the spaces of these alternative and queer clubs and offer positive feelings of potentiality.[217] Sullivan's technique captured his friends as actors in a grand social performance, "a continuous flowing artist statement that integrated the community around him."[218] When Sullivan entered the Pyramid Club on Thanksgiving evening in 1987, he recorded his friends RuPaul, Lahoma, and others getting out of a van, walking to the club, capturing a bit of the performers on the stage, and then capturing footage in the cramped urinals with his friends before heading

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[214] Emily Colucci, "Remembering New York's Downtown Documentarian Nelson Sullivan," *VICE*, July 7, 2014. Accessed September 17, 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/8gdv3v/remembering-downtowns-documentarian-nelson-sullivan.

[215] RuPaul Andre Charles, *Lettin' It All Hang Out: An Autobiography* (New York City, NY: Hyperion, 1995), 82.

[216] Clayton Patterson, "Interview with Philly," in *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Paul Bartlett, Urania Mylonas, and Clayton Patterson (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 336.

[217] The notion of a visual culture of potentiality in queer spaces comes from Muñoz: "[I]t seems that queer visual culture needs to nourish our sense of potentiality and not reinforce our feeling of disappointment. If we are to go on, we need a critical modality of hope and not simply dramatization of loss and despair." José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 111.

[218] Clayton Patterson, "A Peek Inside the Archive," in *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side*, ed. Paul Bartlett, Urania Mylonas, and Clayton Patterson (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 447.

backstage. He greets Larry Tee who was in the dark basement before noticing a new chandelier hanging in the corner. They wander to find RuPaul smoking in the dressing room as Pink Floyd plays over the club's speakers. They wander "upstairs" to find Lahoma and Lady Bunny, and the group all share a joint. In this video, Sullivan does encompass his friends in a fluid, graceful video document. His video records the physical layout of the club in his wanderings alone and with his friends.[219] New York City subcultural historian Clayton Patterson spoke of this movement as a smooth operation akin to peeling a fruit: "The moving; the continuous action. It was like peeling a whole apple without breaking the skin."[220] However, what is of interest to me is the video's capturing of so much more beyond the actual club floor, where the action is happening. In this video, and in many others, Sullivan's videos capture his friends as if they are in another living room, just in the backrooms of a club. Sullivan's videos here document access to a queer intimacy detached from a domestic space. Sullivan's videos capture a "home mode" but applied to spaces of queer sociality.

Sullivan's capturing through video would provide his entourage with a way to play at being part of a "scene." Patterson said: "Nelson would come in with a crowd-consuming presence and do the whole videotape thing and spin around and know everybody."[221] Sullivan's videos encode a community dancing, singing, and joking their way through the 1980s in defiance of AIDS and of media narratives of the LGBTQ community as suffering, in grief, or experiencing an unrelenting state of trauma. Sullivan's work archives queer spaces in movement. Sullivan's videos are dances with cultural memory and the archive. Through his home-mode

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[219] "Looking for Fun at the Pyramid Club in the Wee Hours after Thanksgiving in 1987," uploaded July 4, 2017, video, 9:28, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed 2 November 2020, https://youtu.be/BLdvO-3MOrE.
[220] Patterson, "Interview with Philly," 336.
[221] Ibid.

recording, Sullivan's videos have become a community text, built from the collaborations, interactions, and video-mediated experiences within everyday moments of queer sociality.

Even before Sullivan's video diary practice, public access television furthered discourses of video's revolutionary potential and the inclusive queer content of public access programs by identifying communal identifications as one of the potentials of the mundane in public access programming. Even before AIDS video activism took off with video collectives such as DIVA TV as a video agitator within ACT-UP, work on public access from as early as 1975 identified common formats of public access shows from 1972, such as the "talking head" format put on by public organizations and organized as talk shows to disseminate information by experts.

Important for my focus in this chapter on Sullivan's videos as a community information format is another format of public access television, the videotape of a "real event," defined as "anything not specifically staged for television."[222] In the article that names the "real event" as the second-most popular show format on New York City's Teleprompter Channels C and D, television scholar Pamela Doty also refers to the breadth of social activities named under the "real event," listing a block party, a press conference, a pro-Marijuana event, a baby's birthday party, and "a demonstration by the Gay Activist Alliance in support of a doorman fired because of his homosexuality."[223] Beyond the notable inclusion of gay activist organizations in New York City on public access three years after the Stonewall Riot, I argue that Sullivan's videos also create this "real event" banality, though through Sullivan's capturing of the queer mundane with an opening to capturing a larger community. Public access television paved the way for later AIDS activist video work while also instating a type of "mundane" video format for public access, a format that Sullivan inherited and furthered.

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[222] Pamela Doty, "Public-Access Cable TV: Who Cares?" *Journal of Communication* 25, no. 3 (1975): 36.
[223] Ibid.

The "real event" aesthetic on public access is present in Sullivan's capture of the everyday experience in queer circles in New York. Doty links the "real event" format to a cinema vérité aesthetic and editing practice, where the real event format is "real-time or unedited," without commentary and with no interviews with participants, and no "tricky photographic effects such as superimpositions or sudden jump cuts" and where "nothing is presented that would not have been seen or heard by the average person physically present at the scene."[224] One example of this from Sullivan's archive would be his tape of the Gay Pride parade in June of 1983. His tape of the event itself is recorded first from an elevated position—possibly a front stoop of a residential building or a balcony—with the camera zoomed in and pointing slightly down on the parade coming towards the camera and continuing beyond the lower-right hand side of the frame.

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[224] Ibid., 37.

Figure 3-7: Sullivan's videos capture ephemeral moments of community action, such as the 1983 Gay Pride parade in New York City. "Scenes from New York Gay Pride 1983," uploaded 26 November 1985, accessed 19 November 2020, https://youtu.be/_MpWRps6OEo.

Doty associated the "real event" format with an experimental aesthetic borrowed from Andy

Warhol where not much happens: real-event and slice-of-life videotapes on public access

television "focus, to put it mildly, on life's less dramatic moments."[225] However, this framing on

the banal emerged in the use of video in early writing on public access as an object associated

more with an amateur aesthetic in experimental film practice than on communities of

interpretation that could themselves have political orientations, especially LGBTQ individuals.

When Sullivan videotaped the gay pride parade, viewers today can see that a lot occurs

symbolically in the historical scale and scope of capturing on tape a community in crisis due to

HIV/AIDS despite not much occurring in front of the lens beyond the parade itself. The

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[225] Ibid., 38.

potentiality of the video extends beyond capturing a "real event" to capturing a window onto witnessing and experiencing a community.

Performing Queer Community 2: Queer Culture in Transit

The body of Sullivan's work speaks not to just Sullivan's gay identity and his friends' queer lives, but to such identities in movement, across state lines and into new cultural contexts. Sullivan's work captures a queer community always on the move between Atlanta and New York City. Recording his and Richards's friendship over the years within their respective video work, Sullivan would often visit Atlanta. Sullivan recorded visits to the set of *The American Music Show*, shot out of Richards and his partner David Goldman's living room. Sullivan's YouTube archive thus signals how a metropolis-based body of work can yet have openings to other regions, other localities. In his and his friends' continued movements back and forth to Atlanta, Sullivan's experience sketches a different path from the critique of metronormativity in queer studies that challenges the idea that queerness flourishes most in the country's biggest cities. While Atlanta is a southern cultural capital, Sullivan's frequent travels to Atlanta and his hometown of Kershaw, South Carolina, are important in Sullivan's archive for being captured in a mobile archive of videotape. A perspective that takes into account the influence on queer lives from multiple lived urban areas is necessary, if only to avoid a reification of "queer destinations of New York or San Francisco" as the continued bad object of queer media studies.[226] The case of Sullivan's archive shows a recording of a community on the move between New York City and Atlanta and numerous southern cities in between.

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[226] Karen Tongson, *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2011), 11.

For example, Sullivan's video work and archive encapsulates media moments from beyond Sullivan's private and domestic sphere. He also recorded the production process of *The American Music Show*. As a community project, Sullivan's videos record the taping of the show as a process fluidly flowing out of the group's friendships and local scene. To complicate matters even further, Sullivan would tape himself while he was on camera for *The American Music Show*. Sullivan's travels to Atlanta include one notable appearance in 1989 after a mole surgery on his face where Sullivan recorded himself being recorded on the set of the show.[227] Sullivan's camera becomes interposed between the public access cameras and the action occurring on set, including a bandage replacement on air with the character Nurse McPhee, a drag character played by performer Rosser Shymanski.

Figure 3-8: Sullivan recorded himself being recorded for the American Music Show, with his friend's camera just off-screen.

Sullivan's camera here literally mediates between different uses of video to organize different audiences. The combination of video techniques—Richards's recording a public access show and

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[227] "Nelson Sullivan on His Best Friend's TV Show in Atlanta in 1989," uploaded August 13, 2014, video, 12:18, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed March 8, 2020, https://youtu.be/Xp1WyxU9KhI.

Sullivan's recording a home video of his involvement with Richards's public access show—demonstrates how Sullivan and Richards's friendship was lived through video, with each man's artistic use of video providing a communal space for identity formation.

Through just these few examples of how Sullivan's videos record the queer practices of several understandings of community through video, we can see how Sullivan's videos embed a community information format and create a longing for the archive itself, the body of videos that have been almost lost many times over. As video degrades, so can the archive that Sullivan longed to fulfill in his desire to produce his own public access program in Manhattan. Alex Juhasz terms a "queer archive activism" the very use of nostalgic memory-based media to think of a future for that very media—a future context, a future audience, and a future acceptance.[228] Sullivan's devotion to his video-making practice amid the spiraling turbulence of AIDS makes his videotape archive a testament to his own experience as a gay man in a lively queer community in New York City and Atlanta. Sullivan's archive lives on as a gift for the viewers who lovingly comment into the void of YouTube, sending their nostalgic reactions to other viewers. Sullivan's videos demonstrate Alexandra Juhasz's claim that private archives can have public ends far beyond the ideas of their creators. Sullivan's viewers today access and reinterpret Sullivan's past as a site for nostalgic remembrance.

Fans Rummaging in the Archive: Sullivan's Afterlives

On April 17, 2011, RuPaul Andre Charles, drag queen and host of the reality television program *RuPaul's Drag Race*, tweeted admiringly about Nelson Sullivan, one of his first gay mentors in New York City.[229] In 2018, a young drag queen named Desmond Is Amazing posed

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[228] Juhasz, "Video Remains," 326.
[229] RuPaul Andre Charles (@RuPaul), "Older Gay Mentors," Twitter, April 17, 2011, 7:44 a.m., https://twitter.com/RuPaul/status/59628221527896065.

in front of the entrance to Nelson Sullivan's former townhouse in an Instagram post captioned: "I was SHOOK to the SHOOKEST DEGREE to visit the former home of Nelson Sullivan, one of my heroes, today."[230] In early 2019, drag queen Sharon Needles, winner of the fourth season of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, eulogized Nelson Sullivan's home video oeuvre: "Another late cinema night with Nelson Sullivan, who genuinely documented the night life greats, especially @RuPaul. Check [the videos] out!"[231] On June 27, 2019, the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riot, the Brooklyn gay bar Metropolitan hosted a night-long screening of Sullivan's videotapes. Across the East River that same summer, an exhibition on queer history was held thirty years after Sullivan's death in Sullivan's former townhouse, now an art gallery named Fort Gansevoort. These moments of fandom and the curation of videographer Nelson Sullivan's legacy across media, geographies, and platforms speak to the enduring impact that Sullivan's large body of video work has created today. In straddling the past context of the 1980s and a contemporary streaming economy, many clip-length excerpts from Sullivan's home videos now exist on YouTube, and fans have continued to spread Sullivan and the community information format of his videos across social media in their own posts and tributes. Sullivan's popular reception demonstrates how nostalgic spectatorship online helps audiences learn how to claim their position within queer history and to feel a part of a community across time and space.

Fans have extended the realm of Sullivan's world across social media platforms, responding to Dick Richards's act of curation of the videos on YouTube by creating in turn their own tribute works to Sullivan. Viewers' responses to Sullivan's videos—while not all achieving a mainstream virality—yet establish a small-scale virality that elevates the queer dimensions to

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[230] Desmond Is Amazing (@desmondisamazing), "I was SHOOK," Instagram, March 15, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BgW8JJLn4QF/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

[231] Sharon Needles (@SHARON_NEEDLES), "Another late cinema night," Twitter, March 9, 2019, 3:28 a.m., https://twitter.com/SHARON_NEEDLES/status/1104297804825018368?s=20.

Sullivan's videos in both their content of queer intimacies and in their newfound accessibility as videos that feel like vlogs from the 1980s. The fan practices that have emerged across Sullivan's archive attest to this separation of the past from the confines of melancholia toward the connective tissue of a community reveling in Sullivan's queer media. Viewers locate in Sullivan what I would call a "vlogging nostalgia." A vlogging nostalgia is a yearning for video that contain a selfie aesthetic but without the constraints of social media imperatives of constantly updating, commenting, and self-branding. The queer archive effect at work in Sullivan's video archive online is heightened by Sullivan's "selfie" technique. Sullivan's posing of his videocamera at arm's length from his body as he recorded gave his videos the formal qualities of what viewers read as a "selfie" today—the latter usually occurring in a "facetime" aesthetic of a medium close-up shot of an individual as they hold their phone's camera up and in front of their face. The material composition of Sullivan's videos provides a forerunner genre to today's selfie video aesthetics accomplished with a smartphone camera. As such, viewers readily enfold Sullivan's archive within a social media sharing economy, since Sullivan's shorter clip-length videos feel suited for just such a sharing environment.

Sullivan's video archive on YouTube demonstrates the popular appeal of accessing nostalgic content on YouTube as well as demonstrating viewer responses to the queer archive effect. Fan responses across social media platforms have created a shared space and experience out of Sullivan's vision of an everyday queer 1980s New York City captured on videotape. Nostalgic photographs of street-level, everyday urban encounters have long been a cult media genre that Sullivan's videos pick up from. The photographs of street photographer Vivian Maier, found as a trove of negatives long after her death, capture with unrivalled clarity the

happenstance urban encounters with Chicago and New York's denizens.[232] The posthumous

discovery of those who documented quotidian moments like Vivian Walker and Nelson Sullivan

invites reflection on cultural history, of the ways in which media genres and aesthetic styles are

defined by the successful, the dominant, and the rich. Viewers accomplish this sense of critical

cultural reflection by interacting with Sullivan's archive.

Beyond the reception of Sullivan's work as a type of "vlogging" before vlogging, a

common yet ahistorical attribution to Sullivan's videos, viewers also dwell on how Sullivan's

archive provides them with a queer history—the experience of having, along with RuPaul Andre

Charles, Nelson Sullivan as their gay spirit guide. Reddit posts abound that serve to introduce

Sullivan to wider audiences. Subreddits featuring posts about Sullivan include "r/NYC,"

"r/TodayILearned," "r/VintageLGBT," "r/ObscureMedia," and "r/RupaulsDragRace." The range

of subreddits that post Sullivan's videos attest to the videos' unstable positioning as media

artifacts with a general nostalgic value for a non-queer audience, as well as having particular

nostalgic value for a queer audience. Sullivan's videos have a potential within them that far

exceeds the textual content of the videos for any one audience. Rather, viewers make new

meaning out of Sullivan's videos, spreading his glimpses of 1980s queer intimacies into new

locations online.

Commenting directly on Sullivan's videos on YouTube collects the videos into an

attention economy on the platform. Commenting creates a shared space and experience out of

YouTube videos, especially for a vision of an everyday queer 1980s New York City captured on

videotape. Analyzing the structure, range, and depth of comments to Sullivan's videos would

require a separate journal article, though comments of Sullivan being a precursor to more

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[232] John Maloof, ed. *Vivian Maier: Street Photographer* (Brooklyn, NY: PowerHouse Books, 2012).

contemporary media formats and expressions of nostalgic sentiments are common recurring themes. The range of comments confirms what Hilderbrand considers a positive effect of nostalgia in relation to queer media, creating "a mode of nostalgia that accounts for generative historical fascination, of imagining, feeling, and drawing from history."[233] On Instagram, users educate others into the fold of Sullivan's audience, typically displaying shorter video clips pulled from the 5 Ninth Avenue YouTube channel paired with selfies taken in front of Sullivan's townhouse at 5 Ninth Avenue in the Meatpacking District. One Instagram user "flashreads" remarked having dropped by "ancestor Nelson Sullivan's house on the way to the Whitney in NYC," whereas user "thecottenswabb" wrote that the "ongoing 24-hour salon" of Sullivan's home encouraged him to videotape his life.[234] The blending of past and present found across Sullivan fan posts on Instagram reveals how social media can provide a sense of participation in, and ownership of, a queer history that is usually felt as abstract and inaccessible. Like the numerous subreddits that have provided new digital homes for Sullivan's videos, the associative hashtags of these Instagram posts also reveal the varied legacy that Sullivan's work constitutes today. FlashReads' post contains tags that refer to the form of Sullivan's videos as a proto-vlog (#selfie), to the geographical and historical factors of downtown NYC's contemporary landscape (#gentrification), and to the specifically queer reading of Sullivan's work (#queerancestors). Similarly, user "thecottenswabb" includes the YouTube channel name (#5ninthavenueproject) as a hashtag to signal the origin point of fans who became inspired by Sullivan's archive to produce their own nostalgic media in turn on other social media platforms.

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[233] Hilderbrand, "Retroactivism," 308.

[234] Wesley Flash (@flashreads), "Last Sunday," Instagram, September 21, 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/Bn_Jylbj0mw/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link; Joannie C (@thecottenswabb), "5 Ninth Ave," Instagram, August 14, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B1KKvc6ADQW/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.

One fan tribute video on YouTube itself demonstrates how fans respond to the queer archive effect found in Sullivan's archive by making their own vlogs to render homage to Sullivan. Fans in this way intervene into the queer practice of collecting by reiterating the form of Sullivan's videos on the platform where fans first encountered Sullivan's work. One English Youtuber "Heramitep" posted a video on February 22nd, 2019, that reiterates the long walk to the west side piers that Sullivan recorded in his final videotape on July 3rd, 1989. Sullivan's last tape, recorded merely hours before he passed away, has become a lodestar for Sullivan's ardent followers, because he admits during the video with the alarming certainty of a premonition that "it's the last day [he's] going to have."[235] Heramitep's video is a mournful tribute that inhabits the bodily experience of Sullivan's final video. Heramitep films in Sullivan's home—now turned into an art gallery—with the camera trained back at himself, just as Sullivan used to do. Heramitep's video is both a New York City tourist vlog and a restaging of the place (Sullivan's home) and technique (a prescient "selfie aesthetics") of Sullivan's videos. Heramitep's video then cuts to wide-angle lens footage, not shot through a camcorder like Sullivan but through a GoPro camera. As Heramitep walked through Sullivan's entire home, recording out of the windows featured in so many of Sullivan's videos, Heramitep included the audio track of one of Sullivan's videos.

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[235] "Nelson's Last Tape - July 3, 1989," uploaded March 21, 2015, video, 9:41, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed March 8, 2020, https://youtu.be/6t0kPyTeZps.

Figure 3-9: Heramitep's tribute video captures Sullivan's home, now an art gallery, as Sullivan speaks in the audio track. "Inside Nelson Sullivans [sic] House 5 Ninth Avenue NYC," Heramitep, uploaded 22 February 2019, accessed 5 March 2020. https://youtu.be/_1qch.

As Heramitep scans the changed domestic space of Sullivan's former home, we hear Sullivan speak to his friend Dick Richards on how Sullivan wanted to be recorded. Sullivan's voice reaches out to viewers today through Heramitep's tribute video across the intervening years: "Just follow my every move.… I don't want to be in the shadow, I want light!"[236] Heramitep bodily inhabits the recording process found in many of Sullivan's videos. Heramitep's video displays the desire that the archive creates in Sullivan's fans: to experience the mundane as a route to a feeling of community. Sullivan's address to his future audience has acted as an invitation that viewers today take up in new video practices.

Heramitep's tribute video affirms what performance studies scholar Ricardo Montez has previously highlighted in Sullivan's work, that it "imparts a sensual relationship to its subject

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[236] "Inside Nelson Sullivans [sic] House 5 Ninth Avenue NYC," uploaded February 22, 2019, video, 18:22, Heramitep, accessed March 5, 2020, https://youtu.be/_1qchoO9xkw. The audio track for the clip referenced in the Heramitep video is from "At Home with Nelson Sullivan at 5 Ninth Avenue in 1985," uploaded Nov 22, 2011, video, 8:10, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed March 8, 2020, https://youtu.be/Yil4HSpd9jE.

matter that challenges any attempt to codify the material within neat, linear truths."[237] Additionally, Heramitep's video extends the particular way that Sullivan's work has been read as a vlog on YouTube, while adding to the ongoing collection of fan works that mourn the loss not only of Sullivan, but also of Dick Richards, whose death in 2018 marked the end of the regular updating schedule of the 5 Ninth Avenue Project channel, ending Richards' own contribution to queer media history. At the end of Heramitep's video, as he zooms in on grey water breaking on the rocks of a west side pier, he marks the entire video as a tribute to both people with the following text: "RIP Nelson Sullivan. RIP Dick Richards."[238] Heramitep's video captures the weight of Sullivan's archive by rendering his nostalgic vlog as a memorial to both authors of Sullivan's archive—Dick Richards, in uploading the videos, and Nelson Sullivan, who recorded so intently over the last six years of his life.

Across these and other fan works, Sullivan's archive on YouTube has come to stand in for both the personal queer friendship of Dick Richards and Nelson Sullivan as well as the documentation of the public queer social worlds found in his videos. To respond to, and to address, these two dimensions to Sullivan's archive—the temporality of the collection and the temporality of the world recorded in the video, which keeps receding while remaining ever-present online—the archive effect can be seen as "queer" in the combination of these two facets. If indeed the archival qualities of moving-image media can be understood as an "experience of reception," then Sullivan's wide-ranging reception actively updates his work by linking it to present media genres and social media sharing strategies.[239] I argue that the archive effect of queer media takes the temporality of marginalized archives and of queer media content together,

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[237] Montez, "Virtuosic Distortion," 398.
[238] "Inside Nelson Sullivans [sic] House 5 Ninth Avenue NYC," uploaded February 22, 2019, video, 18:22, Heramitep, accessed March 5, 2020, https://youtu.be/_1qchoO9xkw.
[239] Baron, *Archive Effect*, 7.

weaving queer community across multiple timelines at once, creating an archive that can be mobilized in the present as a community history in the making.

Conclusion

Nelson Sullivan's video recording practice was personal through being communal and communal through being personal. I have explored in this chapter how Sullivan's videos reveal a community information format by the feeling of community that viewers excavate out of Sullivan's style of "active-passive observation" and the mundane texture of his home videos. One week before his death, Nelson Sullivan went to the 1989 Gay Pride parade in drag as his persona, Amnesia. Walking to the parade, Amnesia and his friends RuPaul and a young man only ever referred to as "trade," a young model from Georgia, wound their way through the bustling crowd. Sullivan later entered the flow of the parade floats and dancers, eventually training his floating, hand-balanced camera on a group of drag queens. With Sullivan's camera trained on the group of queens, one queen remarks, surprised: "I thought you were filming yourself!" Nelson replies without missing a beat: "I feel like I am."[240] Sullivan's videos, old media made new through YouTube's sharing economy and on-demand viewing practices, widen our understanding of what community media can mean before the Web and provide a new shared set of visual tools to render queer community anew.

Sullivan's work, home videos in search of an audience, have led multiple lives after Sullivan's passing. Soon after his death, Swiss television produced a segment on Sullivan and his coterie of New York City's club kid friends at Sullivan's wake at the Limelight Club in New York City. A wall of TV screens played Sullivan's tapes, which appeared in the background of

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[240] "Amnesia at Gay Pride 1989," uploaded October 8, 2013, video, 15:43, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed February 15, 2019, https://youtu.be/G5K-R0rI4SE.

the interviews with Sullivan's grieving friends. During the interview, drag queen Lahoma Van Zandt attributed the downtown club kids scene to Sullivan. His camera itself made the scene, she maintained, because people responded to the camera and made themselves into performers before its lens, saying that a lot of things wouldn't have been as fun if he had not been there recording it all. In Sullivan's obituary in the July 17, 1989, issue of *Outweek*, *Village Voice* columnist Michael Musto similarly eulogized Sullivan as videographer of the downtown stars, detailing how he always had his video camera as an extension of his body and his enduring fascination with recording genderqueer performers. Musto wrote of his friend that if you're not in one of his videos, "you've been home too much and not homo enough."[241] The resonance of his videos as a community text is important to remember when assessing the value of a community information format across community media projects before the Web. The community information format of Sullivan's home videos, as domestic media that contain a vision of community that has found so much resonance today, makes for a key site for understanding how everyday queer media of the 1980s have become sites of cultural memory through acts of remediation onto new platforms and into new worlds.

If analyzing the start of Sullivan's archive revealed how his videos exist as an unstable historical artifact, then the end of his archive also reveals an important aspect to the recuperation of his videos for the present. Shortly before his death, Sullivan's life was a succession of rapid changes. He quit his job at a music store to focus on his upcoming public access show, a realization of a dream toward which his years of video recording, and his friendship with Richards, aspired. One week earlier, Sullivan's close friend and trans nightlife performer named Christina passed away. As he shot a test videotape for his future public access show, he

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[241] Michael Musto, "Nelson Sullivan, 41, Downtown Video Artist," *OutWeek*, July 17, 1989, 27.

dedicated the video to Christina. His mournful walk through the West Village in the summer of

1989 is both a queer history lesson and a collection of personal memories. Uploaded to the 5

Ninth Avenue Project channel, this sole episode of Sullivan's TV show comprises a long walk

from the Meatpacking District in NYC's lower west side eastward to Sheridan Square, directly in

front of the Stonewall Inn, the site of the Stonewall Riot in 1969.

Figure 3-10: Nelson Sullivan records the Stonewall Inn on 2 July, 1989. "Nelson Sullivan's Cable TV Show (as imagined from his videos)," uploaded June 11, 2015, video, 28:38, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed March 8, 2020, https://youtu.be/mPbGEBYEk_Y.

The videotape is a heightened, even more self-aware presentation than Sullivan's usual direct

address to the camera, since Sullivan intended for this video to become the format of his

upcoming public access show. Many of the features of Sullivan's videos that viewers identify as

vlogging before vlogging—selfie aesthetics, direct-to-camera address, asking questions of the

audience, a focus on the everyday—were always a part of his archive. However, this tape makes

evident a more didactic tone and more purposeful in-camera editing due to the tape's intended

public exhibition context. Musing on his friend Christina, he introduces the final segment with

the following homage:

> I want to end on a really special note. Due to circumstances beyond my control, Christina is confined to the archives forever. The last time I saw her was at the Chelsea Hotel. I miss her terribly now and I always will. I would like for my first cable show to be a memorial to my friend Christina. She was warm, witty, talented, and generous. She had exquisite taste and she was an artist. All the extraordinary people who knew her knew she was extraordinary herself.[242]

One individual, mourning his friend, can yet also be a community text. Sullivan's desire to bear witness to his own personal loss reverberates today with the capturing of a world being lost all around him.

However, Sullivan never compiled this footage for his first public access show himself. His friend Dick Richards completed the one and only episode of the planned public access show, inserting videos where Nelson cued them originally in this test videotape from July 2nd, 1989. The temporality of the posthumous editing of the raw material of Sullivan's videos into a fated episode that never aired on public access marks a queer orientation to time. Richards's devotion to his friend's videos marks a lifelong practice of collecting Sullivan's media, which Ann Cvetkovich argues is a necessary step to recording marginalized queer lives: "[T]he impulse to collect [queer media objects] or to turn collections into archives is often motivated by a desire to create the alternative histories and genealogies of queer lives."[243] Now that Richards has compiled Sullivan's test footage into an episode of his planned public access show, and now that Richards has maintained Sullivan's archive on YouTube for ten years, Sullivan's videos have become queer community archive-artifacts, recording mourning and yearning in equal measure. Sullivan's friend Richards realized Sullivan's vision for his public access show and for his tapes to have a future audience on YouTube, where the videos have circulated far beyond the bounds of Sullivan's imagination, becoming testaments to a queer history for many around the world.

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[242] "Nelson Sullivan's Cable TV Show (As Imagined from His Videos)," uploaded June 11, 2015, video, 28:38, 5 Ninth Avenue Project, accessed October 26, 2018, https://youtu.be/mPbGEBYEk_Y.
[243] Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects," 275.

The layered quality to the archive effect of Sullivan's videos stages a series of memorials. Using the technology of video, Sullivan memorialized Christina in the test videotape for his public access show. Using the platform of YouTube, Richards memorialized Sullivan in turn for many years to come. Using an array of social media platforms, Fans continue to memorialize Sullivan's archive in tribute posts and videos that insert Sullivan's life, work, and legacy into narratives of a communal queer history. These acts of making sense and community out of history are acts of remembrance, equal parts melancholic and nostalgic, transforming a public mourning into a participatory curation. Seeking to make new meaning from queer media histories for use in the present is one of Sullivan's legacies, a fitting reminder of the positive impact that community information formats can have in making feelings of community tangible across time and space.

Chapter 4 Laughing at Convention: Atlanta Public Access and *The American Music Show*

> While its main purpose is to be a vehicle for those without the clout or polish or instantly apparent logic to speak through more mainstream media, public access also lures a crowd that simply wants to expose its own goofy take on the world.[244]

Analyzing community information formats before the Web can expand what a history of "social media" can mean. As I analyzed in the third chapter, the home video archive of Nelson Sullivan now exists on YouTube as a queer community artifact, preserving a subcultural articulation of sociality built through videotape. Videotape was a powerful social media technology before the Web, as this chapter analyzes in the context of public access television. This chapter continues an analysis of video recording as a social, public practice and picks up the thread left at the end of the last chapter on public access television being Sullivan's dreamed space for the construction of community. Subcultural media groups before the Web built media platforms through a direct-to-audience address on public access cable television.[245] This chapter analyzes how the long-running Atlanta public access program *The American Music Show* (1981-2005) created a community information format that mobilized a satire of televisual conventions to create an archive of Southern queerness.

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[244] Drew Jubera, "The World of 'Wayne: Atlanta Style," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 27, 1992, F1.

[245] I define subculture as a cultural association, bounded by some combination of geography, identity, or ideology, whose members share interests, desires, and needs in common. Subcultures usually position themselves economically, socially, and culturally against competing and predominant subcultures or against a "mainstream" industry, aesthetic style, or set of beliefs. I have followed discussions of subcultures within queer and marginalized groups in work by Curran Nault and Jessa Lingel. Curran Nault, *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture* (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2017); Jessa Lingel, *Digital Countercultures and the Struggle for Community* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution described public access in 1992 as offering amateurs an ability to speak from a platform on the margins of the mainstream. Rather than compete for limited and prized programs on broadcast television, avoiding a dizzying world of corporate pitches and rejection, people could transmit their "own goofy take on the world" on the channels of public access that blossomed throughout the 1970s and 1980s. After the successful launch of public access television in Manhattan in the early-1970s, the horizon of public access television appeared vast by the late-1970s and early-1980s. In August of 1970, New York City's Community Antenna Television (CATV) franchises were made official. The franchises required that cable companies provide channels to lease to the public with adequate time allowed to ensure access to wide groups of people. FCC rules on regulating and allowing public access did not formally come about until February 1972. Such regulations required that cable provision in the top 100 markets in the United States provide one public channel, one municipal channel, and one educational channel.[246] By 1973, there were nearly 18 municipally-owned cable systems in smaller cities in the United States.[247]

Shocking, risqué, and banal content coursed through Manhattan's public access channels, paving the way for other cities to create public access channels in turn with their own brands of community-produced television. An intense demand for air time on New York's two public access channels by 1974 resulted in a limitation to one half-hour per client.[248] A description of programs on these public access channels (C & D) from 1974 lists "a long discussion of media oppression by Ronald Gold representing the Gay Activist Alliance" alongside Spanish-language programs, Feminist news shows, and a show for individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia.[249]

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[246] Stephanie Harrington, "What's All This on TV?," *New York Times*, May 27, 1973, 35.
[247] Ibid.
[248] Fred Ferretti, "No Censor, No Limits on Public Access Cable TV," *New York Times*, May 7, 1974, 89.
[249] Ibid.

From the early stages of public access in New York City, gay activism through video stood

beside the mundane, as in the birthday party program, and other forms of public activism

mediated through video, as in the pro-Marijuana rally. I argue in this chapter that the use of

public access channels by "capable amateurs," who were dedicated to making do with

technological and financial limitations, made public access television a significant space of

community information exchange before the rise of the Web in the early-1990s.[250]

Placing *The American Music Show*

 The American Music Show (*TAMS*) built a community information format that fostered a

network of subcultural queer media. Attentive to the subcultural labor of media producers

outside mainstream media industries as well as the structures of feeling that course throughout

the history of *TAMS*, this chapter grounds its approach at the intersection of production studies

and queer media studies.[251] My aim and focus for this chapter is to analyze how *TAMS* used

technology to foster an ideology of participation that created a satirical televisual style.

Analyzing *TAMS* offers a perspective that braids together independent and amateur media

production, queer orientations to technology, and a commitment to what queer media scholar

Curran Nault terms "creative cheapness" that is important for fleshing out a history of

subcultural media production in North America and a history of sociality built through media

platforms.[252] I look to scholars of Do-It-Yourself (DIY) production cultures that provide a theory

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[250] I follow Cait McKinney's definition of 'capable amateurism" to refer to technological uses and practices that are not just relegated to the sometimes negative connotations of "amateurism." Capable amateurs in Atlanta's public access scene brought a flexibility to how technologies could be imagined, implemented, and used and had an innate capacity for "figuring things out on the fly." Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 30.

[251] For a similar approach to this intersection of fields, see Alfred L. Martin Jr., "Introduction: What Is Queer Production Studies/Why Is Queer Production Studies?" *Journal of Film and Video* 70, no. 3-4 (2018): 3-7.

[252] The term "creative cheapness" is "about repurposing unwanted stuff…for intentions that are, at least symbolically anti-consumptive." Curran Nault "Three Dollar Cinema: The Down and Dirty DIY of Queer Production," *Journal of Film and Video* 70, no. 3-4 (2018): 79.

of DIY technological use among so-called amateurs. My approach to Atlanta public access elevates the work of public access television professionals and performers who exerted their subcultural influence outside of the mainstream for years.

This chapter on *TAMS* addresses a gap in media studies scholarship around public access television. What studies on public access typically reveal is that public access TV—with its more temporary, shifting production arrangements—make for illustrative studies of media production that show how context, culture, and locality challenge hegemony in mainstream media generally and in local cable TV industries in particular.[253] By looking outside of the bounds of agents, contracts, and deals, *The American Music Show* and its world of queer media production also highlights what Alfred L. Martin Jr. calls, "the ways queers work to reassert their queerness through media production and the struggles that come with producing queer media outside of the hegemonic media industries."[254] *The American Music Show* built an anti-hegemonic production culture through public access television, which resulted in the program fostering a community information format. This is because the show developed a mode of producing community media that was also about crafting access to media for people of marginalized identities**.** Queer media studies scholar Curran Nault rightly identifies some shortfalls with the place of queer media production within the contemporary brand of production studies or the occasionally more corporate-leaning "industry studies." Nault argues that to see queer production cultures involves attending to media practices that are more craft-based and that arise out of material necessity: "The history of queer production is by and large a history of do-it-yourself (DIY) practice, a fact born out of both necessity and design."[255] I situate the cultural production on *TAMS* as a site of

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[253] Lauren Herold, "Televisual Emotional Pedagogy: AIDS, Affect, and Activism on Vito Russo's *Our Time*," *Television & New Media* 21, no. 1 (2020): 25-40.
[254] Martin Jr., "Introduction," 5.
[255] Nault, "Three Dollar Cinema," 63.

DIY practice, a term which they may not have applied to their work throughout the production of the show but which does describe their commitment to a quickness in their show's production, a playful experimentation with technology throughout the show's run, and an archival sensibility toward ephemeral objects of queer culture.

One early production studies approach before "production studies" clarifies what a community information format can reveal about the margins of a community media platform such as public access television. Two sociologists, Donna L. King and Christopher Mele, offer a window into analyzing *TAMS* through a critical appreciation of the "fringe" within public access TV as a contested form of emergent media. In 1999, King and Mele performed an ethnographic study of Cape Cod Community Television (CCCT). They asked in their study why "fringe" programs on the station were routinely dismissed as not worthy of public access airtime. Kind and Mele came to the conclusion that programs addressing marginal or subcultural interests were not as valued as programs appealing to a general audience: "Public access ventures are viewed as successful when they provide programs that are (1) demonstrably different (i.e. more inclusive) from those shown on commercial television, and (2) more 'representative' of local or community issues and concerns that are otherwise not articulated, thus recreating a viable public sphere."[256] King and Mele argued for valuing the "fringe" programs on public access by looking at "the critical possibilities inherent in the *production* of public access television" and by not relying on preconceived ideals of rational, informative discourse and programming.[257] They argued convincingly that judging the democratic potential of public access cannot rest on "normative judgments of the content of programming."[258] King and Mele pushed instead for moving studies

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[256] Donna L. King and Christopher Mele, "Making Public Access Television: Community Participation, Media Literacy and the Public Sphere," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 43, no. 4 (1999): 604.
[257] Ibid., 607.
[258] Ibid., 605.

of public access television away "from *what* is produced to *how it is* produced" to counter the hegemonic framing strategies of mainstream television.[259] Understanding how *TAMS* situated itself as a "fringe show" helps to understand how the margins of television industries have been defined historically within the local production contexts of public access. *TAMS*'s subcultural level of fame also shows how a fringe public access program can yet garner an outsized influence that does not necessarily reflect news and programming directly representative of the widest number of viewers. I argue that *TAMS* emerged as a community information format precisely due to its marginal or "fringe" location within the public access television scene in Atlanta and in the United States. This chapter will address the following research questions: How did *TAMS*'s queer practices of technology challenge technological and genre conventions of Atlanta's public access environment? What are the legacies of *TAMS* that can inform a critical history of mediated sociality before the World Wide Web?

The community information format that was built and fostered by the people involved with *The American Music Show* was a queer site of performance. *The American Music Show* offered a home-grown "ugly" queer art aesthetic in their commitment to aesthetic shortcuts in achieving the DIY style of their show. John Waters' troupe of queer performers provided a motley cast for his own slapdash and riotous film productions in Baltimore, Maryland. *The American Music Show* provided a Southern version of a similar arrangement of queer production in an assemblage of performers across genres, genders, and levels of sincerity. The producers and performers of *The American Music Show* made the show distinct from other "ugly" queer art moments in cultural history in the following ways: it satirized new communication technologies; it used a DIY aesthetics not to shock and repulse, but to situate the program within a Southern

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[259] Ibid.

humor basing itself in, and amply critiquing, respectability, cultural whiteness, and the privileges of both; and it documented the ephemeral objects and documents of queer culture. My focus on television, and a program on public access television at that, paired with the ugly queer aesthetics of *TAMS* in particular, sets my work apart from the other film studies work based on the repertoire of John Waters as well as of the DIY aesthetic in more contemporary queer cultural production.[260] An attention to public access television allows for recognition of how, in 1980s Atlanta, satirization of public access television conventions and genres were a component of queer performance, such as when RuPaul earnestly looks at the camera in a 1987 episode and says, "it's Christian broadcasting like this that can help, people, see.… I think Jim & Tammy [Faye Bakker] are going to come back bigger and stronger than ever before."[261] RuPaul in another episode also encourages viewers to reach out and touch the screen, a practice frequently espoused in televangelism. These and other comments and practices make apparent how satire worked hand-in-hand with the show's DIY production style to produce an aesthetics of public access queerness that built a community information format.

My methods of cultural history include analysis of original archival materials, oral history interviews with *TAMS* producers and participants, and textual analysis of episodes of the show. I have performed original archival analysis of materials in *The American Music Show* collection at the Rose Library at Emory University over two separate trips in November 2018 and September 2019. Analyzing the show involved close readings of photographs taken across the show's production run as well as watching full episodes of the show, which is only possible

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[260] Nault, "Three Dollar Cinema"; Derek Kane-Meddock, "Trash Comes Home: Gender/Genre Subversion in the Films of John Waters," in *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*, ed. Christine Gledhill (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012).
[261] Tape 154, May 7, 1987, *The American Music Show* Video Recordings, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

to do onsite at Emory University. I accessed additional clips of bits, characters, location shots, and assorted compilations from the show on Dick Richards' own YouTube channel MisterRichardson.[262] The interviews I performed were with key participants in the show's storied production history. In July 2019, I interviewed David Goldman, Dick Richards's partner and frequent performer on *TAMS*. While in Atlanta in September 2019, I interviewed *TAMS* co-host Potsy Duncan alongside frequent performer Rosser Shymanski. These interviews centered on the production of the show, with ample space left open for an open-ended discussion that gave space for my discussants to elaborate on the show's repeating segments, characters, and technological choices. Through my interviews, I came to a different conclusion than that found in prior academic work on the show by Charlotte Howell, who interviewed participants involved in the show's first three years from 1981 to 1983, namely: James Bond, Tom Zarilli, Reina Oostingh, and Potsy Duncan.[263] By looking to the period just beyond Howell's focus, we see that the rest of the 1980s was the period when *TAMS* achieved a small-scale, national recognition and acclaim. This chapter seeks not to provide an elegy for the lost promise, dashed hope, or unreliable memories of *TAMS*'s producers. Rather, I open up the archive of access within *TAMS* to demonstrate how public access TV provided a platform for a community to form and for a novel queer production of culture through technological use to materialize. My focus on the show through the rest of the 1980s and the early-1990s, the period right before the Web, reveals a wider array of forms of capital that the show's participants actively sought and attained. The

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[262] "MisterRichardson" is the sibling YouTube channel to the 5 Ninth Avenue Project channel discussed in the third chapter of this dissertation. Richards maintained both YouTube channels up to his death in 2018. Whereas the 5 Ninth Avenue Project received more widespread viral attention during Richards's lifetime, the MisterRichardson channel has been much more rarely accessed, viewed, and commented upon, despite the MisterRichardson channel having slightly more uploads (783 uploads on MisterRichardson to 735 on *5 Ninth Avenue Project*).

[263] Charlotte Howell, "Symbolic Capital and the Production Discourse of *The American Music Show*: A Microhistory of Atlanta Cable Access," *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 1-24.

participants in the *TAMS* scene gained a subcultural celebrity status and distributed their own

characters and their queer vision of Atlanta across North America and the globe.

The American Music Show and the Commons

> "Funtone is a way of life. It's a full-service fun forum." – Laurie Pike, *Pizza TV* (1994)[264]

Besides a clever alliterative turn of phrase, Laurie Pike, the presenter of the program

Pizza TV on UK television's Channel 4, encapsulated the scene around *The American Music*

Show as one of multimedia revelry. By the early-1990s, the scene around *The American Music*

Show had achieved a level of subcultural fame through a variety of media fronts. The activities

of queer performance, public access television, and the music label that Dick Richards helmed

called Funtone Records all contributed to a *joie de vivre* that is representative of the scene as a

queer commons. A commons built through media can be defined as "a resource managed by the

community that uses it."[265] Pike's comments isolate an important aspect for reading the media

culture around *The American Music Show* and Richards's many media ventures such as Funtone

Records. I read "full-service fun forum" as a media production culture providing a community

information format bound together by a satirical approach to humor across various media texts.

The satirical approach within the Atlanta public access "scene" was born through Southern

tropes of femininity, whiteness, respectability, and the ways in which these facets were

processed, filtered, and worked through wide-ranging gender performances of drag.

TAMS built a commons through an orientation to technology and a situatedness within a

queer domestic space. By showing the seams of their production, *TAMS* built a commons. The

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[264] "Laurie Pike's Report about The Funtone USA Family," uploaded February 6, 2008, video, 3:56, MisterRichardson, YouTube, accessed October 10, 2020, https://youtu.be/EZgXMIZoyeM.
[265] Nadja Millner-Larsen and Gavin Butt, "Introduction: The Queer Commons," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018): 399.

scene of *TAMS* built an orientation to technology and aesthetic style that was accessible to an audience that could participate and contribute to the show, making the show a type of commons. Through a satire of public access conventions, *TAMS* provided a campy vision of technology in the service of public access. Not just a set of aesthetic choices, and not just a departure from *local* public access conventions, *TAMS* mobilized aesthetic choices and an independent production environment based out of Richards's home. In so doing, they transformed the queer domestic space into a site of performance; they satirized the televisual conventions of liveness; and they laughingly displayed the seams of their technological work-arounds, transforming their televisual production as a joyful type of craft labor. The capable amateurism of the program would heighten the humor of tapings unexpectedly. Frequently, the makeshift set in Richards's living room would have backdrops fall with a crash in the middle of recording. Additionally, when drag queen performers on the show would ask to re-do a take of a song, the camera would just keep recording, even if the hosts encouraged the performer to do another take. In this way, the technological decisions that the producers of *TAMS* made created a messier yet earnest aesthetic that became a hallmark of the show. These features also link the show into a timeline that lags behind social and technical possibilities on purpose. One can see in *The American Music Show* a makeshift aesthetic of public access. However, the scene around the show was far too knowing and satirical to present a mere "queer ugly" aesthetic without a self-awareness of this presentation. A lag in the temporal inhabitation of media technology is a queer orientation to the mainstream, as queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman argues: "[T]he point may be to trail behind actually existing social possibilities: to be interested in the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless."[266] By willingly creating a laggy

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[266] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii.

orientation to the standards of public access television in Atlanta, *TAMS* dwelled in an outmoded, craft labor space to provide a more inclusive vision of what public access television could mean for a community of queer performers.

While the preceding chapter on Nelson Sullivan argued that an attention to queer domesticity and the everyday was an important lens to view how a community information format can be unearthed through the reception of Sullivan's archive, this chapter analyzes how *The American Music Show* marshalled satirical constructions of broadcast television within a similarly domestic idiom in order to craft a community information format that transmitted a reading of the Southern queer experience of Atlanta. *The American Music Show* built a commons through several features of their show's production. The way the scene around the show built a commons is an important feature of the sociality of queer media before the Web.

A commons was built through the show through the philosophy of participation that the show fostered. Viewing the production and history of *TAMS* as offering a commons situates the show's cultural work as offering solutions to a disjointed experience in our orientation to sociality today. Thinking of a commons in relationship to media projects by queer subjects helps us understand the way past groups built resources "for imagining, experimenting with, and enacting the improvisational infrastructures necessary for managing the unevenness of contemporary existence."[267] A commons refers our attention to the way queer communities built resources together, in common, in response to privatizing forces within media industries.

In the annals of queer media history, one noted performer made his start on *The American Music Show*. A young man wrote into *TAMS* after moving to Atlanta from San Diego. RuPaul André Charles described his introduction to the show as one of participating in the weirdness that

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[267] Millner-Larsen and Butt, "Introduction," 400.

felt like home to him: "I saw [*TAMS*] one evening flipping channels and wrote a letter to them and said basically, you're my tribe. I need to be with you. And they said, well, come on down. Be on the show."[268] RuPaul had his sights set on a career of renown. As an early adherent to the philosophy of participation in the show, RuPaul would regularly come on the show to perform. He often appeared in the early-1980s with his bandmates, the U-Haul's, two ladies who were hip to *The American Music Show* and RuPaul's blending of satirical humor with his early knack for working the camera. The June 30, 1982, show includes RuPaul and the U-Haul's dancing to the Temptations' song "Ain't Too Proud to Beg." The warm welcome RuPaul received is the result of the philosophy of media participation that *TAMS* harnessed through its run. Rather than just watch, *TAMS* urged its viewers to get on the other side of the camera and join in on the fun.

In this way, *The American Music Show* maintained a public mission to public access by encouraging fans to join the show as performers and guest stars. The program emphasized the ability for viewers to join in on the television antics. One written title card had "Be on TV!!!" written on it, which they would show at times at the start and end of the show. Another participatory segment was "Who's Home Drunk," where guests on the show would call their friends to see who was imbibing at home on the Tuesday night of taping. In a similar vein of including their connections and friends into the show, anything that touched the hands of the producers could one day end up in the taped episode, including letters sent in or voicemails left on Richards's answering machine. Since Richards and Goldman taped the show at their home, Richards's long-abiding rule was that you had to appear on the show if you wanted to hang out during the pre-show dinner or during the taping. Shymanski described Richards' stance as an

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[268] Kelly McEvers, "Shante, He Stays: RuPaul Reflects on Decades Of Drag," *NPR*, August 25, 2016, accessed November 20, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2016/08/25/491338249/shante-he-stays-rupaul-reflects-on-decades-of-drag-and-2-emmy-nominations.

obligation: "Half a dozen to a dozen people…would just show up just to hang out and had no intention to be on the show, [but] Dick always tried to make everyone be on the show. I mean, he would kind of shame them into it."[269] The constant encouraging by Richards for his friends to be on the show went a long way to maintaining the conviviality of the show and the sustenance of its many characters for its 35-year run. The commons produced through the participatory philosophy of *TAMS* made the show into a community artifact. Within the context of the American South, such a community-oriented goal was sorely needed.

Atlanta: Place, Race, and the South

In 1981, *The American Music Show* and the public access channel serving Atlanta, People TV, debuted. The origin of public access television in Atlanta is tied into the political and activist career of *The American Music Show*'s original co-host, James Bond. By briefly charting the history of public access television in Atlanta, the stakes for *TAMS* of maintaining independence will become more apparent.

The city during Jim Crow was riven with a quotidian structure of racial segregation. The slow desegregation of the city from 1959 onward did not mean that a harmonious integration ensued. When court-ordered desegregation occurred, working-class white residents avoided sharing spaces in common with their black neighbors like public parks or swimming pools. The rage of working-class whites in Atlanta led to a disinvestment in the urban core of Atlanta through decades of white flight. City improvements and public works projects were seen by white residents to benefit African Americans, and so these measures were hotly contested and often voted down.[270] The gay and lesbian scene of the 1960s and 1970s reflected the ongoing

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[269] Rosser Shymanski in discussion with the author, September 11, 2019.
[270] Kevin Kruse, "The Politics of Race and Public Space: Desegregation, Privatization, and the Tax Revolt in Atlanta," *Journal of Urban History* 31, no. 5 (2005).

experience of an unfinished integration for African Americans in the Southern metropolis of Atlanta.

Nonetheless, within LGBT history, Atlanta had become the "Hollywood of drag" in the 1970s.[271] Numerous gay bars catered to somewhat exclusively black or white clienteles, though the former were often not listed in gay directories or newspapers largely catering to white gay men even after Jim Crow. Profiles of Atlanta in 1970s gay men's magazines underlined the city's economic successes as a "Sunbelt" town not suffering from the post-industrialization of the Midwest.[272] Queer life in the South was challenging, and often presented the strictures of a homophobic environment. However, living in the South also meant stronger local ties and adhesion within groups based around queer identities often segmented by racial identity. In Midtown Atlanta by the early-1980s, there were no fewer than six gay bars in the area around Peachtree and 10th Streets.[273] Queer ecologies supported and extended the causes of LGBT organizations and helped create networks of support and concern. Historian James Sears explains this phenomenon: "Localities from Atlanta to Charlotte are better understood as local queer ecologies: queer spaces occupied by various groups with differing beliefs, symbols, identities, lifestyles, languages, and interests operating inside a common border and within a cultural context of homophobia and heteronormativity."[274] The launch of public access as a medium oriented toward representing the desires and needs of a city's residents also played a role in establishing Atlanta as a hub for a specific queer ecology that led to *TAMS*.

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[271] James Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 153.
[272] Lucas Hilderbrand, "A Suitcase Full of Vaseline, or Travels in the 1970s Gay World," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 22, no. 3 (2013): 390.
[273] David Goldman in discussion with the author, August 6, 2019.
[274] Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, and Rhinestones*, 319.

Seen from an intersectional point of view, the rollout of cable television in Atlanta followed the blueprint of racial and economic privilege in Atlanta. Cable first came to Atlanta in the early-1980s in the predominantly white northern half of the city, with the majority African American neighborhoods left out of cable's reach until the mid-1980s.[275] In this way, the actions of *TAMS*'s producers exemplify an easier access to a self-proclaimed DIY production due to having more initial capital and racial privilege to accomplish their goal of self-reliance. Gender-nonconforming and trans media makers of color encounter a different mode of access as opposed to white, cis-gendered men. The latter often have more and better access to the freedom to self-produce: "DIY is a practice that those with the least amount to lose—and the greatest amount of free time and cultural capital—can most casually exercise, even if DIY has been a vital lifeline for minorities of all stripes to tell their stories, their way."[276] In charting how *TAMS* built a community information format, I acknowledge the role of the cultural privileges of whiteness of most of *The American Music Show*'s performers in constructing a type of "independence" from public access conventions that people of color in Atlanta had limited access to. Similarly, this chapter analyzes how Atlanta—as image, as locality, and as a cultural idiom of queer performance—gets mobilized on public access television. This move is not to instill a static image of "Southern"-ness through a focus on Atlanta. Rather, it opens up the characteristics of what "Southern" means for interrogation and redefinition. I follow media scholar Tison Pugh's recent work that focuses on southern regionalisms and how new approaches to the South are needed "not to reify the fantasy of the South as much as…to demonstrate the creation and

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[275] This was one reason why James Bond could continue to host *The American Music Show* in 1981 despite running for re-election on the Atlanta City Council. Since cable television was not yet provided to the majority-Black district in which Bond was campaigning, his public platform of the show was judged not to be an unequal advantage over other city council candidates. See Donna Williams, "FCC: Candidates May Use Public Access Channel," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 7, 1981, D6.
[276] Nault, "Three Dollar Cinema," 68.

continual re-creation of this fantasy and to query its cultural work—which could well influence the world beyond the South's porous borders."[277] The community information format of *TAMS* thus offers one way to localize the history of public access television, to understand how the producers of *TAMS* negotiated the power relations they inherited from a racist structuring of access to public access television. My analysis of *TAMS* within the context of Atlanta public access is thus one example of how analyzing "community information formats" before the Web can productively recuperate the local texture of the participatory medium of public access television. One way to analyze how southern regionalisms were inflected in public access is to analyze closely how public access television came to Atlanta in the first place, which is a history that becomes closely entwined with the start of *TAMS* itself.

Public Access Comes to Atlanta

Histories of television place public access in a lineage that includes guerrilla television experiments from the late-1960s and the early-1970s. A regulatory push toward public access occurred in the 1970s. After the FCC imposed a rule in 1972 that the top 50 United States TV markets had to establish a channel for community use, there were about 18 municipally-owned cable systems in smaller cities in the United States beyond Manhattan.[278] In 1976, the rule was further strengthened when the FCC made the injunction apply to stations with 3,500 or more subscribers. However, cable corporations were not—then as now—altruistic entities. They had to be encouraged, and sometimes forced through arbitration, to provide access to local broadcasting to the public. Some companies and municipalities were eager to sweeten local deals to provide cable in their local markets by offering generous public access funding packages. For example,

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[277] Tison Pugh, "Introduction: Five Ways of Looking on the Queer South on Screen," in *Queering the South on Screen*, ed. Tison Pugh (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 6.
[278] Harrington, "What's All This," 34.

in Dallas, Warner Cable pledged $14 Million for public access in 1981. In 1984, Cincinnati had cable franchise agreements that required 18 access channels, whereas Manhattan Cable TV still only had 2 access stations in 1984.[279] Seen through these few examples, public access history requires an attention to the specificities of local contexts and to the discourses of specific city boosters who had civic missions to expand their citizens' access to public media in their cities. Public access history is a history of media localization.[280]

However, federal regulations still threatened the fledgling public access industry. A general funding challenge arose for public access nationwide through a US Supreme Court decision. In 1978, Midwest Video in Chicago challenged the FCC regulations, and the Supreme Court struck down the law requiring provision of public access by cable companies. As a result, state and local governments became the battlefields for public access provision, which is where Atlanta's public access provisions were forged.

The non-profit corporation Access Atlanta was formed in 1978 after a court ordered that Cox Cable Communications, Inc., the major cable company in Atlanta at the time, had to divest of its Georgia Cablevision subsidiary. Demonstrating the role of civil rights activism in making social change happen in Atlanta, the NAACP had previously filed a suit to make Cox Cable divest. A new FCC provision had also banned cross-ownership of broadcast stations in the same market. Cox Cable's sibling company, Cox Broadcasting, owned another local radio and television station. Georgia Cablevision under Cox Cable had no real public access arm to speak of, so local proponents of video entered the discussions and formed the Access Atlanta advisory

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[279] Peter Kerr, "Public Access TV Ratings Disputed," *New York Times*, March 24, 1984, L46.
[280] Sriram Mohan and Aswin Punathambekar define localization as a process through which cultural norms are encoded: "Localization is a multi-scalar process whereby shifts in industrial and managerial logics (for instance, producing content locally) go hand in hand with highly charged representational moves that build on and often challenge dominant norms, values, and aspirations." Sriram Mohan and Aswin Punathambekar, "Localizing YouTube: Language, Cultural Regions, and Digital Platforms," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 3 (2019): 319.

board to weigh in on the negotiations between the city of Atlanta and Cox Cable. The future co-host of *TAMS*, James Bond, brother to civil rights leader and Georgia politician Julian Bond, was on the advisory board. Cox Cable came to the NAACP and agreed to help set up public access for Atlanta. Cox Cable invested in a public access studio and agreed to make the public access station a reality along with the divestiture of its Georgia Cablevision subsidiary.

At the launch, Cable Atlanta was enthusiastic about the potentials for public access television in Atlanta. In part, this can be attributed to the southern metropolis's history with cable. Atlanta was not a stranger to innovations in broadcast television. Local boosterism helped secure the launch of national cable channels TBS and CNN, both headquartered in Atlanta and helmed by Ted Turner.[281] The director of programming for Cable Atlanta in 1980, John Haynes, a recent transplant from running public access television in Calgary, Alberta, foresaw a grand future for the network. He swooned: "We can make Atlanta the capital of public access television."[282] Cable Atlanta, owned by Cablecasting, Ltd., a Canadian-based company, offered 54 channels in 1980 upon its launch in the majority-white northern areas of the city, two of which would be public access channels dedicated to public, educational, and governmental use.[283]

James Bond met his eventual public access television host Dick Richards while both men were campaigning for Democratic party candidate George McGovern's presidential run in 1971. Richards had moved to Atlanta from North Carolina as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War.[284] Richards and Bond later had a radio show together on the community radio station

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[281] Charles Rutheiser, *Imagineering Atlanta: The Politics of Place in the City of Dreams* (London: Verso, 1996), 70.
[282] Richard Zoglin, "Do-It-Yourself Television Coming Soon to Atlanta," *Atlanta Constitution*, May 18, 1980, SMA12.
[283] Ibid.
[284] David Goldman in discussion with the author, August 6, 2019.

WRFG, described by Richards partner as a "crunchy," left-leaning station. However, Richards and Bond were ignominiously kicked off the air after playing a Donna Summer song.[285] Moving their radio show to public access TV happened quickly and was due to Bond's political positioning. In 1980, Bond was on the Atlanta City Council while he was also advocating for public access on the Access Atlanta advisory board during the FCC negotiations and asked Richards to reboot their radio show on public access TV. Friendship as a generative force of media production defines Richards's relationships with both Bond and his lifelong support of Nelson Sullivan's videography.

Richards and Bond's show is an example of "early adoption" of the public access format due to Bond's close involvement both with civil rights organizing in Atlanta and the regulatory decisions that localized public access in the city. The show was created through the racial coalition of the "two Atlantas," white and black, in addition to the straight and gay worlds of Atlanta's social life. The show began by taping in the basement of the Bond family home in the predominantly African American southern side of Atlanta. Since cable was only available in the northern half of the city, the show was available to the city's white cable subscribers. The show sat uneasily across this segregated cable landscape during the show's early run, though the move to Richards's own home after the first years of the show also followed the unrolling of cable throughout more of Atlanta's urban fabric.

Early in People TV's run, the director of Cable Atlanta, Dr. Jabari Simama, announced a shift in programming from niche content toward programs more in response and in line with viewers' interests and expectations. In 1982, Simama described the intended change at the time as a change in emphasis "from a user-oriented medium to a viewer-oriented medium."[286] Part of

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[285] Ibid.
[286] Richard Zoglin, "Tune in to Public Access: Heeerre's Anybody!" *Atlanta Constitution*, August 12, 1982, B1.

the intended change was to foster increased participation in the access stations by building

neighborhood studios in four areas of the city. By 1984, the main public access studio was in the

two-story building and former home of Ted Turner's Channel 17 commercial TV station.[287] The

Public Access channel was included in the package to Cable Atlanta's nearly 50,000 subscribers.

That same year, neighborhood public access studios had been set up in four quadrants of the city:

SW Atlanta on 2260 Campbellton Road, SE Atlanta on Georgia Ave, NW Atlanta on MLK Jr.

Dr, and NE Atlanta on Euclid Ave. [288] These new neighborhood studios expanded the number of

people trained in the public access studio instructional course exponentially. To record a show on

Cable Atlanta's public access channel, the requirements were relatively open. One had to be a

resident of Atlanta and pass a six-week instructional course (six weekly two-hour sessions) that

cost $30. The course covered "the use of cameras, switchers, graphics generators and such."[289]

Another six-week course was required if prospective show producers wanted to take cameras out

in the city for location shooting. After passing the test that followed the workshops, a prospective

access producer had to work at six People TV productions to learn the ins and outs of daily

access production. Then, one could use the public access equipment free of charge to make a

show. By 1982, 200 people were making their own programs on a weekly basis. The main check

on the content of the channel's content was summarized in the acronym LOAF: no lotteries, no

obscenity, no advertising, and no fundraising for profit.[290] In the early years of People TV, nearly

3,800 community producers passed the initial training course.[291] Simama had acknowledged as

early as 1981 the need to bring in more working-class trainees for the public access channel,

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[287] Pete Scott, "Public Access Station Trains 3,800 Producers," *Atlanta Constitution*, January 19, 1984, D1.
[288] Donna Williams, "Public Access Group Chief Resigns Post," *Atlanta Constitution*, February 26, 1981, E16.
[289] Gerry Yandel, "You, Too, Can Be a TV Producer - But It's Not Easy," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 27, 1992, F6.
[290] Frazier Moore, "Television Free-for-All," *Atlanta Constitution*, November 23, 1980, I24.
[291] Scott, "Public Access Station," D1.

since so many of the producers were quite racially diverse but all middle-class.[292] Part of Simama's vision in 1982 to make the access channel "viewer-oriented" is no doubt alluding to the construction of more studio space, as a welcoming gesture to community members to use the equipment and to record their own programs.

The American Music Show, iconoclastic in their own time, refused to film their show in the studio spaces of the city. By situating themselves at a purposeful remove from the technological and ideological constraints of the public access studio, and by committing to using their own equipment and not renting equipment from the cable company, the show maintained a level of independence rare in public access television history. The rest of this chapter explore *TAMS*'s decisions about the use of technology in the production of the program. I will analyze how these technological choices impacted the form of the program as well as the itinerary the show took in wider realms of culture as a community information format.

"Always Low Standards": The American Music Show's Technological Choices

The community information format of *TAMS* made their limited resources into an aesthetic statement of purpose. *The American Music Show* demonstrated a queer orientation to technology through its commitment to "low standards" and its continual experimentation with the televisual space of their production set. The commitment to low standards is a precursor to more contemporary discourses of "DIY" cultural production. A commitment to low standards within the production culture of *TAMS* was a refusal of polished self-presentation. While the period of the show I analyze precedes "DIY" discourse, *TAMS* defined and distributed an aesthetic style and a use of technology that celebrated an unpracticed messiness that is an important precursor to notions of DIY within digital culture. The experimentation with the

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[292] Williams, "Public Access Group Chief," E16.

televisual space of the production set offered a queer orientation to technology that satirized location shooting and liveness while infusing such satirization with a queer sensibility regarding drag performance and practices of archiving and memorialization.

In 1982, a reporter with the Atlanta Journal-Constitution summarized the typical fare found on Atlanta's one-year old public access channel People TV bluntly. People TV was: "self-indulgent, amateurish, and dull."[293] Rather than see this characterization as a list of negative attributes, *TAMS* hosts and performs would have earnestly courted this reading of the show. I read these adjectives, especially "amateurish," as a lens through which to view the show's queer potential. Dick Richards and his co-hosts—first James Bond and then Potsy Duncan—long believed in a philosophy of technological use summarized in the phrase "always low standards." The slogan "always low standards" was printed on the recorded tapes that *TAMS* sent to People TV's offices to be broadcast, reminding the People TV staff that their approach was intentional and that they would not cease reminding them about it. The written slogan was a message and reminder to Jabari Simama, the head of public access in Atlanta, that *TAMS* was committed to the maintenance of a knowingly simplistic aesthetic approach to the building of community through public access. The slogan referred to an approach that signaled a refusal of professionalism.

The show started in 1981 with controversy. The guest star on the first show, Eloise Montague, performed a humorous bit based in a fictional "Assaholics Anonymous" group meeting, a modification of the alcoholic support group "Alcoholics Anonymous." The cable company refused to air the first episode as a result, and it caused a rift between *TAMS* and the

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[293] Zoglin, "Tune in to Public Access," B1.

leader of People TV, Jabari Simama, that dragged on for a number of years.[294] Bond's colleagues at Access Atlanta, including president Simama and former president Char Pattishall, found the "bad taste" of Richards's and Bond's show most objectionable, not its occasional political content. Bond's colleague on the city council, Buddy Fowlkes, similarly dismissed the show, calling it "ridiculous, period."[295] The comments on the early years of the show indicate how its distinctive aesthetic choices resonated as a program unlike any other on People TV. It caused a fuss. The show was not void of acclaim from its earliest years for these same objectionable features. In a gala celebration for public access television on August 21, 1982, *The American Music Show* won "Best Comedy Program," with awards going to Dick Richards and Potsy Duncan. Dance-O-Rama producers Paul Burke and Tom Zarilli, both of whom were involved with, and performed often on, *The American Music Show*, received awards in the "Best Dance Program" category.[296] The scene around *TAMS* gathered an audience that liked the aesthetic style and brand of low standards that the show provided. As a rapid capturing of these critiques of the show's "bad taste," *TAMS* described the show's vision as just such a commitment to "always low standards" of taste, style, and polish. The commitment to low standards in *TAMS* offers a queer orientation to technology.

A queer orientation to technology situates radical potential in using a technology against the purposes to which it was intended. The term "queer orientation to technology" references a queer orientation to life lived against the grain, allowing for a new description of experience from a marginalized perspective. Queer and feminist theorist Sara Ahmed defines queer orientations as invitations to remaining out of sync and out of alignment: "Queer orientations

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[294] "Recording Queer Atlanta: Archives of The American Music Show," uploaded March 20, 2019, video, 1:29:06, Emory University, accessed November 1, 2019, https://youtu.be/rb2YWRAN1nU.
[295] Williams, "FCC: Candidates," D6.
[296] "Jones Collection Gets Cable Award," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 2, 1982, 6.

might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world 'slantwise' allow other objects to come into view."[297] As an orientation to technology, queer approaches like that found in *TAMS* has helped set an agenda that attempts to conjure new worlds into being through technological choices.

As the sun around which the planets of the *TAMS* scene orbited, Dick Richards helped to create this orientation to technology in the show. Richards rooted his orientation through a commitment to joy. A whimsical sense of humor is a hallmark of Richards' entire career, from the earliest radio show with Bond throughout his long public access TV career. Photographs of Dick Richards in 1971 show him smiling at the Atlanta Midtown Neighborhood Festival, with a WRFG t-shirt draped over his chest.[298] The motto for the Funtone record label was "If it's not fun, don't do it." This motto permeates the jovial atmosphere of the media worlds and technological imaginary that Richards built with his friends. Performers on *TAMS* often played to Richards and hoped to make him laugh on air. Getting Richards to laugh on the show was the goal, as the performer Lady Clare said at a retrospective event at Emory University: "Dick [Richards] was laughing more than anyone, so you were really playing to him."[299] The frequent laughter or "breaking" during the many bits on *TAMS* was part of how the show was read as unpolished. An early review of the show commented on the show's silliness and childlike sense of humor. The show was "the only public-access series that is at least trying something in the way of comedy," though with "the boring, self-indulgent pointlessness of a group of bored kids on a Saturday afternoon."[300] The show's commitment to a low standard of aesthetic quality

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[297] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Other* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 107.
[298] "Midtown Neighborhood Festival," Atlanta History Center, 2009. Accessed November 20, 2020. http://album.atlantahistorycenter.com/cdm/ref/collection/byd/id/1879.
[299] "Recording Queer Atlanta: Archives of The American Music Show," uploaded March 20, 2019, video, 1:29:06, Emory University, accessed November 1, 2019, https://youtu.be/rb2YWRAN1nU.
[300] Richard Zoglin, "Public Access TV Crude, Unimaginative," *Atlanta Constitution*, August 25, 1981, B8.

offered the show a distinctive texture. The production style and low quality allowed for its participants to have more fun with the production, and to revel in the hilarity that ensued. As Tom Zarilli described the low standards enacted through the planned and improvisatory bits in the show: "The sloppier it was, the crazier it was."[301] The "always low standards" slogan also displayed the vision of independence that *TAMS* committed to throughout their run.

The American Music Show made a constant commitment to avert the public access regime in Atlanta. They maintained a marginal position on the public access borderlands of mainstream cable television. The show filmed outside of the five FCC-mandated public access studios in Atlanta, and the show's producers used their own equipment rather than using equipment rented from the public access studio. This decision not to film in the access studios meant that, when People TV faced a financial crisis due to a lack of funding and had to close most of these neighborhood studios, *TAMS* could continue their production in Richards's home without a changed production pace. By 1989, the remaining two satellite studios in Atlanta's neighborhoods had closed, leaving only a central Midtown Atlanta production studio.[302] Richards' shepherding of *TAMS* in his and his partner David Goldman's living room studio created a longevity for the show out of a queer domestic space. The long life of the show due to the domestic experience of the show's production underlines the importance of excavating the small-scale, the quotidian, and the domestic within queer media history as a means to expand our understanding of social media before "social media." Queer domestic spaces were often community waypoints in a local map of queer subcultures. The creation of a community space out of a queer domestic space parallels what Sullivan also accomplished through his home videos

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[301] Ibid.

[302] Melissa Turner, "People TV - It's a Public Access Road, but Funding Is Just a Trail," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, October 1, 1989, R4.

that simultaneously captured a queer mundane and a downtown arts and clubbing scene in the 1980s.

From the start, *The American Music Show*'s technical choices impacted its form, the mode of address to its audience, and the queer characteristics of its mode of performance. By refusing to use the public access studios or public access equipment, the production could maintain a spirit of independence. Duncan attributed the wariness to record in the public access studios as avoiding any form of control on the show.[303] The show's willful technical limitations lent the production a slapdash character, which the show readily claimed outright. The production's limited budget became an aesthetic signature of the program. I will analyze how *TAMS* mobilized technological choices to commit themselves to "always low standards" and to build a community information format out of their show.

Public Access Artifice 1: Technological Experiments and Work-Arounds

TAMS frequently experimented with technology in its attempt to maintain a commitment to low standards while working with the limitations brought on by the public access channel People TV. One technological feature of the improvisatory character of *TAMS* was its regular taping of television screens. As co-host Potsy Duncan explained, the group never wanted to take the time to splice together tapes in an editing deck, so they simply showed video on television sets beside the co-hosts within Richards's domestic studio. They would often also show the cameraperson on the TV and talk to them through the TV screen. This lent the production a quicker, less polished way to playback other videotapes from side video projects, from location shoots, or from reports on travel to New York City. This also meant that the hosts could easily talk over the playback and provide commentary in real-time.

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[303] Potsy Duncan in conversation with the author, September 11, 2019.

The inclusion of recording TV screens brought other elements of the production process of the show into a new realm of visibility. As Potsy Duncan held the microphone and Dick Richards talked through news headlines with the newspaper in his hands, two televisions, one stacked on top of the other, would often show the cameraperson working the camera across both sets. Showing the operation of the camera in the frame revealed how the show was taped and staged a display of the mediation at work in public access television. *TAMS* rendered visually the artifice of its own production. In so doing, the operations of the production "studio" of Richards's living room-turned-set also performed a demystification role found in other, more activist-oriented cable operations such as *Paper Tiger TV*, a Manhattan public access program that frequently brought the audience behind the camera into the production process of the show. The stacked television sets displaying the cameraperson acted as a statement on *TAMS*'s self-reflexivity. Aware of their technological choices, the frequent taping of the hosts alongside the TV screens was a simple means for the host to know when videotapes were being cued into the monitor. The space of the set created a series of staged mediations through the technical workaround that became a forefronting of the process of mediation involved in taping the show.

The image of the cameraperson located on the set's television screens acted as a mirror into the space of production of the show.

Figure 4-1: Potsy Duncan staffs the camera and appears on the TV screens in the shot. Tape 88, The American Music Show Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

The image displayed a vision of the space of the set as the hosts would have seen it. The audience could be interpellated to see the cameraperson as the hosts did. The process of mediation was commented upon through the inclusion of the cameraperson as equivalent to the hosts. Whoever was behind the camera—first Potsy Duncan and later Bud "Beebo" Lowry—served a co-hosting role. The cameraperson would speak into a microphone as well, and their contributions would be acknowledged by the hosts. The TV screens on the set were mediated windows into the interiority of the production set as well as openings into the video worlds of locales beyond Atlanta, most notably through Nelson Sullivan's video diaries from New York City that he would send to Atlanta to be broadcast on the show. The recording of television sets in *TAMS* is a technological fix that turned into a feature that invited a community to witness the mediation at work in the production of a public access program.

The American Music Show here adds more complexity to a regular feature of the talking heads interview set-up common in much public access television. In 1982, a New York Times article discussed how the distinctive style, format, and genre of public access programs was due to the economic and technological constraints imposed on access productions. Space limitations

and small budgets meant that two chairs, a small table, and a backdrop could be the only accessible set design for many different types of programs. Interview or "talking heads" shows became the standard format of public access television by the early-1980s.[304] Part of the satire embedded in *TAMS* was an alternative rendering of the "talking heads" format. By including the cameraperson in the shot, the very act of mediation of public access television was foregrounded, demystifying in part the production process behind the show. *The American Music Show* can be understood as a satirical send-up and as an earnest attempt at navigating the constraints of local public access standards, a miniscule budget, and expensive, bulky video recording and camera equipment that made other production set-ups challenging.

Formatting imperatives brought on by People TV, the public access channel, directed the aesthetic style of the show as well. In January 1985, the format shortened from an hour to a half hour. This period marks a turning point in the show, from more ambling, often sedentary conversations to a more planned style that incorporated more frequent changing of the sets to fake location shoots and imaginary travel segments. In this way, the technological limitations bought on by the local public access channel turned into a creative impetus to enact a community information format through a satire of televisual conventions. Once the show had to parcel out 30 minutes of material in a more organized fashion, the producers began to watch the clock more closely. Richards vowed nonetheless to "give you even more senseless drivel in even less time."[305] Potsy Duncan reminded a guest in the first episode: "We are in our new 30 minute format, so we don't have nearly enough time to talk with [the audience] as Dick and James [Bond] used to."[306] Duncan framed her response to the new format as changing the relationship

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[304] Alexis Greene, "Is Public Access TV Doing Its Job?" *New York Times*, August 22, 1982, H25.
[305] Tape 28, January 15, 1985, *The American Music Show* Video Recordings, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
[306] Ibid.

163

the show maintained with their audience. Duncan's comments showed that the choices the show made regarding its "always low standards" relied on audience expectations of what liveness in broadcast television meant.

Public Access Artifice 2: Satire of Locations and Liveness

Extending from a general philosophy of "always low standards" and an environment of experimentation within the format limitations of People TV, *TAMS* also mobilized a queer orientation to technology through how they regularly satirized liveness. Liveness in broadcast television is a feature of how news channels present the pressing and timely nature of the news to viewers. Cable news channels like *CNN* typically emphasize how liveness creates more direct access to current events and a feeling that every event is "breaking news." Televisual liveness, however, demands resources and a network of satellites to transmit high-quality signals to households. *TAMS* experimented with technology by satirizing liveness in a variety of ways. This satire offered a queer orientation to technology. If they could not marshal the resources to compete materially with cable television outfits, then the hosts and performers involved with *TAMS* could create an aesthetic approximation of the main features of cable television to create a humorous position out of a lack of resources.

Seeing at a distance is at the very root of "television." The prefix "tele-" as in distance and the word "vision" as in sight form the basis for how television operates and has been imagined. The way that *TAMS* crafted modes of seeing at a distance through "fake" location shoots and live broadcasts that were anything but "live" by the time viewers watched the show are two sites of the production of a queer orientation to technology within *TAMS*. Seeing at a distance is an epistemology, or a way of structuring the production of knowledge. I argue that an epistemology of seeing at a distance can also encompass moments when public access programs

like *TAMS* made a habit out of "faking" the power of television to traverse great distances.

Media studies scholar Lisa Parks argues that epistemologies of television can be elastic in the

way that I am arguing through *TAMS*: "Televisual epistemologies are not fixed and lodged

within a commercial entertainment culture, but also can be activated across different disciplines,

media, or platforms."[307] The technological arrangement of broadcasting corporations is not the

only apparatus within which the "televisual" can take on new meanings and new power

arrangements. *TAMS* evinces the sense of "playfulness, experimentation, and pushback against

the tendency to overdetermine or reduce television given its deep entrenchment in commercial

regimes" that Parks finds of central importance to the study of televisual epistemologies and the

future of television.[308] By following how *TAMS* playfully adapted the televisual conventions of

their time to a vision of "always low standards," we can understand how public access television

provided a community information format for a production culture that celebrated DIY

alternatives to sleek production styles.

"On Location" in the Living Room

One way that *TAMS* capitalized on its DIY production budget was to incorporate travel—

real and imagined—into the program. *TAMS* regularly included reports from locations beyond

the living room, some of them filmed far afield and a large number filmed in the usual space of

the domestic set. The show included reports from civil rights marches and protests throughout

metro Atlanta, including a notable rally in Forsyth County in January 1987 against the long

history of de facto segregation in the county. *TAMS* also included videos recorded at nightlife

events throughout Atlanta, offering viewers a visual recap of what Atlanta's subcultural

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[307] Lisa Parks, "Televisual Epistemologies and Beyond," *Journal of Visual Culture* 18, no. 2 (2019): 235-36.
[308] Ibid., 236.

celebrities had been up to over the past week. Reports from New York City were often recorded by Nelson Sullivan and sent to Atlanta to broadcast on the show. Dick Richards would also record and play tapes of recording artists on the Funtone Records imprint as a cross-promotion of his work heading the label.

The way that the hosts and performers take seriously the fake location shoots through absurd moments demonstrates that the show used limited resources to mimic and satirize televisual standards of location shooting. *The American Music Show* often featured locations that were filmed in Richards's living room. In one episode from March 1985, the hosts sit on a makeshift boat in front of a painted backdrop depicting a tranquil scene of a pond and a mossy embankment. Amid the hushed chorus of frogs and crickets, the hosts drift in a canoe in life-jackets and talk about fishing. "It's so much trouble to do a TV show from a boat," Richards says to the camera. Duncan replies, fumbling with her microphone, "I know, it's hard to hold a microphone and a fishing pole at the same time."[309]

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[309] "RuPaul Goes Fishing on The American Music Show," uploaded September 12, 2016, video, 12:13, MisterRichardson, accessed May 28, 2020, https://youtu.be/iqAMHzXGQck.

Figure 4-2: Dick Richards, Lady Clare, and Potsy Duncan Go Fishing. RuPaul Goes Fishing on The American Music Show,"
MisterRichardson, uploaded 12 September 2016, accessed 28 May 2020. https://youtu.be/iqAMHzXGQck.

RuPaul joins the show and then ambles over the surface of the water to take over the hosting

duties from inside the boat.

Another episode parodied infomercial spots on cable television and presented a regional

Atlanta frame of reference by filming in a suburban location outside of Atlanta. The episode

broadcast on March 14, 1985, was taped live "on location in Rockdale County at the House O'

Sofas."[310] A singer jauntily starts the episode with a jingle: "If you're feeling blue, we've got just

the sofa for you." The new location allowed for an easier incorporation of other characters.

Indeed, the episode at the sofa store featured, according to a title card shown at the start of the

episode, "whoever else comes in."[311] With a backdrop of pasted-together paper signs that read

"30% off all sofas," Richards opens the episode by sitting on a sofa and saying to Potsy: "This

one looks like a good bargain, Potsy."[312] After stating that they are "on location in Rockdale

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[310] "TAMS All-Time Favorite: Live from the House of Sofas on the American Music Show in 1985,"
MisterRichardson, uploaded May 30, 2016, video, 17:44, MisterRichardson, accessed April 15, 2020,
https://youtu.be/QGdUu5P8ndI.
[311] Ibid.
[312] Ibid.

167

county," they realize that this episode is their "first remote from the House of Sofas" and that they were looking to buy a sofa to use for the show. Since *TAMS* taped from Richards' living room, they draw attention to this domestic production set-up while also poking fun at it, in acknowledging that the sofa has, for *TAMS*, become the show's driving vehicle, even while "on location" in Rockdale County.

Beyond the location shoots, *TAMS* also offered a queer orientation to technology in other ways. *TAMS* incorporated moments of "liveness" and imaginary travel on *TAMS*. The imaginary travel on the show furthered their commitment to low standards while also making do with their equipment to present a wider cultural repertoire. Moments of imaginary travel on *TAMS* demonstrate how the show staged a constant negotiation with the standards of video recording technology within public access television production. *TAMS* challenged the structure of public access television production in Atlanta and mobilized a philosophy of technology that sought to appropriate the televisual apparatus, with the goal to "reinvent…[technological] products and rethink…knowledge systems, often in ways that embody critique, resistance, or outright revolt."[313] *TAMS* mobilized a vision of technology from the margins of the public access television scene, and they did so by satirizing liveness and inventing new modes of travel within the constraints of limited resources.

Satirizing Liveness, Imagining Travel

Another way that *TAMS* adapted televisual conventions with their DIY production techniques was by satirizing liveness. In playing with the textual and technical conventions of live television broadcasting, *TAMS* often restaged the concerns behind what Lisa Parks has

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[313] Ron Eglash, "Appropriating Technology: An Introduction," in *Appropriating Technology: Vernacular Science and Social Power*, ed. Ron Eglash, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), vii.

defined as an episteme that undergirds television and other technologies of seeing at a distance: "modes of distant discovery."[314] On July 23, 1987, Richards and Duncan recorded the episode as if on a train traveling north to New York City to see Nelson Sullivan in hospital for a hernia operation. The hosts camp up the show's limited technical resources by declaring that they are broadcasting "live via satellite from a moving train."[315] With the absence of resources to produce a live broadcast, *TAMS* materializes television infrastructure immaterially.

By invoking a satellite connection during the taping, and by pretending to be transmitting the program live, *TAMS* mimicked the style of live television broadcasting and the material affordances of a satellite connection. The couch in the living room faced perpendicularly to the camera, with the television monitor positioned next to Duncan portraying a taped video of a countryside rolling past, as if the screen of the television were a window to the outside world. The dry hosting style of Richards and Duncan increased the humor of moments when the set-up in Richards' living room failed to align with the high bar that the hosts' set in their introduction to the episode. At one moment, the television screen serving as the train car window playing a looped video of a bucolic countryside rolling past began to tilt, making it appear as if the train was careening at a sharp decline. Cameraperson Bud Lowry said, "I think we're going drastically downhill," as Duncan and Richards laughed and kept talking to one another. By mimicking a satellite connection here to broadcast their show from a "moving train," *TAMS* invoked a dynamic of distant experience and immediate presence that is a component of televisual technologies. Rather than take such a moment as solely a joke, this episode mimicking a live broadcast from a moving train encourages an awareness of the show's blend of satire through

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[314] Lisa Parks, "My Media Studies: Thoughts from Lisa Parks," *Television & New Media* 10, no. 1 (2009): 126.
[315] Tape 123, July 23, 1987, *The American Music Show* Video Recordings, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

technological adaptation and technological re-routing as a source of humor. The satire of liveness usually parodies the common expectation that liveness equates to a more immediate access to the truth of an event. Satirizing liveness was a way to build a feeling of community and participation in the show.

The satirization of liveness encouraged the audience to dwell in the space of the show with the hosts and performers, a televisual tour that changed what public access programming could look and feel like. The hosts' willing suspension of disbelief encouraged audiences to inhabit the world of *TAMS* along with them. This episode and others like it display how televisual epistemologies are not only about the content of a television program produced through a distinct technological apparatus. Through a DIY set-up and a commitment to mimicking falsified technical specifications, *TAMS* stages a "dialectics of distance and proximity" that Lisa Parks argues is the core feature of a televisual epistemology.[316] *TAMS* plays with "ways of seeing and knowing from afar that are associated with television technologies or disciplines" that aspire to omniscience, and their satirical adoption of such technological apparatuses shows how far the producers of *TAMS* were willing to go to subvert conventions brought on by a lack of resources.[317]

The imaginary staging of travel was a recurring feature of the show, building off the show's "faked" location shoots, technological choices to eschew refinement, and a satirization of liveness. One moment of imaginary travel also demonstrates how the show mobilized imaginary travel to provide an archival sensibility toward marginalized queer lives. On July 20, 1989, *TAMS* recorded an episode of their show that was a tonal departure from its usual format of talking to a trove of guests and setting up bizarre clips on the television screen. In this July 1989

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[316] Parks, "Televisual Epistemologies," 235.
[317] Ibid.

episode, *The American Music Show* took their show on the road. Richards's childhood friend, frequent *TAMS* guest, and New York correspondent Nelson Sullivan had recently passed away, and the episode was to be a tribute to Sullivan's work, a voluminous collection of home video recordings of New York City's downtown nightlife scene. The set was rearranged with two couches facing the camera—one for the front seat and one for the back seat. Richards and Duncan sat in the front seat with drag queen DeAundra Peek and Sullivan's friend Albert Crudo behind them. *TAMS* put the keys in the ignition, pushed record on their video camera, and produced a memorial episode for their friend Nelson.

The American Music Show's remediation of travel in this episode, an episode taped *in medias res* and in motion, stitched together an affective tissue of loss. This episode also provides a key example of how the imaginary modes of travel are a queer modality that resonates with the mourning of friends gone too soon. The imaginary modes of transport the show would create for themselves and for their viewers offers a way to mourn loss together, an affect common in the LGBT community in the 1980s who were reeling from the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The special memorial episode in July 1989 was both out of the ordinary—the usually light-hearted sense of humor of the show was offset by a tone of mourning—but with a format akin to a travelogue that the show would regularly incorporate. In a tone that is both serious and sardonic, which casts a humorous doubt over the sincerity of the imparting of Sullivan's final wishes, Richards remarked at the start of the episode that Sullivan's final wish before he died was for Richards to do a special just for him on *The American Music Show*. Sullivan wanted them to do the special "no matter where we are. So we are continuing our road trip around the United States."[318] The show

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[318] Tape 179, July 20, 1989, *The American Music Show* Video Recordings, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

would go on, with an imaginary road trip being a fitting memorial to the hosts and performers'

friend Nelson Sullivan.

The loss of a friend ruptures time. Unable to record an episode as if the world had not

changed, Richards devoted an episode to his friend by mimicking the environment in which he

and Sullivan built a media relationship—through Sullivan's frequent video recording of Richards

in long car rides. The death of Sullivan, and the Atlanta public access show's memorialization of

him, caught *TAMS* on the move. In the living room set turned into a moving vehicle, the

transitory characteristics of the show's staged travels serve as a metaphor for how the show has

been hard to pin down, evading understanding under one rubric within queer media history or

public access television history. Catching the show in movement here captures the show at its

most spontaneous, creative, and sincere.

During the road trip memorial episode, several key and repeating qualities of the

production history of *The American Music Show* are on display. The fluid display and exchange

of gender performances and presentations are an unspoken feature of the show by this point,

nearly eight years into the show's run. Richards and Sullivan's friend from New York City,

Albert Crudo, appears dressed in leather bondage gear in the back seat, sitting beside the lavishly

made-up drag queen DeAundra Peek, played by Rosser Shymanski. Emphasizing and skewering

the show's makeshift technological set-up—where a smooth production style was exchanged for

an absurd display of a raw crudeness that showed its own seams, Crudo picked up a landline

telephone from the back seat of the "moving vehicle" and reported to the group that Michael

Musto, *Village Voice* columnist and friend to Sullivan's, was on the line from New York City

with further details on Sullivan's autopsy: "It seems that Nelson's death was brought on by a

large consumption of beef fat that was eaten shortly before the heart attack," Crudo reported.[319]

After a conversation over who cooked the hamburgers containing the murderous beef drippings on the eve of the 4th of July, with drag queen Lady Bunny as the primary culprit, Crudo picked up the phone again and reported a breaking development: "I've just got more information! Poppers may have been involved in the death!"[320] As Richards laughed behind his sunglasses, maneuvering the fake steering wheel, cameraperson Bud Lowry zoomed in and out comically on Richards' face, punctuating the moment with an unexpected slapstick exclamation point.

During this episode, Richards drove with Potsy Duncan beside him. Duncan made sure the microphone was always within reach of Richards' voice. Potsy Duncan was ever the calmly composed sidekick to Richards' search for quick laughs. In the Sullivan memorial episode, Duncan takes on the recording role that Sullivan practiced.

Figure 4-3: The American Music Show driving to New York City as a tribute to their friend, Nelson Sullivan. Tape 179, The American Music Show collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

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[319] Ibid.
[320] Ibid.

As she held the microphone to Richards' face, Duncan doubled Sullivan's ceaseless recording intent with her own focus on Richards. Sullivan would similarly sit in the passenger seat and would turn his camera towards Richards, asking him countless questions while recording hours of videotapes of their travel to Atlanta from New York City and back again. The memorial episode of *TAMS* recorded Sullivan and Richards's friendship as a production culture stitched together through travel.

The makeshift moving vehicle in Richards's living room set performs a tribute to a friendship on the move, built between the video projects of Sullivan's home videos and the public access set in Richards's living room. The impossibility of taping a public access program over live broadcast while in a moving vehicle was not technically possible or economically feasible in 1989 with the limited resources of the self-financed *The American Music Show*. In many ways, however, they pulled off this technical feat stylistically through other means—through a constantly changing set and a shared commitment to the bit. This glimpse into *The American Music Show* opens up how the show constructed real and imagined geographies to stage an affective orientation to a commons. Richards and Sullivan's friendship, built through video recording in movement, was aptly memorialized during this tribute episode. The memorial episode captures how Richards and his friends understood their media production as incorporating movement across locales, from the American South to New York City, creating an archive of what friendship feels like.[321] This blueprint for a feeling of community is what a community information format can mean when analyzing media projects before the Web.

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[321] An archive of feelings is how queer theorist Ann Cvetkovich evokes a relationship between the materiality of archives and our emotional baggage to this material. An archive of feelings manifests in the Sullivan tribute episode of *TAMS*, opening a door to "an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception." Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

Archives of Queer Culture: Cataloguing Ephemera of Community

The American Music Show displayed ephemeral objects that encoded an access to the scene of queer performance in New York City and Atlanta. This contributed to the community information format of *TAMS*, providing a modality of access to a subculture to their audience. *TAMS* provided within their programs an archive of the artifacts of their community. The media objects that the show catalogued in surprising detail comprise largely all that remains from the performance culture of the world of *TAMS*. For example, the episode from 1985 recorded "on location" at the House of Sofas in Rockdale County includes a display of artifacts from recent drag performances in New York City. Richards and Duncan held up a flyer from Lady Bunny's recent show in a New York City club. The camera moved in close enough to the displayed flyer for viewers to make out bits of the displayed text. This feature of presenting ephemeral objects connected to the world of *TAMS* would recur regularly on the show. On an episode in 1982, the hosts displayed a stern letter from president of People TV, Jabari Simama, and critiqued the typos included in his memo urging *TAMS* not to include promotion of commercial products.[322] Another episode documented a write-up in the *East Village Eye* of one of RuPaul's performance at the Pyramid Club in New York City.

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[322] Tape 711, December 18, 1982, *The American Music Show* Video Recordings, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Figure 4-4: The show regularly documented ephemeral objects of queer media culture, like this article and provocative photograph of RuPaul's performance in New York City. Tape 28, The American Music Show collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

One episode from 1992 also includes a visual display and documentation of David Goldman's launch party for his zine *Popcorn*, which is otherwise inaccessible in any other format. The episode's capturing of the few page proofs are the sole archival documentation of this zine, an ephemeral object of queer culture registered onto this videotape.

These disparate moments of displaying texts and objects on *TAMS* organize an orientation to archiving that relishes a collecting of ephemeral things. *TAMS* recorded these windows into other media forms and scenes in Atlanta and beyond, recording ephemeral texts and objects that otherwise would not be recorded. A desire to collect can be thought of as queer, in that queer individuals have had to record their own histories from the margins, as Ann Cvetkovich argues: "Queers have long been collectors because they are not the subject of official histories and thus have to make it themselves by saving materials that might be seen as

marginal."[323] *TAMS* can be understood as an archive of ephemerality for its documentation of objects in the space of the show as a practice committed to save what would otherwise disappear in the historical record.

Thanksgiving Parade of Queer Ephemera

Modeling another experience of movement in a different way from the show's many mock travelogue episodes, the annual Thanksgiving Day parade episodes also transported the audience to a makeshift set that replicated the media spectacle of New York City's Thanksgiving Day Parade within the cultural idiom of *TAMS*. Capturing the playful spirit of a *planned* messiness, the yearly Thanksgiving episode offers a window into the show's DIY politics and shows how much thought and effort went into producing the show's staging of ephemeral objects. The episode also recodes and displays the objects of Richards and Goldman's home in a staged presentation of ephemera akin to the process of holding up textual documents in other episodes. The archival presentation of objects in the campy send-up of televised Thanksgiving parades on *TAMS* acted to solidify a sense of humor alongside a curatorial sensibility within the community information format the show was building.

The annual parade episodes required a complicated technical and material set-up. A painted backdrop for the parade from 1986 showed buildings in downtown Macon, Georgia, with a small cheering crowd looking on attentively. In the middle-ground of the shot of each taped Thanksgiving parade, the parade floats would advance due to deft camera work. To show the floats moving from left to right, the camera would move from right to left, passing over the static objects to mimic the forward movement of the parade. The floats themselves were comprised of

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[323] Ann Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice," in *Feeling Photography*, ed. Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 275.

repurposed toy objects and ephemera from Richards and Goldman's home. The parade would be regularly supplemented with new objects from those brought in specifically for the parade. As the camera moved from the right to the left, the hosts of the parade would comment on the floats and provide a humorous running commentary. Many of the floats had a written banner text underneath them, which often punctuated each individual float with a grace note of humor. The range of floats and the fictional community groups that sponsor them posited an imagined community that commented on and critiqued Southern tropes and issues, akin to a Southern Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, but after drinking too many gin gimlets. The parade in 1986 featured floats and text descriptions such as a Kewpie doll with the arms missing, a single brontosaurus toy (courtesy of "Better Living Through Fossilization"), a magazine cut-out of a heterosexual nuclear family (courtesy of "All the Folks at the Southeastern Assigned Sexual Preference Coalition"), and even a float comprised solely of a studio portrait of Nelson Sullivan.

Figure 4-5: : The yearly Thanksgiving parade always included a Nelson Sullivan float. Tape 79, The American Music Show collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

Duncan remarked during the 1986 Thanksgiving episode that the Sullivan float "gets lovelier and lovelier each year."[324] The Sullivan float would end the parade each year, a tribute to Richards and Sullivan's friendship before Sullivan passed away, and then acting as an elegy for Sullivan as the tradition continued after his death.[325]

The collection of objects assembled for the yearly Thanksgiving parade offers an archiving of ephemera. In a more banal way than the recording of the newspaper clippings of performers like RuPaul and Lady Bunny, the Thanksgiving episodes also catalogue the domestic curatorial practice of Richards and his partner David Goldman as collectors of kitschy objects. Potsy Duncan viewed the yearly parade as something the whole *TAMS* group looked forward to, and Shymanski deemed it the "highlight" of the year.[326] Shymanski would regularly bring a laundry basket full of random objects. If the objects that Shymanski or others brought did not satisfy the group, sometimes that week's performers would look through the rest of Richards and Goldman's house for any interesting object they could find. While preparing for the episode by the early-1990s, Shymanski would perform a lot of labor before the big event. He said he would sit at his computer and "make up signs for a week before [doing] the show."[327] His printed parade float descriptions would say outlandish things like "pot-belly pigs of Alden County," even if he did not have any toy pigs for the Thanksgiving Parade episode.[328] Favorite toys would regularly make re-appearances, such as a magnetized ice-skating toy that would show a metal figure skater gliding around a tiny rink, though Duncan replaced the figure-skater's head with a print-out of DeAundra Peek's face in clown-drag.[329] The elevation of everyday objects,

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[324] Tape 79, ca. 1986, *The American Music Show* Video Recordings, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
[325] Potsy Duncan in discussion with the author, September 11, 2019.
[326] Rosser Shymanski in discussion with the author, September 11, 2019.
[327] Ibid.
[328] Ibid.
[329] Potsy Duncan in discussion with the author, September 11, 2019.

179

children's toys, and random household items in these moments is a kitschy presentation of white, middle-class collecting practices as well as a childlike, intense appreciation of the banal. A float from the 1992 parade presented a Barbie head and torso intended for applying makeup to the doll's face, but with a queer recognition of Sappho.

Figure 4-6: : The Thanksgiving Day parade floats turned household objects and toys into queer artifacts of TAMS's production culture. Tape 385, The American Music Show collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

The presentation of these objects out of the domestic space of Richards's home offers an archive of kitschy marginalia. The inclusion of such objects speaks to the technological choices the show made in keeping the show in line with their "always low standards," which in turn presented possibilities for the show to dwell on and to repurpose the objects of their lives and to perform a type of archival preservation in the space of the public access program.

Video Distribution: *The American Music Show* Makes its Mark

To insert the name of *TAMS* into wider realms of American life, Dick Richards also sought to insert his show into other regional and national venues for queer media in the 1980s and 1990s. Richards borrowed from tactics of televisual attention-seeking then found in religious televangelism, another mainstay of Southern public access television: "How many people watch us? I don't have any idea. We do our show for people who are tuning through the channels - like

Jim and Tammy [Bakker] used to."[330] Richards frequently sent tapes to many Gay & Lesbian

film festivals around the country. This wide-ranging distribution strategy helped get the name

and word of *The American Music Show* into the minds of potential fans around the country. The

material travel of the tapes also found an audience among other queer media producers, such as

zine producers, who loved the show and its performers. Shymanski's character DeAundra Peek

garnered a wide fan base through the show's peripatetic travel around the country. Shymanski

reflected on being contacted out of the blue by Toronto zine producer Johnny Noxzema who

"discovered us through probably a film festival and stuff that Dick [Richards] had submitted the

show for."[331] Their attempt to send the show to other networks, especially ones aimed at

children, was not always met with such glowing enthusiasm or acceptance. Nickelodeon

responded to a submission of one of *The American Music Show* tapes by saying that, although

the show was "very funny," the show was "not the quality (technical) that we need for

broadcast."[332]

The material videotapes of *TAMS* followed circuits of distribution within queer

subcultures by the early-1990s. As the tapes were copied and distributed, the quality of the

source tape declined. This "aesthetics of access" is the hallmark aesthetic signature of watching

videotape. We know videotape as tape due to its inherent process of degeneration.[333] We can

read that the show gained in popularity from the degradation of the tapes in the early-1990s. The

tapes of the 1980s stand out for their clarity, while the tapes in Emory's archive from the early-

1990s have frequent static bars course across the screen, and the sound frequently gets wobbly

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[330] Jubera, "The World of Wayne," F1.
[331] Rosser Shymanski in discussion with the author, September 11, 2019.
[332] Letter from Nickelodeon to Dick Richards, October 2, 1984. Box 1, Folder 6, *The American Music Show* Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.
[333] Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 6.

and cuts in and out. With Richards sending the tapes to Gay & Lesbian film festivals, and with

Richards and Shymanski performing at Wigstock in drag, the show found a wider audience and

opened doors for the show's performers by establishing the show as a queer document of the

American South.

If the arc of RuPaul's career may be familiar to many in the US and across the world, I

want to analyze the reach of *TAMS* through how the show also curated a type of subcultural drag

stardom that never broke through to the mainstream through the career of another frequent *TAMS*

performer, DeAundra Peek. DeAundra Peek was Rosser Shymanski's primary drag character

who was a naïve, energetic, and boisterous performer who would swear in interviews ten years

after his first performance as DeAundra that she was only 16.[334] Blithely singing out of tune,

Shymanski's performance is a slightly deranged and frequently loud display of poor white

Southern girlhood. By the time that *Paris Is Burning* (dir. Jennie Livingston) had become one of

the top-grossing documentary films in the United States by 1990, drag had become a

recognizable feature of gay life in the national consciousness. Drag had also been a staple of

TAMS by this time, and DeAundra's path diverged from RuPaul's in the type of audience that

clamored for her character.

I would argue that it is from the example of DeAundra Peek's own varied, wide-ranging

public access career that we can see how *TAMS* offered a community information format that

fostered a network of subcultural queer media. The Peek's were one of a few families of

characters that would regularly appear on *TAMS*. Recurring guests would often play family

members across the show's families (such as the trailer-park manager Odum family or the poor

Bailey family headed by the drunken lecher named Boompa), allowing regular performers a

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[334] Richard Gincel, "Quickies: Peeking at the Roots of a Hip Singer," *Atlanta-Journal Constitution*, 20 August 1993, C3.

repertoire of repeating characters to appear on the show numerous times. The character of DeAundra Peek brings to the fore how the show emphasized a broad-ranging picture of drag, based in "clown drag," as Richards' partner David Goldman described it.[335] Realness, or the illusion of male-identifying performers passing as women, was not the name of the game with *TAMS*.[336] The Singing Peek sisters were a family of poor white girls—variously portrayed by men and women—whose singing talents left much to be desired. They would frequently appear in in-show pageants, such as the Tiny Miss Little Perky Palmetto Personality pageant or the Itty Bitty Miss Trailer Park Princess Pageant. DeAundra Peek became the star of the Singing Peek sisters. She would sing out unreservedly on the show, and her Southern drawl made her an endearing figure in the Atlanta nightlife scene. For Shymanski and for *TAMS*, drag was a fluid space of gender performance, with people of all genders portraying exaggerated versions of Southern characters referenced from their own personal lives.

The working-class and poor world of the Peek family are important sites where Southern identity was actively renegotiated across media formats. On the Odum family's website, an off-shoot of *TAMS* based on the shows that the Odum's and DeAundra Peek hosted on People TV in the 1990s, white-trash tropes of recipes with ingredients from tin cans sit alongside exaggerated drag performances by both men and women. Shymanski's start on *TAMS* led to DeAundra Peek's own show on People TV, *DeAundra Peek's Teenage Fan-Club*, which in turn spawned offshoot programs such as *Hi Class Hall O' Fame*, *Most Fun Summer Playhouse*, and *Ultra Style Bin*.[337]

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[335] David Goldman in discussion with the author, August 6, 2019.
[336] Rosser Shymanski and Potsy Duncan in conversation with the author, September 11, 2019.
[337] David Salyer, "DeAundra Is Burning," *Southern Voice*, September 12, 1991, 13.

Figure 4-7: DeAundra Peek on her own show Hi-Class Hall O' Fame in 1990. Tape 241, The American Music Show Collection, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

On these spin-off programs of *TAMS*, a more pointed critique of Southern ideals of gender and class could be worked out, showing how public access in Atlanta achieved a rearrangement of the performative dimension to Southern identity as being always in a negotiated posture in relationship to the wider currents of American popular culture. Media scholar Tara McPherson found in DeAundra Peek's performance "a class-based politics of performance, deploying a white trash veneer to mock the etiquette-driven, rule-bound fixations of southern culture and ''hospitality.'"[338] Southern culture in *TAMS* and in its offshoot programs hosted by DeAundra Peek are reservoirs for the negative nightmares of US culture and history just as they act as reminders of a lost gentility, two sides of the same coin that McPherson has often discussed to be driving forces behind contemporary instances of white nationalism in the United States.[339]

The allure of *TAMS* and DeAundra Peek's off-key singing did not go unnoticed by wider realms of the access-loving audience nationally by the early 1990s. Fred Willard, noted comedian and actor in director Christopher Guest's mockumentary films, was due to host a

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[338] Tara McPherson, *Reconstructing Dixie: Race, Gender, and Nostalgia in the Imagined South* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 195.

[339] Tara McPherson, "Critical Conversations: Media Studies at the Intersection of Theory and Practice," (Public Lecture at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, February 7, 2020).

program called *Access America* on the short-lived Ha! cable network. An Atlanta Journal-Constitution write-up of the attention paid by *Access America* to Atlanta's public access scene included a focus on the Peek sisters. By the mid-1980s, Rosser Shymanski's performance as DeAundra Peek granted him a queer subcultural appeal that led to multiple performances in Atlanta's gay clubs as DeAundra as well as a level of fame in national subcultural media networks by the early 1990s. DeAundra Peek was named "*the* superstar of Atlanta public access TV" in 1991.[340]

Additionally, it was DeAundra Peek who would send in tapes for the 1997 British show *TV Pizza*, which collected an array of tapes from American public access shows to show on the British Channel 4 station. DeAundra's clips incorporated many of the performers from *TAMS*, but centered on DeAundra as host and guide through Atlanta. Her clips would show manic rides through Atlanta on the back of a pick-up truck, stopping at "roadside boutiques," otherwise known as garbage left out on the street, as well as show the pageant performances of her little sister, Ms. Baby Jean Peek, played by performer Paul Burke. In this way, *The American Music Show* acted to distribute the subcultural drag celebrity of DeAundra Peek as the voice of Atlanta's public access world to places as far away as Britain.

Shymanski's character of DeAundra Peek mobilized a camp sensibility "to make known and give voice and vitality to gay identities within an urban center in the South, all the while signaling to her audience that Atlanta was a great place to be gay."[341] Peek carried forward the "always low standards" ethos in her own programs and solidified an image of Atlanta as a gay capital for distribution around the world. Defining Peek's style as "cable access grunge," in a

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[340] Salyer, "DeAundra Is Burning," 13.

[341] Margaret T. McGehee, "'Vienners' at Odum's: DeAundra Peek and the Atlanta Televisual Drag Scene," in *Queering the South on Screen*, ed. Tison Pugh (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 263.

nod to the unpolished, scruffy aesthetic and musical genre of the early-1990s, *Fuse* magazine

also described Peek's aesthetic as a parody of televisual convention: "DeAundra Peek's *High*

Class Hall of Fame Theater carries [the] parody of everyday television further, without any

pretence, at technical proficiency."[342] Through DeAundra Peek, *The American Music Show* acted

as a vehicle that pushed a subcultural and queer vision of Atlanta into new cultural spaces,

putting Atlanta on the map for British viewers of the *TV Pizza* show. *TAMS* demonstrates how,

by following the subcultural allure of a program like *TAMS* and its affiliated performers, we can

understand how a public access television program and its scene spurred a variety of modes of

cultural production that satirized televisual conventions and presented Atlanta to the world as a

creative site of queer media production.

Conclusion

The work Dick Richards and his circle of friends made in building *TAMS* into much more

than just a television program makes the show an important artifact of queer media history and as

a community information format that encouraged participation. *The American Music Show* is

important because it was one of the longest-running shows on public access television *anywhere*.

The show became eventually the longest-running show in public access in Atlanta and the

country. By 1985, only a few years into the show's run, the show was introduced as "the longest-

running continuously-produced program on the access channel," a notable achievement in the

public access space that often witnessed a show live and die with a cursory lifespan.[343] The show

built a thriving scene, and the practices, performances, and objects that the show recorded

resonate with an archival potential toward Atlanta's queer subculture.

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[342] Gabriel Gomez, "DQTV: Public Access Queers," *Fuse*, Fall 1993, 10.

[343] Tape 27, May 21, 1985, *The American Music Show* Video Recordings, Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

TAMS's commitment to "always low standards" built through technological choices created a style and format within which a community information format could take shape. Dick Richards and the small-scale production culture he and his friends created out of his home is an important addition to histories of queer production cultures in the United States. Beyond the content of the program he co-hosted for over thirty years with James Bond and then Potsy Duncan, the show's philosophy of technological adoption, tinkering, and continual satire of the affordances of broadcasting technology shaped public access into a platform for a flourishing of a community that did not find a ready home elsewhere. The public access space and texture of *TAMS*—the living room studio set, the imaginary travel through fictional location shooting, and a critique of high-tech liveness—created a community in Atlanta before the Web. *TAMS* created a style borne through a queer orientation to technology that preferred a laggy orientation to perfection and polish.

TAMS and its performers made a queer commons out of a commitment to "always low standards." The show built a queer commons, or a set of shared resources maintained and used by a community, through a queer orientation to technology. José Esteban Muñoz defines a commons as uniting people across categories of difference. In isolating a commons within the punk rock subculture, Muñoz defines a scene as a distinct type of sociality, or "a commons of people who do not have the most predictable things in common."[344] Taking seriously the technological choices and resultant televisual style of *TAMS* can demonstrate that the work of *TAMS* exceeds the bounds of one media format. The producers and performers involved with *TAMS* created a community information format by recording video across their social worlds, at drag shows, at clubs, at protests, and within the television programs of Atlanta public access in

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[344] José Esteban Muñoz, "The Wildness of the Punk Rock Commons," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 654.

the 1980s and 1990s. By understanding how *TAMS* thrived as a community information format, we may begin to understand how to craft platforms that can put back the improvisatory, the satirical, and a commitment to "always low standards" into our own social media.

Chapter 5 Networking the Queercore Scene: Zines and the Network Imaginary

> *My Comrade*, the revolutionary gay magazine from Manhattan, …was originally
> distributed at "Whispers," a Sunday evening multi-media drag event at the
> Pyramid Club…. *My Comrade* provokes our mobilization. In the tradition of other
> homegrown 'zines, it desires our response, our involvement, our inspired
> imitation.[345]

By the early-1990s, queercore zines coursed across the United States.[346] At punk shows,

in special queer zine catalogs like San Francisco zinester Larry-Bob Roberts' *Queer Zine*

Explosion, at queer zine conferences, and distributed at drag shows at the Pyramid Club in New

York City, readers across the country opened the pages of zines and linked into a community that

grew through recognition of a shared affinity through the textual medium of zines. Zines built

networks around a shared recognition of affinity over the LGBT experience in everyday life.

This affinity was the burgeoning community around the term "queer," recuperated from a slur to

a rallying cry by radical lesbians and gays to force a wider inclusiveness within gay culture.[347]

Zines became calling cards and evidence of the existence of queer communities across the

nation, virtual communities lying-in-wait to reveal themselves to other queer youth through the

textual and graphic medium of the zine.

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[345] Mark Leger, "The Drag Queen in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Out-Look: National Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 2, no. 6 (1989): 28-29.

[346] Queercore as a term references both a reclamation of the slur "queer" into a rallying concept in activism alongside the "-core" of the "hardcore" punk scene.

[347] One signal moment in the reclaiming of "queer" was the Queer Nation group that broke off from ACT-UP by the summer of 1990. Their program was laid out in a 1990 zine titled "Queers Read This" and was distributed at that year's New York City pride parade. The definition of "queer" could also serve as an exclusionary tactic of white activists, as Cathy Cohen importantly argued in reference to ACT-UP's organizing. Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3, no. 4 (1997): 437-465.

In this chapter, I build off the prior three chapters to analyze how zines also offered a community information format of the network imaginary. Less a concrete manifestation of infrastructure as the Community Memory public computing system of the second chapter, zines evoke nonetheless the feeling of interconnection through the subcultural experience of being "in-the-know" and up-to-date with the rumblings from the underground. Zines printed and catalogued subcultures throughout the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. For young people who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise "queer," zine culture manifested a community that brought belonging and respect. Reading the community information format of the network imaginary through *queer* zines in particular evokes how marginalization was mobilized through a pivotal turning-point when the text-based culture of zines began to shift to the text-based culture of the early Web.

A network imaginary within the emergent queercore scene relied on those in one locality reaching out to find likeminded people in other localities through zines. For a significant segment of queer youth and young punks, the feeling of being networked happened in a large way through zines before the Web. The queer zine community built itself from these participatory local nodes of alterity. The letters sent to the famed San Francisco zine *Homocore*, created by Tom Jennings, illustrate just how quickly local nodes became interlinked through zines as a type of network, grounded through a shared set of queer cultural interests and an aversion to mainstream gay culture. A national network of small city locality met the established cultural icon of the gay mecca of San Francisco through Jennings's inclusion of testimonials from queer writers in his zine.[348] Jennings's determination to include readers' own words was a

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[348] Locality refers to a relational, context-bound feeling of connection for people who share spaces and identities in common. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 178.

guiding principle. Jennings promised in the first *Homocore* issue: "I'll devote as much space as needed to letters."[349] By *Homocore*'s second issue in 1988, the first one to include readers' letters, individuals had written in from across the United States, including: Jackson, Mississippi; Lawrence, Kansas; Urbana, Illinois; Amherst, Massachusetts; Kansas City, Missouri; and from an incarcerated individual from Monroe, Washington. Most of these letter writers saw Jennings's advertisement for *Homocore* in the 65th issue of *Maximum Rocknroll*, a widely distributed punk magazine that ran from 1982 to 2019.

Figure 5-1: Jennings's Homocore ad parodied a domestic framing of popular comics. Maximum Rocknroll 65 (October 1988): 90.

The letter writer from Kansas City in this issue of *Homocore*, Deke Nihilson, lamented the lack of a queer punk scene, let alone queer zines at all, in his hometown: "Zines are bleak around here, I've put out a couple but it's been a while and I need…to motivate and do another but oh

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[349] *Homocore* 1 (September 1988), 4.

those logistics."[350] Jennings's devotion to a transparent display of intercourse between him as editor and between his readers is in full display from the start of his zine. Further demonstrating how networks of solidarity could build rapidly through queer zines, the Kansas City letter-writer to *Homocore*, Deke Nihilson, moved to San Francisco only six months after writing in to be included in Jennings' zine. He joined Jennings to produce the zine that he spoke so highly of in his letter to *Homocore*'s second issue. The rapid response to *Homocore* reveals the extent to which *Maximum Rocknroll* organized and solidified the distribution of queer zines at the start of the zine explosion in the mid- to late-1980s. It also, and more profoundly, demonstrates how zines organized the feeling of being networked—a network imaginary—in the 1980s. The way in which zines crafted this feeling of being networked within the community of queer zine producers and readers is the focus of this chapter.

I analyze zines as emergent media.[351] Zines were emergent in the 1980s as a mass medium of networking. The method of this chapter incorporates original archival analysis of textual zines and ephemera alongside an interview with zine producer Larry-Bob Roberts. I analyze a corpus of zines that I have collected through original archival research at cultural institutions as well as those found in open-access editions of zines on online archives such as the Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP) and within archive.org's voluminous, open-access digital collection of zines. My method allowed for a type of exploratory research that involved a snowball approach in an alertness for reference to other zines within the pages of a given zine. If one zine mentioned another zine, even in passing, I would search for it by title or author in two

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[350] *Homocore* 2 (December 1988), 4.
[351] Emergence in new media studies refers to moments in the development of technologies and technological practices when meanings are contested and not yet pinned down: "There is a moment, before the material means and the conceptual modes of new media have become fixed, when such media are not yet accepted as natural, when their own meanings are in flux." Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman, "Introduction: What's New About New Media?" in *New Media 1740-1915*, eds. Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), xii.

of Michigan's research university special collections libraries, at both Michigan State University and the University of Michigan. This research method sought to correct a forgetting of the small-scale within media history. While zines may sometimes be thought of as phenomena issuing from urban communities of queer cultural production, my research has indicated that zines manifested and attested to queer youth in pockets across North America. When considering zines, the local, the regional, and the small-scale are important additions to the more common cultural constructions of queer capitals like San Francisco and New York City.

I analyze zines with a focus on making visible how a "network imaginary" was present within zine culture. Specifically, I analyze how the queer punk or "queercore" zine scene manifested a network imaginary. I carry forward digital media scholar Patrick Jagoda's observation that "a network imaginary remains adaptable to myriad ends," which motivates my desire to surface a network imaginary within queercore zine production culture.[352] A network is always a surplus of affect atop a material infrastructure. Networks organize disparate technical and material features of everyday life, rendering the "complex of material infrastructures and metaphorical figures that inform our experience with and our thinking about the contemporary social world."[353] A network runs on the belief that people and things can be interconnected and that, as a result, ideas and feelings can be shared. This orientation to networks is a material and affective position. As digital media scholar Tung-Hui Hu explains this facet of a network imaginary, a network is "a state of *desire*."[354] Systems of belief about how networks could operate precede the material capacity to build material connections across space and time.[355] The

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[352] Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 18.
[353] Ibid., 3.
[354] Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 10.
[355] In this way, I am analyzing a "structure of feelings" about networks within the queer zine scene. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams defines a structure of feeling as "a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material." Zines enclose a structure of feeling to networks through "thought as felt and feeling as thought." Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 131-32.

193

social belief in networking that occurs before the building of infrastructure is also apparent in the second chapter's discussion of the ecological visions of the Loving Grace Cybernetics group, which influenced the development of Community Memory's computing infrastructure. This inherent lag to the building of *material* networks means that cultural investments in ideas about networking are a site to excavate people's *orientations* to networking technologies and what people expect of such technologies.

I argue that people used the textual medium of zines within a network imaginary to build a community information format around the emergent definition of "queer." Networking in this chapter is not primarily a technical arrangement or apparatus. It is also the desire for communication at a distance. For example, in his queer, erotically charged, autobiographical tour of New York City in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, Samuel Delany provides a definition of networking that undergirds technical systems of interconnection but that is not exclusively defined by such systems: "Networking is what people have to do when those with like interests live too far apart to be thrown together in public spaces through chance and propinquity."[356] If the second chapter's public computing terminals attempted to leverage "chance and propinquity" to encourage a community curation of information in neighborhoods, this chapter analyzes the will to network from the social perspective of queer individuals who sought a community through zines while living often quite far apart. Queer zines networked LGBT people leading up to the public uptake of the World Wide Web after 1993.

This chapter provides an excavation of orientations to a network imaginary by situating the definition of "queer" within the punk scene of the 1980s across North America. The collection of zines that I analyze often fall under the organizing political concept of "queercore."

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[356] Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 1999), 128.

The idea of queercore provided a political critique of the homophobia within hardcore punk and the largely white, middle-class, male composition of mainstream gay activism of the time. This chapter tracks the emergence of "queercore" through zines. This chapter thus dwells in certain city spaces—Toronto, Ontario; Chicago, Illinois; Los Angeles, California—to map the resonances and movements of people and ideas across and beyond these localities. Like a current of electricity or a storm front, queercore's influence coursed across the continent, spreading its influence from cities to smaller towns along the way, and helped to bring together a community. As the final chapter of this dissertation, this chapter dwells in a liminal space between two mass media of networking—zines and the Web—to sketch out a community that built its vibrancy in the historical interstices of these two ways of experiencing togetherness.

Within the queercore zine production culture, a network imaginary existed within each queer zine itself, for example, through the commitment to displaying the geographical reach of the letters to the editor. Queercore zines also established a network imaginary in the networks that the zines established materially—in the gatherings, festivals, and punk shows created as multimedia offshoots of each zine's content. Each creation of a zine in a suburban Wisconsin bedroom or in a Brooklyn loft provided a network in at least two senses: first, in the zine's format, in that many different people, in different locales, in a decentralized fashion, created their zine as a response to, and connected into, a national queer zine network; second, the creation of a zine was itself a "node" in the sense that zines collected and recorded letters to the editor that map queer culture and local histories of queer life.[357]

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[357] This chapter does not engage in depth with the Riot Grrrl movement, which arose in 1991 out of the International Pop Underground Convention held in Olympia, Washington. This is primarily because the focus on queer and punk zines begins much earlier and extends throughout Riot Grrrl, but also because equating the queer punk zine scene to Riot Grrrl does a disservice to both cultural movements, for queer women already were navigating their place within the punk community years before Riot Grrrl came about.

The Zine as Artifact: Archives of Ephemerality

Zines operate within a network imaginary due to their ability to channel, collect, and distribute information from other zines and for their ability to create a space in which queer individuals can write letters from geographically disparate areas and thus align themselves with a shared identity. The past media networks of solidarity and identity formation that coursed through zine culture are worth revisiting today considering our "convergent" digital media ecosystem.[358] Zine culture created a Tumblr-like collage of a variety of media formats of text, photographs, scanned pages from other zines, and hand-scrawled annotations and commentary over all of these media forms. The multimedia front that queer zines provided in particular was in the service of critiquing mainstream gay culture and creating a space for queer youth to connect and harbor their visions of community.

Self-printed texts may seem like a far cry from what we have come to understand as networks. I view zines as a component in an activism over access to information about marginalized identities. Women of color edited anthologies like *This Bridge Called My Back* launched presses to distribute an articulation of the interlocking experience of oppression from the material conditions of their marginalized identities.[359] Analyzing zines as another genre of self-printed and distributed media is important in the history of twentieth-century challenges to the privatization and centralization of media writ large. This chapter situates itself alongside recent work that finds ways to think activism across networks that encompass not only the "digital." Media studies and queer studies scholar Cait McKinney situates an "information activism" as the creation of information that matters to people's lives and identities where such

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[358] Henry Jenkins, "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2004).
[359] Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015 [1981]).

information is usually not found. Information activists respond to a frustrate desire for information about their own history and lives by generating that information themselves. I similarly analyze zines as material media that "organize, store, and provide access to information," which serves to undergird the role of feminist and queer subjects in histories of media technologies.[360] Turning to paper media and the circuitous routes they take from production, to distribution, to a brief and sudden demise, or to archival storage in cultural institutions, is to follow how people moved materially across media forms and formats.[361] As media historian Cait McKinney reminds us of the multiple media fronts of Lesbian activism within history, self-distributed media function within a continuum of networking: "Newsletters, archives, and network models work together as interconnected social movement technologies."[362] Ending this dissertation with an analysis of zines dwells not in a space outside of my continuing interrogation of queer orientations to media technologies but, rather, looks for meanings "that arise, shift, and persist according to the uses that media—emergent, dominant, and residual—familiarly have."[363] Zines are a site of an articulation of networks that are instructive for thinking of the web of cultural influences into which the World Wide Web intervened. My orientation to zines understands zines as ephemeral archives.

Zines occupy a queer orientation to time in that they are dually ephemeral and archival objects. Zines are ephemeral in their exteriority and archival in their interiority. As objects, zines are ephemeral. Typically printed quickly and cheaply, zines were media of distribution not built for the *longue durée*. Often stapled merely once or twice in the spine, zines tear apart easily, their

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[360] Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.
[361] Ibid., 5.
[362] Ibid., 28.
[363] Lisa Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 9.

pages shedding through use. As documents, however, zines are archival. The queer zines that remain today in institutional archives or scanned online as digital files are the traces of queerness in a locality and queerness built through a network of like-minded zine producers. Zines have a capacity to serve as reminders of the ephemerality of low-cost subcultural production *and* as a type of deep text that renders a composite picture of a subculture. Zines viewed from today lag behind the present, echoing queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman's discussion of "temporal drag" as a site of potential for excavating new solidarities in the present. The ephemerality of zines reminds us to dwell in "the tail end of things, willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless."[364] Applying Freeman's observation onto the world of zines, I inquire into how zines show a culture in transition from the networking of zines into the networking of the Web.

Since all zines are records of a historical moment, then any zine that survives to today is a fragment of a historical record, a glimpse into a constellation of social forces. Zines exemplify an "enduring ephemerality" and "obsolescent ubiquity" in both their predominance as a subcultural media format in the 1980s and 1990s and in their now-archival granting of access to a scene today.[365] In their relationship to archival and ephemeral qualities, zines stage a relationship to technology not only brought about by their material manufacture of printing, copying, and assembly in computer programs from the 1980s onwards, but also in their relationship to organizing a network imaginary.

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[364] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii.
[365] Wendy Chun, *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 15.

Making Zines, Making Communities

Zines are fleeting composites of order. Zines and their producers (typically called zinesters) desire approximation and quickness over studied, academic depth. Zines also resist neat categorization and definition. Zinesters create a negative identity forged in distinction to "straight" or "normal" society, a legacy from punk rock as a general negation of cultural tropes. Stephen Duncombe wrote that zines responded to a post-WWII cultural backdrop of the North American suburb. Zines arose "from a perpetual sickness of the sterile and homogeneous lifestyle found in greater suburbia."[366] As zines grew in popularity from their start as fanzines within Science Fiction fan communities through to the explosion of self-publishing in underground newspapers and pamphlets in the post-Stonewall gay liberation movement, by the mid-1990s the availability of editing software and home computers fostered a culture of computer-based zine production and duplication in the home.

Within this history, queercore zines fall between at least two temporal junctures within zine culture: between the literal cut-and-paste, do-it-yourself mode of production and a neater, more organized production process with the aid of specialized text editing software on the home computer. Queercore zines also straddle a space between the liberal gay identity politics of the late-1970s and the rise of the mainstreaming of "queer" as a catch-all term for non-normative sexual identity and gender expression of the late-1990s. The former liberal politics insisted that gays, lesbians, bisexual folks, and transgender people were just like their straight counterparts in career aspirations and desires for domestic stability. The emergence of "queer" signals a departure from a liberal politics toward a critique of systems of power that demand fitting into existing legal formations. Queer politics demanded in the 1990s a more radical alteration of

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[366] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, 3rd ed. (Portland, OR: Microcosm, 2017 [1997]), 42.

sexuality and gender, even from within gay activism. Queercore zines were the material gathering spaces of queer activism in the 1980s and 1990s, organizing communities through the textual space of the zine while materially advancing and debating what "queer" meant.

Queercore zine production also demonstrates how the geography of a zine has real, material effects. Writing in 1997, Stephen Duncombe's belief in virtuality hid from sight the material weight of zines as networks themselves. He noted an almost two-to-one ratio of zines produced in small town or rural areas in comparison with urban zines. However, Duncombe read the geographical predominance of zines in smaller towns not as a rooting in the material and geographical realities of smaller cities and towns but instead as a dissipation into the virtual: "As traditional garrets give way to gentrified lofts and smoky cafes are superseded by the Starbucks coffee chain, creative misfits scattered across the country use the culture that is zines to share, define and hold together a 'culture' of discontent: a virtual bohemia."[367] For Duncombe, zines provided the cultural geographic function of mapping—through each zine's manifestation of alternative social activity *somewhere*—North America's underground.

I want to modify Duncombe's insistence on the virtual placelessness that he believes zine networks create: "The [zine] underground is not a tight, formalized, and coherent social grouping with firm boundaries; instead it is a nongeographical sprawl which must be mapped out."[368] Duncombe calls the zine network "nongeographical," in that its very constitution structures a "virtual space." However, zines are nothing if not explicitly geographical and *painstakingly local* (while also containing offshoots to other locales and contexts). If the widespread cultural belief in a coming horizon of virtuality in 1997 after the launch of the Web appeared so vast, it is no wonder that Duncombe thought that zines were an appropriate cultural precursor and co-

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[367] Ibid., 14.
[368] Ibid., 64.

development alongside virtual communities through computing.[369] However, zines also embed individuals in physical localities. Zines are technologies of localization in that they put to print the evidence of a person (or group of people) with an identity profile that others can recognize as like themselves. Zines create nodes in a human geography of a "queer" identity in formation. Localization is a concept that refers to how media platforms, products, and objects are adapted for circulation within a geographical region. Understanding the dynamism of localization can display "the changing relations between economy, culture, and space without privileging the national as *the* dominant, pregiven, and uniformly imagined framework and scale of analysis."[370] Localization today is a complex process of adapting digital media platforms for use in specific cultural contexts. Seen as technologies of localization, each individual zine thus offers a context-specific emanation of a larger cultural format. Queer zines, then, localize both the zine as a format and a queer culture in formation. Looking at queer zines helps to localize queer communities where otherwise they may not have been visible—such as in rural, out-of-the-reach locations—as well as joining in the articulation of a category of "queer" that was coming into being before the Web. To begin the analysis of queer zine subcultures, this story must first pass through the locality of a run-down apartment in Toronto.

Origin Stories: From Toronto to the World

> Bruce LaBruce: "We invented punk."
> Vaginal Davis: "Yes, we invented punk rock and disco at the same time."
> LaBruce: "We played one against the other."
> Davis: "To amuse ourselves."
> LaBruce: "And watched the ensuing brouhaha. That was our best idea. That month."[371]

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[369] On the notion of virtual community, see Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993

[370] Aswin Punathambekar and Sriram Mohan, "Introduction: Mapping Global Digital Cultures," *Global Digital Cultures: Perspectives from South Asia* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019), 9.

[371] Ricky Castro, "Dingleberries and Donkey Dongs: An Intimate Chat with Vaginal Crème Davis and Bruce LaBruce," *Maximum Rocknroll*, no. 109 (June 1992): 70.

Los Angeles drag queen Vaginal Crème Davis and Toronto filmmaker Bruce LaBruce

joked in a 1992 interview for the special queer issue of the punk magazine *Maximum Rocknroll*

that they had invented punk and disco. Through an arch and playful sense of humor, Davis and

LaBruce, both of whom produced their own zines in the 1980s and 1990s, illustrate in this piece

that queercore proponents claim ownership over queercore's roots while denying a single, tidy,

discrete starting moment to queercore culture. Queercore's origins were multiple, overlapping,

and unruly.

Davis and LaBruce maintain in their interview a critical distance to the subcultural style

that they helped to initiate. Queercore spread so fast that these two punk zinesters could

simultaneously account for being its progenitors; they helped make it spread to new geographical

locales, and they playfully adapted this viewpoint for a rather queer, upended timeline of the

emergence of the aesthetic styles of punk and disco. Their joking comments refer to how

LaBruce had been historicized—even by 1992—as the originator of the "queercore" movement,

the origin point for which is the zine *J.D.s* that he and punk musician and filmmaker G.B. Jones

began in 1985 in their Toronto apartment. Davis's simultaneous claim to birthing the queercore

movement is an acknowledgment and a critique of the predominant whiteness of the punk scene.

A self-described "young militant African-American drag queen who not only welcomes

confrontation but encourages it," Davis's claim to starting the queer punk movement troubles the

common attribution of queercore to Bruce LaBruce and his Lesbian punk rock guitarist friend

G.B. Jones in Toronto.[372] In the *Maximum Rocknroll* interview, LaBruce and Davis both poked

fun at the minor celebrity status LaBruce had achieved, while also inserting Davis into the frame

as another "founder" of the queer punk movement. At the time of the interview in 1992, the

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[372] B. Boofy, *Evil Taco: An Unauthorized Biography of Vaginal Crème Davis* (Agony Press, 1993), 8.

202

queercore party had been raging for many years. Within queercore, foundations were fluid, and this fluidity encouraged a community information format to take root through zines. The rest of this section analyzes the narrative surrounding the birth of the queercore scene in Toronto to analyze how a narrative of a singular origin in Toronto obscures a more complicated and networked history.

Bruce LaBruce and G.B. Jones's zine *J.D.s* emerged from their collaboration at a run-down apartment at Queen and Parliament streets, on the margins of Toronto's gay neighborhood centered at Church and Wellesley streets. The name of *J.D.'s* came from the local punk hangout and café named Just Desserts, where LaBruce was working in 1985 and whose owner hired "all the punks and junkies."[373] LaBruce met his collaborator and queer punk confidante G.B. Jones at the café. The name later gathered additional referents to the term "juvenile delinquents," the Mancunian post-punk group Joy Division, the emotive masculinity of James Dean, LaBruce's drink of choice of Jack Daniels, and the reclusive author J.D. Salinger.[374] Living off stolen groceries from the local Loblaw's grocery store, Jones and LaBruce came up with the term "homocore," which over time changed and adapted into "queercore" by Jones and LaBruce and others. Enraged by the violence toward gay and lesbian people at "straight" punk clubs and the resultant self-selected invisibility by gay and lesbian punks at punk shows, Jones and LaBruce sought a more active, unabashed, and proud role in the punk subculture as gay and lesbian punks.

This narrative of the origins of queercore begins to fray with a closer look at the local production culture of Toronto. Another Toronto zine *Dr. Smith* influenced LaBruce and Jones to publish their own zine. Published by Jones and LaBruce's mutual friend Candy Parker, *Dr. Smith* began in 1984 and ran until 1988. An example of *Dr. Smith*'s "queer" content through zine

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[373] Curran Nault, *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture* (New York City, NY: Routledge, 2017), 16.
[374] Adam Rathe, "Queer to the Core," *Out*, May 2012, 57.

aesthetics, before "queer" became a shared term of reference, was a collage printed in the second issue of *Dr. Smith* in 1984. The collage reprints an Archie comic that includes a male character coded as gay flirting with another man alongside numerous newspaper articles that talk of gay-related issues as perversions. *Dr. Smith*'s reprinting of this material encodes a critique of discourses that demonize gay and lesbian people when paired with the rest of the issue's frank discussion of lesbian underground filmmaking, full-page images of sexualized male punk performers during their gigs, and a pictorial spread displaying the homoeroticism of wrestling.

Figure 5-2: Dr. Smith's queer content included this recoding of wrestling as inherently homoerotic. Dr. Smith *2 (1984): 8.*

The zine's range of coverage is one feature that Jones and LaBruce carried over to their zine *J.D.s*, though paired with an added will to name and to found a subcultural movement.

The *J.D.s* zine that launched a thousand zines—and a community information format of a queer critique of hardcore punk subcultures and mainstream gay culture—began with one loud graphic stamp, a statement of purpose as a raw, unrefined, and abrasive publication. The cover said simply *J.D.s* in industrial type set against a plain background. No other description on the cover laid claim to the contents of the zine. Within the zine's pages, a far more frankly sexual display of the queer gaze onto punk was apparent than within *Dr. Smith*. Inside, the first issue of *J.D.'s* depicted not only the latent masculine erotics of the male punk musician as in *Dr. Smith*,

notably through a photo series of male punk rockers in varying stages of undress, but the first

issue also provided many pages of erotica across media formats: G.B. Jones's "Tom Girls,"

graphic art lesbian erotica in the style of gay artist Tom of Finland; textual erotica of LaBruce's

nighttime exploits with his friend Butch while in Niagara Falls for his brother's wedding; and a

photographic series of LaBruce and his acquaintance "Joe the Ho" getting intimate.
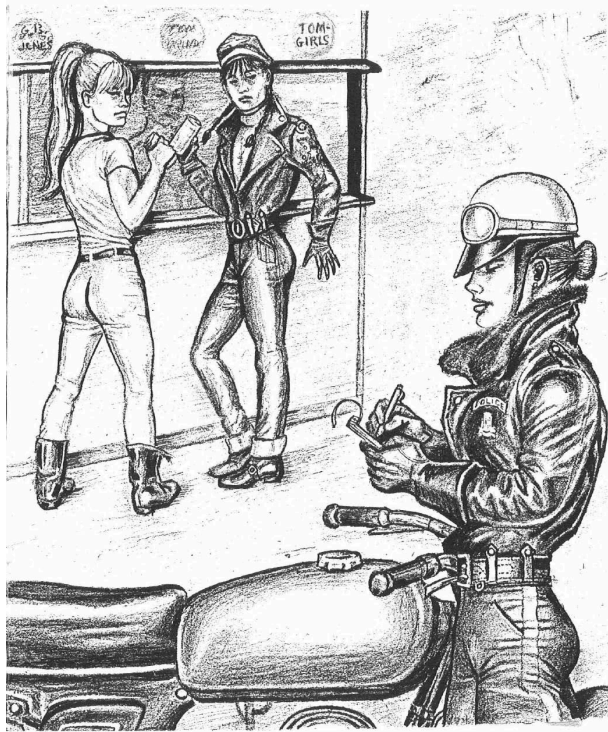
Figure 5-3: G.B. Jones's drawings imitated gay illustrator Tom of Finland's masculine stereotypes as fetishes. J.D.'s 1 (1985): 19.

Across these erotic genres enclosed within the zine, many of which borrowed from pulp and

underground gay and lesbian periodicals, *J.D.s* displayed a range of potential sexual possibilities

from within punk itself. *J.D.s* presented a queer sexuality and sensibility as inherently

compatible with the performances of gender and sexuality already within hardcore punk. At the

end of the first *J.D.s*, the first reference to "homocore" occurs in the article title "*J.D.s* homo-

core top 10," which is followed by a list of ten recommended songs. The early articulation of

"homo-core" in its hyphenated form shows how the term was signaling to the hardcore punk

community while capturing and neutralizing "homo" as a taunting slur alongside the "-core" of hardcore. As the zine continued its publication, the focus on sex seemed to skew the reception of the zine, leading LaBruce to ask rhetorically whether *J.D.s* was "just a porno-rag for homo-punks?"[375] Nevertheless, the first issue of *J.D.s* attested to a thriving Toronto queer punk subculture.

However, LaBruce and Jones faked the scene entirely. While Jones and LaBruce were indeed gay and lesbian punks seeking a space and a platform for solidarity, the space of queercore was at first a potential, virtual space. Queercore was dreamt into being; the idea of a thriving scene built the foundation for a scene to exist and to spread to other cities across North America. The zine in this way acted as an aspirational platform for an idealized community through queer punk. The zine lent an authority and authenticity to the aspirations of Jones and LaBruce as part of a network imaginary. By 1994, filmmaker Gus Van Sant came to Toronto to make the film *To Die For* (1995). A mutual friend convinced Van Sant to check out the "queercore scene" in Toronto that, by the look of the *J.D.s* zine, had been thriving for years. When Van Sant came to Toronto, LaBruce explained to Van Sant that the scene was still just him, Jones, and Candy Parker.[376] The desire to create a "fake" queercore scene in Toronto underscores the material and geographical specificity of zines and the network imaginary that such an inaugural "node" created. The release of the first issue of *J.D.'s* was thought of—at least retrospectively—as a networked phenomenon. Bruce LaBruce revealed the target audience for his and G.B. Jones's zine to be lonely young people far from North America's major urban centers: "When what has been dubbed 'queer fanzines' started out, the 'target

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[375] *J.D.s*, no. 6 (ca. 1989-1990), 10. Radicalism Collection, Special Collections Library, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.
[376] Nault, *Queercore*, 41.

market'…consisted of isolated, confused hardcore kids from small towns and cities across North America."[377] Inverting the "nongeographical" diagnosis of zines made by Duncombe, LaBruce located his and Jones's zine as connecting disparate and disconnected queer youths into a community.

The myth and origin story of Toronto being the home of queercore eventually became an unwanted burden for Jones and LaBruce. Being the originators of a subcultural style and model of a production culture that was averse to falling in line with any mainstreaming tendency made the Toronto originators frustrated at their increasing popularity. Others affirm this picture of the queercore "scene" in Toronto as an ideal vision: "Bruce and G. B. Jones had created this zine that depicted this scene that didn't really exist, other than in their minds. They made themselves larger than life, the superstars of this 'gigantic' queer-punk scene in Toronto."[378] The 1992 interview with LaBruce and Vaginal Davis showed how much LaBruce was willing to shed his acquired aura of patron saint of queercore, or, as he called it, "prince of the homosexuals." Additionally, other queer zinesters began to take credit for the phenomenon. In Vaginal Davis's interview article alongside Bruce LaBruce, both of these cultural figures laid claim to starting the "homocore movement," albeit on different sides of the continent. "[W]e have to take the blame," wrote LaBruce wryly.[379] What the multiple origins reveals is that the articulation of queerness through zines was a cultural trend, a structure of feeling that emerged in response to local punk scenes and local gay activism, in simultaneous but dispersed ways around North America.

The movement across textual genres and communities—from the punk zine *Maximum Rocknroll* to self-published zines and across underground video and photography—all created a

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[377] Bruce LaBruce, "Guest Opinion: Bruce LaBruce," *Maximum Rocknroll*, no. 109, June 1992, 25.
[378] Mark Freitas quoted in Rathe, "Queer to the Core," 57.
[379] Castro, "Dingleberries," 70.

network of queer punk (pseudo-)celebrity, establishing a form of performance art and artist that created icons of the emerging queercore scene. As the zine production model of queer and punk intersections alongside a frank display of queer sexual desire became an emulated model, the definition of queercore became something in which more zinesters could participate. Charting the changing, mutating, but consistently politically engaged definitions of queercore helps to demonstrate how the "model" of queercore spread like a viral meme through zines.

Jones and LaBruce's groundbreaking column in *Maximum Rocknroll* is one major example of the way that queercore moved across zine platforms as it cemented itself as a national phenomenon. By 1989, *J.D.'s* had reached the hallowed hall of *Maximum Rocknroll*'s front columns. The title of their essay, "Don't Be Gay: Or, How I learned to Stop Worrying and Fuck Punk Up the Ass," was not only an in-your-face, tongue-in-cheek use of punk's abrasiveness to force an awareness of queer punks by a mainstream punk audience, it was also a statement of purpose. This is because Jones and LaBruce's column in the April 1989 issue of *Maximum Rocknroll* began with an etymological detour. They had asked their readers in *J.D.'s* to look up punk in the dictionary and register what they found. As a provocation, their question was not overly scandalous. However, their direction to their readers—reprinted at the start of their column in *Maximum Rocknroll*—served to point out that the words "punk" and "faggot" share etymological roots. The two Toronto punks laid out how punk culture and queer culture were interlinked, at least historically:

> If you *really* did your homework, you would've discovered that punk is also an archaic word for dried wood used as tinder, the original meaning of the word 'faggot' as well. Homosexuals, witches, criminals, all denounced as enemies of the state, were once burned at the stake. The word for the material used to set them on fire became another name for the victims themselves. It's no accident that 'punk' and 'faggot' have a similar root.[380]

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[380] Bruce LaBruce and G.B. Jones, "Don't Be Gay: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Fuck Punk up the Ass," *Maximum Rocknroll*, no. 71, April 1989, 52.

Wryly lecturing to a punk audience, Jones and LaBruce further pointed out that "punk" carried connotations within the prison context as well, where the verb "to punk" meant to recruit younger men into sexual acts with older men.

In their *Maximum Rocknroll* column, Jones and LaBruce provided a theory of queer and punk co-optation. "Homocore," as they termed it in the article, was an opportunity to maintain within the punk subculture a recognition of the co-optation of the liberal, white, gay male scene, with its ghettoization and "facile freedom that offers gay bars, discos, and fashion."[381] This gay co-optation of queer punks was aligned with a general social struggle within punk. Jones and LaBruce saw within punk a failure to acknowledge a critique of "normal" culture into new social justice areas. Queercore was an earnest attempt to mobilize sexuality as political critique to continue punk's struggle against class-based distinctions: "[A]s a 'movement,' it doesn't seem like punk has clued in to the idea of using sex as a strategy for promoting change."[382] Jones and LaBruce informed the *Maximum Rocknroll* audience that queercore sought to contribute to the hardcore punk subculture by continuing to ask "What is the failure of punk?" from their own grounded subject positions.[383] LaBruce & Jones sought a re-radicalization of punk through their queer subject positions. As astute and adept cultural critics, their ability to create grounded theory is one important aspect of the movement they forged through zines as a community information format.

The essay in *Maximum Rocknroll* provocatively introduced readers to the queercore scene, and the authoritative stamp of being printed in the most prominent punk zine helped readers understand that there was a place in the hardcore punk scene for them. Or, if there was

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[381] Ibid.
[382] Ibid.
[383] Ibid.

not one yet that suited them, queer youths could make one themselves where they lived. Queer

zine networks materialized in specific places like punk shows and anarchist bookstores,

circulated (sometimes in anonymous packaging, and usually through the more private option of

post office boxes) across North America and the world, and materialized queer spaces textually

through letters to the editors, reports of queer scenes across the country, and other textual traces

of communities across the country and the world. Zines formed an affective network of

communal identification.

The following section will expand on Jennings' zine *Homocore* and other queercore zines

to explore how queer zines manifested the community information format of a network

imaginary. Letters sent in to queer zines testified to a community-in-waiting, one that could form

through a recognition of the shared geographical reach of queer youth around North America.

Although Duncombe does not dwell on queer zines in particular in his 1997 monograph, he does

describe the features of zines that I would argue are more potent for queer zinesters. When

Duncombe wrote that "zines are a shadow map of the USA," I would argue that it is precisely

within queercore zine culture that media scholars can understand how a "shadow map" of the

USA would come to allow for a community of individuals to create a platform who otherwise do

not have a space in the mainstream.[384] Through queer punks' dispersal around the country,

sharing in the definition of the term "queer" would have been more difficult, and far more locally

confined, without zines. Queer zines helped to bridge and connect localities into a North

American continental geography of a queer punk scene. Zines knitted together a dispersed

public, combining strands of queer lives that, through zines, found themselves part of a larger

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[384] Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 65.

social world and community. In this way, their form as media objects built a network imaginary that predicated itself on finding the tools and technologies for human connection.

Letter-Writing and the Network Imaginary

As a community information format before the Web, zines in general allowed for a dispersed subculture to connect, to communicate, and to build ties of solidarity across time and space. A confessional mode at a distance was a hallmark of queer zines, whose radical sexual and gender politics provided a wider net of inclusion to allow for the caring community that young queer people desired. Confessional moments occurred in the letters section of queer zines. Writers to queer zines textually enacted a network through sending in their letters and having them printed in zines, which created lines of connection and support across geographical distance. Queercore zinesters and filmmakers saw their work as part of a new rise in connection through the community information format of zines.

LaBruce revealed his excitement at witnessing the coming-out-at-a-distance experiences of his zine readers who would write into *J.D.'s* with letters and copies of zines from other locations. The connection created through these mailed-in zines and letters allowed for greater self-identification as non-conforming youths who were both punks and queer people. LaBruce wrote of the coming-out at a distance phenomenon that the platform of *J.D.'s* fostered by depicting the confessional nature of most submissions:

> The most exciting mail I ever got as a fanzine editor…contained zines in which teen punks declared their homosexuality in daring and oh so sincere editorials, baring their souls to the world, or at least to a few like-minded individuals out there at anonymous post office boxes, who wouldn't hate, reject, or judge them for expressing their innermost secrets.[385]

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[385] LaBruce, "Guest Opinion," 25.

The focus on letters as a space for networked connection and communication also finds a potent

expression in Tom Jennings's zine *Homocore*.

Shortly after Jennings met LaBruce at an anarchist gathering in Toronto in 1988,

Jennings started his zine *Homocore* with the added insistence on including as many letters as he

could. Within *J.D.'s* and especially in *Homocore,* the letter sections offered platforms for

coming-out across space and time, for narrating experiences living in homophobic places, and

for exchanging letters between LGBT prisoners and the wider reading public of the zine. To be

queer in a distributed, networked way—geographically, ideologically—was to read *and* to reply

to queercore zines in the 1980s and early 1990s. Letter exchanges, while not particular to queer

zines, crafted a network imaginary within the queercore zine scene in particular due to the willful

construction of a community out of marginalized identity positions. Articulating a position of

strength out of a popular characterization of LGBT people as deviants, Tom Jennings wrote in

the opening salvo and statement of purpose to the *Homocore* zine: "One thing *everyone in here*

has in common is that we're all social *mutants*."[386] The "here" of Jennings statement is at once

the pages of the zine that he is inaugurating with these words as well as the space of the

community the zine sought to create. The letters section of *Homocore* stands out for the self-

reflexivity with which Jennings and his readers considered the process of letter-writing as a

confessional space of community.

The letters written into zines often relate how readers sought the subversiveness of punk

shows and spaces, but without the homophobia that populated such spaces normally. The zines

showed how the argument for a fusion of punk and queer was happening as a groundswell

movement. Reading the letters of *Homocore* reveals this to be less of an unforeseen occurrence

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[386] Tom Jennings quoted in Mark Fenster, "Queer Punk Fanzines: Identity, Community, and the Articulation of Homosexuality and Hardcore," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 17, no. 1 (1993): 78-79. My emphasis.

than an always present aspect of punk. A feature, not a bug. Despite the critique of homophobic social spaces and the quest for an inclusive, safe space for queer punks, a commitment to refining punk into a coherent social space remained as a constant, desired goal of queer punks.[387] Queer zinesters registered surprise at just how much the letters sections of zines offered a timely forum for queer youth: "I just think it's so fascinating, the fact that there are these people all over, all these gay men and women, who read these magazines. I think it's so wonderful, so funny."[388] In just one page of the fourth issue of *Homocore*, a range of letters demonstrated how readers found a welcoming, understanding perspective in the pages of the zine. A 15-year old from Reading, Massachusetts, asked for the next *Homocore* issue and added at the bottom to mail it discreetly: "Please use a very plain envelope because this is a very oppressive environment."[389] Another young man from Chicago who said he was in a "hardcore/drunk rock band" enjoyed reading reports of indie and punk musicians coming out, but lamented that the option seemed closed to him: "'Coming out' would be the kiss of death for what I'm trying to do." Saying he would lose band members and be ostracized, he remarked on his Midwest locality and further cemented the vision of San Francisco as a gay mecca: "It's not the same here as in San Francisco where you assembled a type of family promoting mutual support."[390] Tom Jennings took the time to include his response in the zine, assuring the letter-writer that there was a scene in Chicago and providing challenging, yet supportive comments: "Instead of 'promoting' freedom of expression, why not live it?"[391] The public display of the dialogues about the *Homocore* zine within the pages of the zine itself provides a record of queer punk's tastes and opinions about the state of

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[387] Fenster, "Queer Punk Fanzines," 81.
[388] Paco quoted in Glennda Orgasm, *Pussy Grazer* (1991), 40. Accessed November 20, 2020. http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/503.
[389] *Homocore* 4 (June 1989), 5.
[390] Ibid.
[391] Ibid.

zine culture at the time. In other words, *Homocore*'s letters archive a scene despite the format's ephemerality. Another letter writer on the same page said his favorite part of *Homocore* was the letters section, because "all the different voices come through."[392] The public display of letters and frequent responses by Jennings created a moderated forum outside of parallel, yet separate, spaces of computer-based networking.

To make sense of the ways that a "network imaginary" took shape beyond the letters section of zines like *Homocore*, I will analyze the ways that zinesters and commentators connected the zine world to material computer networking infrastructure. The reverberations between online and offline activities can inform a richer context for understanding sociality today. Thinking of queer zines as an interface between two cultural strands of networking evinces a queer orientation to networking technologies, furthering Elizabeth Freeman's methodological orientation to queerness and the past. Zines provide a glimpse into a type of cultural debris that "includes [an] incomplete, partial, or otherwise failed transformations of the social field."[393] Revisiting the visions of social transformations in the network imaginary of zines provides a sense of hope to the now-reified sociality we have inherited from the past.

To recuperate the late-1980s and early-1990s discourse on the intersections between networking and the myriad cultural influences within zine culture, one should look not to New York City or San Francisco but to Iowa City. Stephen Perkins, then a doctoral student in Art History at the University of Iowa, curated the "International Zine Show" at an Iowa City art gallery called Subspace. Perkins's inspiration for such a show came from his participation at the 1992 Decentralized World-Wide Networker Congress. He explained his activities with reference to networking: "Specifically, the show was premised upon the idea that zines arise out of specific

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[392] Ibid.
[393] Freeman, *Time Binds*, xiii.

communities, connect people within these communities and act as links, across and between other communities. *Zines are networking tools*."[394] Perkins located zines as a manifestation of a networking consciousness. This consciousness is the site of a network imaginary built through aesthetic styles and genres found in media objects that "enable readers, viewers, and players to think about networks not merely by knowing or representing them but by *feeling and inhabiting* them, often through ordinary scenes, interruptions, and contradictions."[395] Queer zines that emerged within the "queercore" subculture are an important site to consider how ideas of networking emerged not only out of zines in general, but out of zines that staked political claims to everyday spaces for a queer identity expression. Queer zines allowed for an emotional investment in a community at a distance. A network imaginary within the queer zine scene was about affirming, not avoiding, identities people were born with and creating a space to enact inclusive dialogue around being "queer" together. Queer zinesters made technological choices in creating a media platform. These choices turned marginalization into a way to articulate a political platform through zines, pushing forward the concept of "queer" as a shared rallying concept.

The "Queer Network Zine": *Queer Zine Explosion*

Queer zines also contributed to a network imaginary in creating a shadow map of zine culture through the "queer network zine." The affixing of the word queer in front of the "network zine" extends cultural theorist Stephen Duncombe's definition of the concept "network zine" into the world of queer subcultural production. The "network zine" refers to zines that "concentrate on reviewing and publicizing other zines, music, art, computer and other underground culture.

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[394] Stephen Perkins, *Subspace: International Zine Show* (Iowa City, IA: Subspace, 1992), 1. My emphasis.
[395] Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics*, 28.

They serve as nodal points for the bohemian diaspora."[396] The network zine is thus a zine comprised of reviews of other zines. A San Francisco transplant from Minneapolis, Larry-Bob Roberts, produced *Queer Zine Explosion*, the major "queer network zine" in the 1980s and 1990s that offered a painstakingly compiled catalogued list of zines that acted as a database of descriptions of queer zines and addresses of where to order your own copy.[397] Applying this concept of the network zine to queer publications and queer readership in the case of *Queer Zine Explosion* helps to contextualize the ways in which the particularity of a "queer network zine" has particular historical importance and ramifications. The analog space of the queer zine is an important moment where those involved in tech work and computer programming carried over ideals of interconnection into the zine world and back again to spaces of digital community. To return to the same page of the *Homocore* zine discussed earlier in the letter-writing section of this chapter, another gay man named Laurence Roberts from Minneapolis, Minnesota, wrote in explaining the staid flavor of his life: "I'm a…yuppie. I have a computer programming job out in the suburbs…. I know one [other] gay punk."[398] By 1995, Larry-Bob was a contributing editor to the major zine review publication, *Factsheet 5*.[399]

Along the way, Roberts had moved to San Francisco and started his own zines *Holy Titclamps* and *Queer Zine Explosion*. *Holy Titclamps* was his more personal zine, including descriptions of recent trips around the country, reviews of music, editorials on a range of subjects, and an entire issue devoted to "queer history." *Queer Zine Explosion* was a listing of queer zines that was sometimes printed on its own, but it was usually printed within *Holy Titclamps* itself. The zine-within-a-zine was also a network zine, inspired by Roberts's trajectory

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[396] Duncombe, *Notes from Underground*, 14.
[397] Larry-Bob Roberts, *Queer Zine Explosion* 11 (1993), 1.
[398] *Homocore* 4 (June 1989), 5.
[399] *Factsheet 5* 58 (1995), 2.

216

within queer punk culture. When Roberts wrote his letter in to *Homocore* in 1989, he was working in the Twin Cities area of Minnesota, frustrated with being forced back in the closet at his workplace after having come out of the closet in college. Roberts knew of a wider queer punk scene through the writings of Adam Block in the *Advocate*. Roberts had read Block's column through college, but it was only when Block covered the queer zine scene in the summer of 1988 that Roberts decided to make zines himself.[400] After trying his hand at a couple broadsheet-style zines, Roberts desired a bigger change. A computer programmer, Roberts sought to advance his career and his personal life with a move to San Francisco, where he began to network the queer zine scene.

The *Queer Zine Explosion* zine started from a process whereby Roberts would list queer zines in early issues of his primary zine, *Holy Titclamps*. Over time, the list got too cumbersome, so Roberts would staple an updated list of queer zines into the finished version of each *Holy Titclamps* zine. After a couple iterations of this format, Roberts moved to creating a separate zine that would be devoted to listing queer zines. A meticulous, intricate list of details about zines sent to him or discovered by him from around the world, *Queer Zine Explosion* was a striking project that manifested a network imaginary through the community information format of the zine.

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[400] Larry-Bob Roberts in discussion with the author, June 12, 2019

SHRIMp #1: Vaginal Davis' foot sucking and licking zine. Celebrity feets like Fugazi, Nirvana, Danzig. The Goddess Bunny, Pedro, Muriel and Esther. A must! Vaginal Davis, 7850 Sunset Blvd #110, LA CA 90046 (S-70/S4)

Silver Balls #1: Comix zine by Quetzal with drawings of dirty old men. Come Clean, shower scene with the coach and the janitor; Back Door Baths; 3 other stories and a couple more drawings. Requires age statement. Hand Jive Comix, Box 46095, LA CA 90046 (D-28/S3.50)

Siren #1: A dyke music magazine. Record reviews; saxophonist Camille Rocha; Girls in the Nose; a grungy he-fag has his say; mainstream makeovers for Melissa Etherige and Laurie Freelove (x-2 Nice Girls); Blackgirls; classical corner; Betty; Lesbianville USA. Kathe Bergquist, 727 W Bruar #A3, Chicago, IL 60657 (8 1/2 x 8/12 - 32/S3)

Sister Nobody #3: Riot Grrrl Convention issue. Includes a rant about how the convention will be a turning point in American culture, working for spiraling upwards instead of circling, and the dangers of mass media co-option. Box 11033, Washington, DC 20008-0233 (S-2/S1+2 stamps)

SKAG 2000 #1: G.B. Jones, founder of JDs, promises to have this new zine out soon. Box 55, Stn.E, Toronto, Ont M6H 4E1 Canada (S3)

Slutburger Stories #3: Comix by Mary Fleener. Coke snorting shoe fetishist; "Loaded;" Captain Beefheart illustrated; a dream story. #2 has a story about a gay ghost, but it's temporarily out of print. Drawn and Quarterly, 4550 Boyer St, Montreal, PQ H2J 3E4 Canada (C-28/S2.50)

Slut Mag: Multi-sexual zine with Slut-of-the-moment Justice Howard,

CA 94103 (D-24/S2?/ sub:1 yr issues $15)

Stomping Scene: Comix anthology zine with some queer content. c/o Jeremy Dennis, Exeter College, Oxford, OX1 3DP England (A4-24/1.20 pounds)

Strange Looking Exile #4: Queer comix zine edited by Rob Kirby. Jeffery Kennedy on his first boy kiss and his second tattoo; Rob spends a friday night at home; Baby Dyke tries her pick-up lines, and another cartoon by Terry Sapp; another episode of Born Queer by Diane DiMassa (Hothead Paisan); Melissa Rasmussen on sex "bases"; Nick Leonard on cooking cute rabbits; Rob's life with Morrissey; Christian Schroeder's first comic strip; Quetzal on quakes; Liliane tries to be a lipstick dyke in a comic by Leanne Franson; Roberta Gregory on comic titles; another episode of Rob's Father and Son — the father's a goody-goody, the son's a nihilist. Plus more Kirby comics. GAP, Box 214, New Haven, CT 06502 (HL-40/S3)

Strangeway Almanac #4: The zine which declares that nothing is too bizarre. Scenes from "Just Another Hot Dyke"; "I Bought a Little City"; Housekeeping Lessons for a messy slaveboy by his Mistress; why Casey publishes; Psychopath Soliloquy; a hetro sex story; a woman has a sexual encounter with her friend's son; info on battering and sexual abuse. Requires age statement. Box 1172, Montpelier, VT 05601 (S-24/S1)

Stumblings: A collection of 9 short stories about travel and other things by JanNathan Long, some of which have appeared in RFD. JanNathan Long, Rt. 1, Box 84 A, Liberty, TN 37095 (M-76/S4)

+ Suck Don't Blow #1: The ugly truth about Sandra Bernhard, Bush and Reagan, Greg Brady, European homos; Cunti the question bitch asks Liz Smith, Ray Chalker, and Merv Griffen when they last got laid; Cher in Nazi uniform; New York celebrity gossip; Why the

Figure 5-4: The dense description of zines found in Queer Zine Explosion 7 (February 1993): 7.

Each page would include many listings of zines, all in alphabetical order, with mailing addresses to send in money for issues as well as a selection of zine covers on the bottom of each page. Roberts's zine offers a type of information activism, a response to a frustrated desire for information about marginalized identity categories.[401] A veritable Yellow Pages of queer, self-published printed matter, Roberts built a database of information on queer zines.

Roberts's *Queer Zine Explosion* relied on a network imaginary that cemented a material vision of the queercore zine scene. Roberts described his process as a "cataloguing." He used the software Hypercard Stacks and its own programming language HyperTalk to make his issues. Hypercard Stacks was a critical precursor to HTTP, including language akin to hypertext with

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[401] McKinney, *Information Activism*, 217.

functions like a moving cursor and a compatibility for software offering games like the first *Myst*

game, which was initially released as a Hypercard stack and was even bundled with some

Macintosh personal computers. Using Hypercard Stacks, Roberts would compile a database of

information about zines akin to what more current desktop computer users might think of as

functionalities found in spreadsheet programs. He would fill in fields for zine titles, issue

numbers, and contact information, which would then be exported either for *Queer Zine*

Explosion or for his editing side-gig for the mainstream zine review compilation, *Factsheet Five*.

While compiling his constantly updating database, as older queer zines folded and as new queer

zines emerged, Roberts would write his detailed content notes for each zine with an imagined

end-user in mind. He would try to locate and describe the "one page in one zine" that could be

critical information for young queer youth seeking community.[402] This quite detailed zine labor

and imagination of the prototypical queer zine reader is a manifestation of a network imaginary

and furthers the archival ephemerality of zines. The description of many zines in *Queer Zine*

Explosion, some of which ran for only one issue, remain as the sole archival trace of a given zine

solely because of Roberts's cataloguing.

Roberts also helped to materialize what he had noticed as occurring in the pre-existing

bulletin board spaces of the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL) and Usenet. Although some

zine listings had been included in those bulletin board spaces, Roberts was determined to print a

paper zine version of queer zine reviews due to the many physical distribution options on offer,

including at Tower Records and even at some mainstream bookstores like Barnes & Noble.

Roberts reflected in 2019 that there was an easier "link to the underground" in distributing zines

back in the early 1990s at such chain media outlets. In translating ideas from the networked

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[402] Larry-Bob Roberts in discussion with the author, June 12, 2019.

computing spaces of zine reviews on the WELL and Usenet, Roberts was inspired by Tom

Jennings of *Homocore*, who was himself a tech entrepreneur who had created FidoNet, a bulletin

board system that served as an alternative to the world wide web and that had harbored

communities of dissent successfully, such as Eastern European anti-Soviet activists. Roberts

chose to maintain a paper directory of the "network zine" *Queer Zine Explosion*. In so doing, he

created an archive of queer zines for recuperation by scholars today as an enduring archive of the

ephemeral. While the zines referenced in *Queer Zine Explosion* are mostly lost to history, the

archive glimpsed through the partial references across queer zines like Roberts's and others

offers a powerful manifestation of the community information format of queer zines.

Placing the Queercore Scene: Tabling at SPEW, and Other Material Formats

Queercore zines catalogued a scene. A scene is both a place and its people. The scene of

queercore zines made both visible. One portrait collage of the landmark queer zine conference,

the SPEW Homographic Convergence or just "SPEW," offers a visual mechanism that

manifested this component of queer zines. Printed in the *MonStar* zine produced by Bruce

LaBruce, the collage of participants in the second SPEW conference in Los Angeles, California,

gave these subcultural performers and socialites a cultural status befitting celebrities in the pages

of magazines like *People*. "Eight is enough," the caption reads above the photo collage.[403] The

heads and torsos of performers such as LaBruce himself and drag queens DeAundra Peek and

Vaginal Crème Davis all sit unevenly on top of one another at slanted angles.

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[403] Bruce LaBruce, "Eight Is Enough," *Monstar* (1992), 60. Popular Culture Collection, Special Collections Library, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

Figure 5-5: Participants of the second SPEW conference in Los Angeles manifest a queer network of zine producers and queer performance artists. Bruce LaBruce, Monstar (1992), 60. Popular Culture Collection, Special Collections Library, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

The collage places the participants in the conference in an impossible relationship to one another that visualizes a material network. The SPEW conference manifested the queercore zine network at a moment in time. Like a network diagram of DARPANET or the internet, a network diagram materializes a relationship of information exchange between nodes at a given time. At the SPEW conference, the physical arrangement of personalities in the collage materialized in the mishmash of the physical presence of the zine writers and of queer performers all assembled in one place. At the SPEW conferences, the queercore scene "took place," albeit for three fleeting weekends over three consecutive years.

Queercore's institutionalization in the Midwest occurred through the first SPEW convention. Steve LaFrenière, who in the third chapter also curated Nelson Sullivan's videos for exhibition at art galleries, guest-curated the zine gathering as part of the Randolph Street

Gallery's *In Through the Out Door* series for "performance & multimedia art by lesbian and gay artists."[404] The gathering collected a range of artists in the emerging New Queer Media canon. On May 24th, the festival began with a Sadie Benning film screening. In a signaling to the type of gay and lesbian activism under the emergent banner of queer politics, ACT-UP and Queer Nation both had tables at the conference alongside zine tables for zines ranging from Vaginal Crème Davis's *Fertile LaToyah Jackson* to G.B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce's *J.D.s*. Davis later spoke of the first SPEW conference as providing a level of crowning fame upon her and Bruce LaBruce. In her words, SPEW was great, because "all those people were so hot for us original fag ziners."[405] In total, more than 20 zine producers and over 500 participants attended the event in Chicago.

Analyzing the SPEW conference involves consideration of how the queercore zine community materialized its network. At SPEW, queercore zines "took place." Foregrounding SPEW in the viewfinder reveals how anarchist and other Left-oriented conventions were important precursors in the organization of the nexus of the queer punk and zine scenes. Tom Jennings met Bruce LaBruce at a fated anarchist gathering in Toronto in 1988, which was a general spurring of queer zine activity out of an anarchist convention space. As Jennings described years later about how the queercore zine scene got its start at this anarchist gathering, he said that when the straight, macho punk men went out to get into fights with the police after a heady day of anarchism, "the rest of us were networking, realizing there are all these weirdo punk, queer, street culture people who are not particularly interested in that macho stuff."[406] Occupying a more marginal position at the Anarchist gathering in 1988 ushered the queer

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[404] Poster for "In Through the Out Door, May 24-June 15, 1991," Randolph Street Gallery. Accessed November 20, 2020. https://digitalcollections.saic.edu/islandora/object/islandora%3Arsga_2878.
[405] Castro, "Dingleberries," 71.
[406] Rathe, "Queer to the Core," 57.

zinesters into new networked social arrangements. The SPEW conferences extended from such convention spaces and was designed as a self-curated space for the queercore zine scene.

To write an account of the first SPEW conference is to reconstruct a boisterous weekend of zine hawking, drag performances, and even the aftermath of a violent attack on the planner of the conference, LaFrenière himself. The event fostered a lively multimedia showcase of zines alongside moving-image media, performances of varying degrees of gender experimentation, and even "Dancing, Cruising, and Ranting," as described on one promotional flyer.[407] Expectations were set with a flyer promising a commitment to non-productivity and queer revelry with an anarchist bent: "NO panel discussions. NO workshops. NO keynote address."[408] A review of the conference in the journal *Postmodern Culture* highlighted how the North American queer punk scene was far more established than in Europe, which the reviewer attributed to the "punk fanzine network" being stronger in the United States and Canada.[409] As he summarized in *Postmodern Culture*: "Drag was once again subversive and dangerous rather than merely polite."[410] This harder edge to the queer drag shows may have pushed away straight punks from attending the first SPEW. The queer contingent of punk was in full form at the conference, but the straighter denizens of punk were nowhere to be found. Hsu linked queer politics with the queercore zine as a site of cultural production, saying that "more of the attendees were from the 'new allies' of the queer punk movement: ACT-UPers, Queer Nationals, and radical queer artists and performers. Apparently, despite all the rhetoric about liberal/progressive politics, the hardcore establishment still has to come to terms with its homophobia."[411] The way that the

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[407] "Ephemera: SPEW – The Homographic Convergence – Poster Flats," Chicago, IL, 1991, 4. *Queer Zine Archive Project*. http://archive.qzap.org/index.php/Detail/Object/Show/object_id/223.
[408] Ibid., 20.
[409] Bill Hsu, "Spew: The Queer Punk Convention," *Postmodern Culture* 2, no. 1 (1991): para 4. http://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/26/spew-the-queer-punk-convention/.
[410] Ibid., para. 7.
[411] Ibid., para. 11.

contemporary academic discourse spoke of the SPEW conference situated it as a community set apart from mainstream punk that could still make claims upon mainstream punk.

Scant material exists today that documents the zine floor of the first conference. If zines are ephemeral media objects, then the space of the SPEW convention was even more so. One interview remains from the event that was recorded and included in a compilation video of Chicago gay and lesbian events by the media group Visual AIDS. Artist Hokey Sapp interviews Robert Ford, producer of *Thing*, a self-described "Black gay and lesbian underground arch-journal and magazine."[412] *Thing* began in November 1989. When Sapp asked if Ford had been doing it before others, he responded "we just started on our own, and as we started doing it, we started finding out that lots of other people were doing stuff like this and just kind of got hooked into that network eventually."[413] The moments of emergence of queer zines within black queer subcultures challenge a too-easy belief in Toronto being the epicenter point from which all queercore radiated.

Despite the celebratory nature of the weekend conference, the evening of film screenings and "subversive and dangerous drag" ended with violence. Steve LaFrenière, organizer of the conference, was attacked by a group of men outside of the Randolph Street Gallery venue. LaBruce's *MonStar* zine includes a photo of LaFrenière's back after the attack. The grim image attests to the archive as a writing of the body into history, with acts of inscription that speak to institutional and homophobic violence in the case of the queercore zine. LaBruce's playful tone still contains a sharp element of verve when he writes next to the image of LaFrenière's exposed and wounded back body: "Steve LaFreniere shows us the true meaning of back-stabbing as he

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[412] "Documents: Art, AIDS & Activism in Chicago," uploaded October 29, 2018, video, 56:57, Visual AIDS, accessed November 20, 2020. https://vimeo.com/297755355.
[413] Ibid.

displays the puncture wound he received at the hands of a homophobic creep he confronted during the original SPEW in Chicago."[414] Understanding how zines enact a community information format involve attending to how zines archive the moments that organized a budding queer zine network. Zines like LaBruce's *MonStar* contain such rare images that attest to zines as archival wayfinding technologies into the ephemeral spaces and sites of queer performance and community-building like the first SPEW conference.

The second SPEW conference took place in Los Angeles the following year, in 1992, at the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) gallery. Los Angeles was the west coast hub of queercore in North America at the time. Additionally, 1992 was a propitious year for emergent debates over reckoning with what "queer" meant, or could mean, for national discussions over LGBT politics within academic and journalistic circles. 1992 saw the publication of the "Queer Nationality" article by Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, which responded to the rise of Queer Nation as an offshoot of ACT-UP. 1992 also saw the publication of "queer" issues of both *Village Voice* and *Maximum Rocknroll*. The queercore scene had arrived, and no fewer than 50 queer zinesters had signed up for promotional tables ahead of the second conference in Los Angeles.

Bruce LaBruce's column in the special "queer" issue of *MRR* in 1992 discussed the second SPEW conference at length. LaBruce recollected how the first SPEW conference in Chicago was, by LaBruce's description, a ramshackle affair of slapdash planning: "What started out as the cheapest (by necessity) and crudest (by choice) means of expressing oneself outside of the conventional publishing world has transmogrified into a mini-literary establishment as

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[414] Bruce LaBruce, *Monstar* (1992), 81. Popular Culture Collection, Special Collections Library, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

unfocused yet elitist and exclusive as the Bloomsbury Group."[415] The second SPEW queercore

zine conference provided an engine for queercore as a cultural phenomenon. Larry-Bob Roberts

spoke of SPEW 2 as initiating a flurry of zine activity. Anticipating the conference spurred many

queer zinesters to print new editions of their queer zines: "SPEW 2 swelled the ranks of zines

this time," putting some people "at the photo-copier round the clock."[416] By SPEW 2, Roberts's

impression as a participant was that the conference focused mainly on zine tabling.[417] However,

punk groups Pansy Division, Tribe 8, and Vaginal Crème Davis's group Cholita all performed,

attesting to the wide-ranging platform that the queer zine scene collected at the SPEW

conference. Additionally, editor of the *Scream Box* zine Adriene Jenik curated a screening

comprised of public access videos from across the United States. Film Forum also organized a

"SPEW at 2" screening on the Sunday of the conference weekend, where LaBruce's film *No Skin

Off My Ass* was screened alongside director Greta Snider's films *Shred of Sex* and *Hardcore

Home Movie*. At the SPEW conference, zine activities spurred film screenings, and these media

formats formed a united front in a queer articulation of identity set against a more complacent

gay mainstream.

The increasing popularity and numbers of queer zines at the second SPEW also paralleled

a solidifying of the queercore community across localities.[418] Bruce LaBruce's ire at the

mainstreaming of queerness through the film screenings sponsored by the prestigious

organization of Film Forum did not prevent him from recording at least two photographs of

activity at the zine tables, which he later printed in his *MonStar* zine.

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[415] LaBruce, "Guest Opinion," 25.
[416] *Queer Zine Explosion* 5 (1992), 1.
[417] Larry-Bob Roberts in discussion with the author, June 12, 2019.
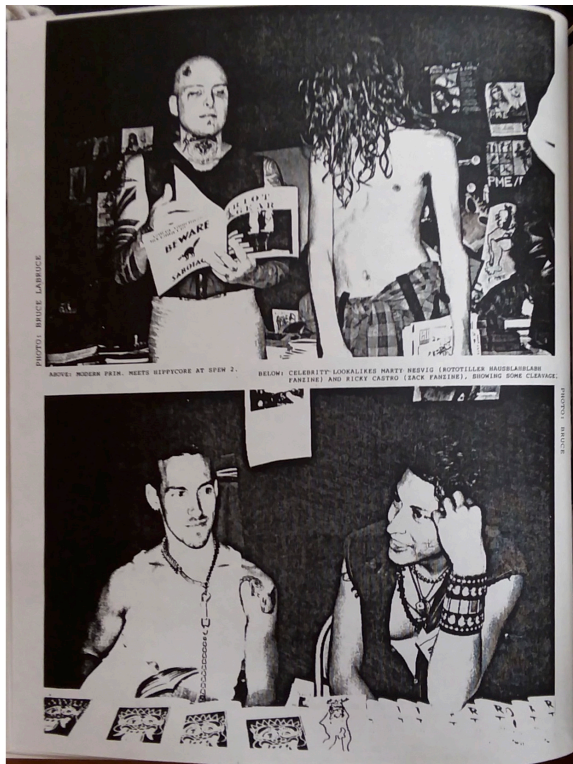[418] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 178.

Figure 5-6: A glimpse of the zine tables at SPEW 2 in Los Angeles. In MonStar 1 (1991): 80.

These images of the zine tables offer a glimpse into how the zines were distributed and made into a focal point as a community information format that invited interactive participation at SPEW.

Queercore zine coverage of the second SPEW conference also highlighted the scene's celebrities. The second issue of New York drag queen Glennda Orgasm's zine *Pussy Grazer* in 1992 profiled her involvement with the conference. Escaping "the piss-smelling streets of New York," Glennda found Los Angeles bigger, brighter, and better than her east coast home. Her zine coverage of SPEW 2 contained a portrait of a few of the most prominent queercore zinesters and affiliated performers, with a description alongside each image. The descriptions reveal key details in envisioning what participating at the queercore conference would have been like. Glennda described the run-down of other participants in the second SPEW conference to her

readers as "people I think you should know."[419] She talked of her encounter with Joan Jett Blakk, the first drag queen presidential candidate during the 1992 election cycle. Her description of other participants also reveals in part the character of the SPEW 2 conference, including a furtive writing of her own name over a blank star in Hollywood's walk of fame with artist Klaus von Brucker and an ensuing run from police. Glennda's acclaim for Vaginal Crème Davis's performance with her band Cholita is exuberant: "CHOLITA is a force to be reckoned with. Fun and sexy, but also confrontational and dangerous, it made something like NY's Boy Bar look like the Lawrence Welk show."[420] The reviews of the participants of SPEW 2 here read like an establishment of these zinesters as micro-celebrities.

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[419] Glennda Orgasm, "My Fanzine Friends," *Pussy Grazer* 2 (1992): 28.
[420] Ibid., 29.

Klaus Von Brucker - Klaus and I did the tourist thing and made a trip to glamorous Hollywood Boulevard and checked out all the foot and hand prints at Grouman's Chinese Theater. We tried to pull a Lucy and Ethel by stealing Natalie Woods' footprints, but there were too many people wathing. However I did manage to write GLENNDA ORGASM in black magic marker in one of the empty stars in the sidewalk. We managed to escape from the police by taking cover in the Hollywood Wax Musuem where we noticed that the replica of Kiss' Paul Stanley was displaying mucho pubic hair in his low-cut sequined outfit.

Vaginal Creme Davis - I finally met the sexational blacktress herself and i was not disappointed. Definitely one of the high points of SPEW was the appearance of her band CHOLITA-the female Menudo. Punky salsa with lyrics in Espanol y Ingles, Latino homeboy drag king go-go dancers who slammed their way through the crowd, and Vag's call-to-arms to overthrow the white power structure - CHOLITA is a force to be reckoned with. Fun and sexy, but also confrontational and dangerous, it made something like NY's Boy Bar look like The Lawrence Welk Show.

No skin off Natalie Wood's tuchus

Hot Hot Hot Ms. Davis

A queen has got to be extreme

Figure 5-7: Glennda Orgasm's recap of SPEW 2 includes a glowing review of Vaginal Davis's performance. In Pussy Grazer 2 (1991): 29.

When describing Bruce LaBruce, Glennda talked of sharing a zine table with the queercore veteran. Glennda's description of LaBruce presents a different side to LaBruce than the crafted image he maintained in his own work: "A veritable whirlwind of satiric (?) self-marketing, Ms. Blab [LaBruce's nickname] signed 8x10 prints of himself, wore a label that proclaimed he was trademarked, and deviously tried to cover up my…advertisement poster."[421] The many details gleaned from her event description, housed within her description of each queercore micro-celebrity, demonstrates how the ephemerality of the second SPEW conference can be resisted by reconstructing these details from the piecemeal archive within a range of queercore zines, many

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[421] Ibid., 30.

of which add details to the importance of these conferences in establishing the scene of queer zines.

Conclusion

This chapter presented a community information format built not through the protocols of the World Wide Web but of a North American queer community that constructed a network imaginary through zines. I argued in this chapter that queer individuals mobilized the textual medium of zines within a network imaginary to build a community around the emergent definition of "queer." Zines archive a past only felt as ephemeral once it has passed. The queercore zine scene viewed through the multimedia pages of *J.D.s*, *Homocore*, *My Comrade*, among countless others, is a riotous space of play with gender and sexuality. The queer zine network imaginary proceeded in sometimes an indirect or passive way, with zine producers using the literal terms of "network" and "networking" to apply to the distribution practices of zines themselves. Other zine producers textually enacted a network through their letters to zines that were sent in and then printed, which created lines of connection and support across geographical distance. Preceding (in the 1980s) and then responding to (by the mid-1990s) the rise of networked communication, queercore zine producers and filmmakers saw their work as part of a new rise in connection across space and time. Zines demonstrate that network imaginaries can manifest across media forms, formats, and ephemeral performances, enabling readers of zines to experience a feeling of being networked through their marginalized identities. Queer zines provided an affective embrace for marginalized identities, for folks who felt disconnected and in a laggy orientation to a virtual community they desired. One anonymous letter writer to *Homocore* summarized this view on claiming an identity *and* a community through zines: "Flipping through *Maximum Rocknroll* seeing another *Homocore* ad & realizing that I can no

longer sit here disconnected with other gays & lesbians [with whom] I need contact."[422] The

SPEW conferences contributed to a network imaginary by offering an adaptation of the more

common fan conventions and political gatherings—like the 1988 anarchist gathering in

Toronto— that united disparate groups united through shared media texts. The SPEW

conferences helped to materialize the queer zine network as a cross-disciplinary, multi-media

scene. Zines built networks of feelings of solidarity across North America.

Understanding the community information format of queer solidarity through zines is a

way to understand where such sociality may go in our present. If popular culture is indeed "the

stage where we rehearse our identities," then zines provided the stage where "queer" became

prominently formulated, defined, and contested.[423] An aesthetics of amateurism in the queer zine

scene presents a refusal of polish and composure. As José Esteban Muñoz argued of images of

empty punk clubs and stages, a visual culture of queer sociality should seek to uncover sites of

potentiality. Queercore is not only a zine culture, but a media production culture that took

advantage of a marginalized status with regard to other subcultures to craft a "media format" of

alterity that queer punks in other geographical locales could emulate. Seen along the lines of

digital media scholar Alexis Lothian's description of speculative queer futures in media, the

work of Toronto's queercore zinesters also invited viewers and readers "to sit not only with the

idea that the future might be different from the present, but with visual, aural and affective

elements of how that future could manifest."[424] If queerness is always in formation, then the

media formats and material places where queer performances occurred, paired with a

[422] *Homocore* 7 (1991): 7.

[423] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2009), 104.

[424] Alexis Lothian, *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2018), 178.

commitment to an amateur aesthetic, are cultural zones to assess and analyze what sociality can mean for our present and future.

Queer zines and the network imaginary they built before the Web gave a sense of belonging to a community within the folded formats of self-printed media. Performances of queer identity in punk clubs, at the SPEW conferences, and in the pages of a myriad of zines staged "a certain structure of feelings, a circuit of queer belonging."[425] This chapter focused on the community information format of a network imaginary within zines to demonstrate how the social construction of networks in queer media can be historically "placed" parallel to the endeavors to construct the protocols of the Web. The cultural format of the zine offers both a glimpse into a locality as well as a sometimes widely dispersed geographic reach. In this sense, they are a networked form of media, creating through their distribution to other communities of solidarity a like-minded set of burgeoning definitions for a subculture in formation. Queercore provided a critique of homophobic punk spaces and the mainstream gay worlds that were predominantly white, middle-class, and based in cultural idioms of respectability. As social media platforms define the potential of fostering community across space and time, remembering the use of zines to mount a critique of mainstream subcultures can teach us that innovation occurred not only in the digitally networked worlds of bulletin boards like Usenet, but also in the pages of zines.

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[425] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 111.

Chapter 6 Conclusion: Community Information Formats Today

What does it mean to find a community through media? What does it mean to study social media before "social media?" What role did community information formats have in fostering queer and subcultural media histories? These questions weave across the four case studies analyzed in this dissertation. In answering these questions, I have demonstrated how a community information format has been about media practices *in formation*. Tied closely to the notion of the emergent, the community information format is about the horizon of what has not yet been achieved, but what might one day come about.[426] The links to utopian strains of queer theory should be apparent in the formulation of the community information format.[427] So, too, are the methodological orientations of media archaeology that analyze paths not taken in media history, to reckon with forgotten predecessors who did not *fail*, a framing that would undercut the agency of the media producers that I studied in these pages. Rather, the community information formats discussed in these pages are about overlooked orientations to information *in formation*, as potential states toward media made in common and as a commons that can productively inform our present.

The stakes for recuperating alternative visions of community media are in many ways higher than ever. The past five years have seen misinformation spread like poison across social media networks. Twitter, Facebook, and other platforms have fostered the growth of the alt-right

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[426] Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman, "Introduction: What's New About New Media?" in *New Media 1740-1915*, eds. Geoffrey B. Pingree and Lisa Gitelman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

[427] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York City, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

in the United States and ushered in meme distribution practices that have led to deadly mobilizations in the Charlottesville, Virginia, Unite the Right rally in 2017. Social media corporations seem eager to police the vision of community they present to the world, at least to a public weary of investing more trust in platforms that can harbor such vitriolic and divisive hate.

I witnessed such a repositioning of the promise of community on social media on a pre-pandemic day of research in San Francisco. After hours of taking photographs of the zine collections at the GLBT Historical Society in San Francisco, I stood drowsily waiting for a bus to connect me to the BART train. The patter of rain lulled me into calm after hours of sifting through self-published zines. The bright, LED-backlit advertising screen beside me distracted my attention, and I watched as a vision of community appeared before me. Sitting in the bus stop alone, I saw Facebook's vision of community in an ad for Facebook Groups:
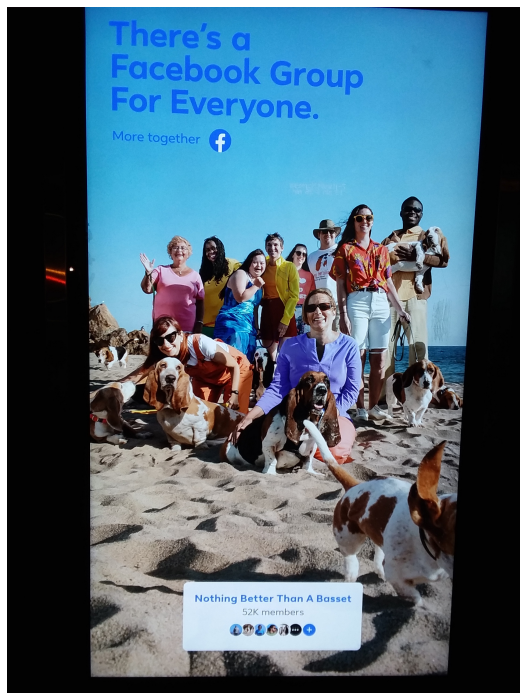

Figure 6-1: Facebook Groups advertisement at a bus stop in San Francisco. Photo taken by author on November 13, 2019.

A smiling, multi-racial group of Basset Hound enthusiasts gleamed from the sunny beachside scene in stark contrast to the nighttime grit of the San Francisco bus stop. The ad promises joy

234

through the fostering of community based on shared, niche interests. The inclusivity of

Facebook's claim that there is a Group "for everyone" implies that Facebook Groups is

expansive enough to account for all the different, intersecting facets of lived identity. In this ad, I

realized that the community information format has become a tool of marketing. Sandwiched

beside other advertisements for media franchises such as Disney's *The Mandalorian* television

series, the vision of community that the Facebook Groups ad presented was one of a commodity

item on display for customers to select out of competing options, a reduction of the experience of

community to a cleverly titled Facebook Group name like "Nothing Better Than a Basset."

Filtered through the medium of Facebook Groups, a community information format seems

entirely beholden to the ad-driven structure and design imperatives of Facebook. Facebook offers

Groups as a community information format in order to mine the sociality and creativity of the

platform's users into a product to sell to advertisers.

Recognizing Facebook Groups as the contemporary version of a corporatized community

information format also entails a flexibility to changing social conditions. The experience of

community through media has always been mediated through the promise of making the burden

of life easier to shoulder. During the darkest days of 2020, the corporate vision of community

within Facebook Groups also presented this as a feature of their service. With the SARS-CoV-2

pandemic rampant in the United States, the ability for social media companies to adapt agilely

has been made apparent. Facebook Groups in 2020 was no longer the glue to bond Basset hound

lovers together in person on sunny beaches. One video advertising the Groups feature in May

2020 showed how people in isolation were "still going strong," as the title of the YouTube video

made clear.[428] Overlays appeared in this video on top of short clips of individuals going about

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[428] "Facebook Groups | Still Going Strong," uploaded May 11, 2020, video, 1:00, Facebook App, accessed February 19, 2021, https://youtu.be/AARdkJfTYFY.

their everyday life while in quarantine, such as a man and his child by their tent in a sunny backyard with the overlay of the "Tent Camping Adventures" group visible, or an athletic woman climbing the ceiling girders of her loft apartment with the overlay of the "Moab Rock Climbers" group visible. In this clip, even the banal experience of isolation due to the pandemic could be alleviated through the community found on Facebook.

I present these observations about Facebook Groups less as a call-to-arms and more as a presentation of the contrast to the subcultural and queer case studies this dissertation has analyzed. Much has changed from the early-1990s to today. I am most struck by the adaptability of a social media giant like Facebook that can advertise the experience of quarantine to us as a Facebook-branded activity. Whereas the case studies of this project were all politically oriented to challenging the status quo of dominant identities and of the embedded power relationships in hegemonic uses of media technologies, Facebook Groups presents a community information format largely devoid of politics. By turning to the past examples of queer and subcultural media producers, I analyzed community information formats before "social media" became the norm for experiencing digitally mediated community. The lessons of these chapters can hopefully inflect our contemporary experience with an understanding of how corporate imperatives to forming community may be resisted, challenged, and adapted to suit the types of community we want to build today.

As a scholar of overlooked moments, uses of media, and lived experiences in media history, I acknowledge that the history in these pages is by necessity a partial one. Our present media culture is the culmination not only of successful stories of media innovation but also of the dreams of subcultural and queer media producers. More work must be done on establishing alternative histories of sociality before the Web. This project analyzed a collection of generally

overlooked groups and moments in media history in order to understand social media before

"social media." Each chapter is a cherished object in my own cupboard of curiosity. The history

in these pages aimed to present a collection that can inform other collections of similar case

studies, to give histories that resemble "not a simple linear narrative but an archive or

collection."[429] The scenes of media production of this dissertation are grounded on the hope of

not having to go it alone. The realization of sharing a feeling of hope can animate new political

solidarities and collectivities. This dissertation provides a foundation from which to think about

how the horizons of social justice advocated for in subcultural and queer media groups before the

Web can adjust our understanding of monopolistic social media platforms today. As platforms

proliferate, and as political fault lines entrench ever more deeply into our everyday experience of

social media, we must continue to attend to alternative discourses of media history by seeking

out understudied voices, lives, and technological visions in order to build a better tomorrow.

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[429] Amelie Hastie, *Cupboards of Curiosity: Women, Recollection, and Film History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 9.

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