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GRADUATE CRITICISM AND THEORY

AIDS/ABORTION/ANTI-BODIES

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ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

From Within: Alternative AIDS Media By Women

Alex: *What do you think of this video camera? Both sides?*
Sharon: *Actually to be on the other side's not as much fun as I thought it would be. It's exciting. . . But being on this side, I wonder: What do I look like? Do I look clear? Okay? Hair's okay?*

—*A WAVE Taster*, "Introductions"

Introduction: Alternative Media/Indigenous Media

With the recent advances in video technology, all kinds of people (indigenous peoples, people of color, people with AIDS [PWAs], home viewers, Alex and Sharon) can pick up a video camera, tape themselves, and for a limited expense edit their images into something that looks like, and can be broadcast upon, television. Suddenly, people from "minority," "disenfranchised," and "marginal" communities can make and see their own media images: "I wonder what I look like? Do I look clear?"

Sharon's queries are from a tape made by a video "support group" that I organized, one where we women affected by AIDS learned to make our own educational media for our own communities. And this is only one example of a significant and diverse body of alternative AIDS media produced by women. From as early as 1985, women have been contributing to the cultural and political construction of AIDS by making and watching films and videos about it. Yet, although it no doubt could, alternative AIDS media by women does not look or function like "mainstream" AIDS productions. Alternative productions are dissimilar in almost every way: in their modes of production, distribution, and exhibition, in their purpose, in their form.

This is precisely because alternative AIDS media by women is a form of "indigenous media." The term, which comes by way of ethnographic film

and anthropology, to my mind most closely identifies a new kind of media production in which the longtime subjects of the ethnographic filmic gaze—indigenous peoples—themselves take up the camera. In her article on indigenous media, Faye Ginsburg explains how these media productions can serve as "new vehicles for internal and external communication, for self-determination, and for resistance to outside cultural domination"(Ginsburg, 94). Furthermore, she proposes that media production is an ideal method "for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption"(Ginsburg, 96). Although Ginsburg is primarily discussing the condition of Fourth World or indigenous populations who have suffered the long-term effects of colonialism and postcolonialism, her words equally describe, I believe, alternative AIDS media: the conventional form is being used differently by people who have experienced "massive disruption," and used to counter their oppressed status through different formal strategies and for different ends, by and for different communities.

Unlike generalized and supposedly "objective" ethnographic film, documentaries, or news, indigenous media comes from the communities of "others" to whom it is addressed and about whom it is concerned: indigenous media speaks from the vantage of the local and the opinionated. I believe that indigenous or alternative media most differentiates itself from mainstream production in that it willingly and necessarily identifies its makers and viewers as distinct (opinionated, political) communities. This necessitates profoundly different strategies of production, distribution, and exhibition. Thus, alternative AIDS media is most easily identified by the relationship it fosters between an audience and producer of a specific community—from *within* the AIDS crisis—in a society that usually determines minority identity from a position of distance.

And I don't raise the banner of identity merely for rhetorical purposes. Ten years into the AIDS crisis there is a new cultural minority, a new identity politics: AIDS culture, of which many of us are members. Whether we are infected by HIV or sleep with someone who is, whether we shoot drugs ourselves or live in neighborhoods where they are sold, whether we mourn the loss of creative, active, vibrant members of our society or care for those who may still die from this disease, we are a community, a so-called minority, in that we share common experiences and a common oppression.

I use the terms "identity" and "identification" in a manner indebted to the recent theoretical writings of feminist, ethnic, and gay "cultural theorists," as well as those who, like Ginsburg, are writing about cultural identity in contemporary ethnography and anthropology. Significantly, their considerations of identity politics in a postmodern culture, even as they try to account for the specificities of gender, ethnicity, class, or sexual orientation, share similar assumptions and similar motivations. Such theorists, writing as feminists, black women, gay men, or gay black men—and writing through a range of explicitly political identities (in fact, this specificity of voice and commitment makes this writing surprisingly similar to the indigenous media that is the subject of this paper)—share an understanding of "identity" that is always constructed, that is neither fixed nor essential. For instance, Ginsburg, in discussing the work of current ethnographic filmmakers, writes:

> They are not about recreating a pre-existent and untroubled cultural identity "out there." Rather they are about the process of identity construction. They are not based on some retrieval of an idealized past, but create and assert a position for the present that attempts to accommodate the inconsistencies and contradictions of contemporary life. (Ginsburg, 106)

Ginsburg's affirmation of an active "identity construction" that nevertheless denies the fixity of identity is held in common by cultural theorists like Teresa de Lauretis, bell hooks, Cornell West, Stuart Hall, Kobena Mercer, and Isaac Julien. What draws me to their work is that their analyses seem to operate dually: while explaining how the construction of identity for minorities has oppressed marginal communities, they also express how the work of constructing our own identities is vital for oppressed people who have specific political needs. Thus, bell hooks wishes to claim "marginality" as

> a site of transformation where liberatory black subjectivity can fully emerge, emphasizing that there is a definitive distinction between that marginality that is imposed by oppressive structure and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance, as location of radical openness and possibility. (hooks, 22)

I suggest that alternative AIDS media, which willingly speaks from and about a marginal and oppressed position, can be understood in hooks' terms (which strongly echo Ginsburg's "resistance to outside domination") as "that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance." One reason alternative media does not look like mainstream media, even though it could, is that this would require forfeiting that "location of radical openness and possibility" from which to speak.

hooks' belief that the self-selected position of marginal identity can be both political and affirmative inspires a critique of postmodernist thought similar to that by many cultural theorists or black "cultural workers" (West, "New Cultural Politics," 105). For example, Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, in their introductory article for *Screen*'s 1988 special issue on race, counter the "end of everything" type of postmodern discourse of Jean Baudrillard and Victor Burgin by suggesting instead that "identity" theory has allowed us to begin to "recognize and reckon with the kinds of complexity inherent in the culturally constructed nature of ethnic identities, and the implications this has for the analysis of representational practices" (Julien and Mercer, 3).

Cornell West also suggests that while postmodern theory has made central the concerns of difference and otherness, there has been little focus on how considerations of the nonessential nature of identity can itself be useful politically (West, "Black Culture," 92). People who are oppressed because of their "identities," whether essential or culturally constructed, do not yet have the luxury of celebrating the end of identity. Therefore, hooks suggests a "radical postmodernism" that "would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups"(hooks, 27).

An example of such "radical postmodernism" is seen in the work of Teresa de Lauretis. Here, describing the "notion of identity" in emergent feminist writing, she uses terms that could best be understood as postmodern:

> What is emerging in feminist writings is . . . the concept of a multiple, shifting, and often self-contradictory identity, a subject that is not divided in, but rather at odds with, language; an identity made up of heterogeneous and heteronomous representations of gender, race, and class, and often indeed across languages and cultures; an identity that one decides to reclaim from history of multiple assimilations, and that one insists on as a strategy. (de Lauretis, 9)

She goes on to explain that for feminists, however, this notion of identity differs from "contemporary modes of radical, critical, or creative thinking, such as postmodernism and philosophical antihumanism," because feminism is always "a political instance." She continues: "The edge is there: the sense of struggle, the weight of oppression and contradiction. The stakes, for women, are rooted in the body which is not to say that the body escapes representation, but quite the opposite" (de Lauretis, 10, 12).

Because alternative and indigenous media, unlike mainstream media, comes from and is addressed to a local body with a shared and explicit sense of oppression, struggle, and contradiction, I believe that such production, like the work of feminism and other struggles against identity oppression, must always be a "political instance." In the case of alternative AIDS media, de Lauretis' notion of an identity that is "heterogeneous and heteronomous" across "language and culture" is particularly important, since the members of this community span not just the globe, but also races, classes, genders, and the other conventional markers of difference and sameness. If identification occurs in the making and viewing of alternative AIDS media—and it must, if a tape is to be truly effective—then this is a complicated and fluid sort of identification that takes into account what Mercer explains as "the social, political, and psychic effects of actually living in a multicultural society" (in Kenny, "Traveling Theory," 8).

In the making and viewing of alternative AIDS media—willingly and explicitly positioned from the margins, willingly and explicitly heterogeneous and heteronomous—notions of an AIDS community "identity" are suggested, bandied about, played with, taken up, passed by. And *this* is political action. Says hooks:

> We return to "identity" and "culture" for relocation, linked to political practice—identity that is not informed by a narrow cultural nationalism masking continued fascination with the power of the white hegemonic other. Instead identity is evoked as a stage in a process wherein one constructs radical black subjectivity. (hooks, 20)

I suggest that the making and viewing of alternative AIDS media works toward an active construction of a "radical AIDS subjectivity." For the AIDS community, as for indigenous populations around the world, the political instance of access to media production allows us to speak our needs, define our agenda, counter irresponsible depictions of our lives, and recog-

nize our similarities and differences.

In this article, I would like to give indigenous AIDS media some of the critical attention it deserves by describing videotapes that have been produced by women over the past six years, and by analyzing in closer detail five recent projects. To date, much has been written about mainstream media production about AIDS, while much less has been written regarding the large body of alternative work.[1] In a society where it is always difficult for women to produce, and where that production is always undervalued, it is vitally important for the work of women to be identified, analyzed, and celebrated.

Thus, I will discuss five tapes in detail: *Current Flow*, by Jean Carlomusto for The Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC); *Stop the Church/Like a Prayer*, by DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists); *Women and Children Last*, by Amber Hollibaugh and Gini Reticker; *The Embrace/El Abrazo*, by Diana Coryat; and finally, *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS*, by WAVE (Women's AIDS Video Enterprise), which I will discuss in the greatest detail and use to summarize my analysis of alternative AIDS media by women. These tapes were all completed in 1990 by New York women videomakers. Although the makers of these tapes are all feminists active in AIDS and media communities in New York City, each of these projects targets a more select community within this larger (but still too small) community (i.e., lesbians, activists, women of color, care providers, etc.).

It is this very process and possibility of "identifying" smaller and smaller communities from which and to which to speak that raises the questions most central to my analysis of indigenous media. How do such tapes, specifically by New Yorkers and about New Yorkers, speak to an audience of New Yorkers? And how do such tapes speak to other Americans (in urban or rural environments), or to non-Americans? Does work by Brooklynites, for example, speak to people from the Bronx? Or how does my own writing about what I know best (my own video project, the work of my friends and colleagues, the issues most important to me) make this writing both limited and rich? These kinds of questions, which raise the complex issues of identification and identity politics, difference and sameness, cross-cultural or cross-community communication, are the concern of this paper and of indigenous and alternative practice in general.

What is "alternative" about alternative AIDS media?

Clearly, the term "alternative media" encompasses a vast array of producers and production strategies. According to John Greyson, there are at least nine types of alternative AIDS practice, including:

1. Cable access talk shows
2. Documents of performances and plays addressing AIDS
3. Documentary (memorial) portraits of PLWAs (people living with AIDS)
4. Experimental works by artists deconstructing mass media hysteria
5. Educational tapes on transmission of and protection against the HIV virus
6. Documentaries portraying the vast range of AIDS service organizations
7. Safer-sex tapes
8. Activist tapes
9. A growing handful of tapes for PLWAs (Greyson, 14)

Greyson argues that there is no "unified, uncomplicated field of alternative media." Alternative AIDS tapes are being made for a range of reasons, by a range of producers, for a range of audiences. Variously funded and formally diverse, these productions differ from the mainstream media, although they do inform and sometimes change the commercial media's representations.

Thus, one could locate the difference between alternative and mainstream AIDS media in *intent* (to document AIDS activism, to educate, to empower), or in *message* (to affirm much which the mainstream ignores or repudiates: nonprocreative sexuality, or ethnic, gender, and economic difference, or the political and social components of the crisis, or vital information about safe drug use). Or one could locate the differences in their *mode of production* (produced by or in conjunction with nonmedia professionals, usually on a low budget and on a nonprofit basis).

However, I would locate the most consistent feature of alternative AIDS media in a difference of position: it comes from within the AIDS community, as opposed to a mainstream practice outside of the AIDS community that insistently constructs itself and its audience as immune to the AIDS virus. Timothy Landers suggestively labels this problem as one of "Bodies/Anti-Bodies": the "Body—white, middle-class, and heterosexual—is constructed in opposition to the Other, the Anti-Body—blacks, gay men,

lesbians, workers, foreigners, in short, the whole range of groups that threaten straight, white, middle-class values" (Landers, 282). Alternative AIDS media could be considered the video work of individuals who proudly take up the negative mantle assigned to them as "anti-bodies" and work from the site of any (anti-)body willing to admit a relationship to infection.

In fact, I believe the most precise determination of "alternative" media is a matter of who is addressed: that is, if the voice and body of an "anti-body" organizes and assumes responsibility for the work's narrative flow, and if such work assumes that an "anti-body" might also be watching and listening. Says Jean Carlomusto, speaking as a member of the AIDS video collective Testing the Limits: "Everything I don't consider video AIDS activism addresses a 'general public,' as if there is one homogenous general public that doesn't allow for diversity" (in Kenny, "Testing the Limits," 7).

Carlomusto both here and in her video work defines a media production willing to situate itself outside the imaginary but nevertheless overbearing shadow of the "general public." There is an important, and often dangerous, history of AIDS mediamakers like Testing the Limits willingly identifying themselves with otherness, with their own proximity to infection, and therefore opening the doors for discrimination and hostility along with self-definition and education. Examples of such early work produced by women mediamakers are the tapes *Living With AIDS* (1985/86), by Tina DiFeliciantonio, and *Chuck Solomon: Coming of Age* (1986), co-produced by DiFeliciantonio and Wendy Dallas, both portraits of gay white men living with AIDS. The tapes "personalize" the disease by proudly and carefully presenting intimate details about PWAs Todd Coleman and Chuck Solomon, and about their lovers, friends, and communities. Jan Zita Grover explains that such representations of PWAs "suggest some fundamental differences between mainstream media's hit-and-run approach . . . and a community's coverage of its own . . . [that] encourages readers' identification with the PWA because of shared history and concerns" (Grover, "Visible Lesions," 15). Grover describes a courageous, and political, identification here: the willing acknowledgement of connection to infection by those who are either sick or well.

As the face of AIDS has changed and diversified, so has the work of alternative video producers. AIDS videos were first produced from within the many communities that were being profoundly affected by the virus: by PWAs, people working in the field, AIDS activists, IV drug users, prostitutes, ethnic communities, gays and lesbians, women. But such work also

began to take account of the range of experience encompassed by the term "AIDS crisis," as well as to reach out to the range of people affected. As we have found over the past ten years, AIDS education is most effective when it comes from, and is made specifically for, the diverse communities that most need to be addressed. As Jose Gutierres-Gomez and Jose Vergelin, producers of the "telenovela" educational AIDS video *"Ojos Que No Ven,"* explain:

> Effective AIDS education directed at minorities requires a show and tell medium that can also role-model positive behavior change while reflecting the language, culture, values, and lifestyles of the target audience. . . . Government agencies will often translate materials in order to save money and the result is, almost inevitably, a useless one. People simply cannot relate what they are being taught (to their lives), and the educational message falls on deaf ears. (Gutierres-Gomez and Vergelin, 13)

Gutierres-Gomez and Vergelin call for indigenization—a move toward producer/audience identification—in the production of educational AIDS media. Appropriate and useful education works toward a specificity of voice and address: an explicit acknowledgement of what unifies, and identifies, maker and audience. This connection between audience and producer occurs in the "artist's response" to AIDS as well, according to Grover:

> An accurate reading of audience became particularly important here; AIDS activist groups and service organizations now spend as much time defining and addressing questions about audience—i.e., appropriate language, idiom, graphic style, literacy level and circulation for different "markets" of AIDS information—as any art director or account rep at DD or Chiat-Day. Many young artists have had their first introduction to their own marginality as speakers and audiences (e.g., as gay men, as lesbians, as sex workers, as artists) while working on these projects. They have also learned the salutary lesson that it is difficult to speak effectively for or to people unlike themselves. (Grover, "AIDS," 3)

A Community of Women AIDS Media Activists

Women have been especially prolific producers of community-specific AIDS media, willing to work for and often from a particular "margin" of the media's universal mainstream. Beyond my perhaps brazen call to, and idealistic celebration of, indigenous media production, there is a much more complicated world where access to the production of meaning may be expanding but in which very real social inhibitions monitor an individual's access to public discourse. There are innumerable societally proscribed reasons why individuals feel more or less ready, and compelled, to make their own images, to resist cultural domination, and one of these is gender.

But why have women been producing large amounts of AIDS media? What has motivated them to speak so forcefully about this issue at this time? Women were early on invested in AIDS activism, AIDS care, and AIDS suffering because, sadly, they had experience and knowledge of similar catastrophes. Feminism, in fact, traces the longstanding relationships between sexuality, politics, representation, the body, and illness. Women have always been the caretakers of the ill: as mothers, nurses, sisters, and doctors. And women are poorer than men in our society. Issues of inadequate health care, poverty, homelessness, prostitution, drug use, and lack of daycare have always affected them disproportionately. Women's friends, family members, and lovers were infected. And soon into the crisis, women and their children became infected too. With the increasing affordabilty of video technology, women picked up the camera and found they had a lot to say, and they said it to others affected as they were.[2]

Make A Video for Me!

The AIDS community is itself speckled with hundreds of smaller communities and is bordered by its own margins. Women in the AIDS community form a subset, or margin, with needs different from and similar to the community as a whole. And there is a wide range of smaller communities that can be identified within this AIDS community of women: activists, lesbians, lesbian activists, women of color, Asian-Americans, blacks, black lesbians, black lesbian activists, and so on. Clearly, such a process of infinite regression could ultimately reduce every community to the individual: "make a video for me!" might sound absurd, but in fact it's the point.

The most significant way in which indigenous practice counters and alters mainstream media is that it localizes the production and reception of this usually universalizing mode of discourse. I'm not trying to say that a black lesbian activist cannot watch or learn from a video for an Asian-American straight social worker, but rather that she *can*. The political impact of alternative media comes as much from "oppositional" distribution and exhibition strategies (organizing, for example, screenings outside the community), as it does from oppositional production (making localized images from within a community). As video production becomes more accessible and less expensive, there is no reason not to use this medium to educate our own particular and private communities, while also inviting other communities to see the ways in which we talk about and to ourselves.

Thus, two recent tapes produced by and for very specific subsets of the women's AIDS community may be seen as particularly important expressions of the needs of those specific communities, both to themselves and, potentially, to interested outsiders. *Current Flow* (1989), a safer-sex porn short for lesbians, is one in a series of such shorts produced by GMHC's media department. Because most of the funding for this project is dependable, the production standards are high. Directed by Jean Carlomusto in conjunction with a lesbian task group, *Current Flow* opens upon a woman masturbating with a vibrator to the sounds of a televised interview with Madonna and Sandra Bernhardt. As the woman moves toward climax, a black hand unplugs—stops the current flow to—the vibrator. Although the woman is initially angered by this interruption, another equally exciting flow begins as the mysterious intruder joins her upon the couch, and Sinéad O'Connor's "Just Like U Said it Would B" enters the soundtrack. Long, minimally edited close-ups of safe oral sex with a dental dam, as well as penetration with a well washed sex toy and a latex-gloved hand, are the tape's highlights. The short ends with the two women kissing, the glow of the television lighting their faces. The implications of such unabashed, unapologetic images are enormous. Explains Carlomusto:

> Lesbian-identified sex-positive imagery is scarce. . . . Although many videotapes depicting lesbian sex created for straight men are available on the shelves of even the most mundane video rental stores, only a few tapes trickle in from the West Coast made for, by, and about women. And even fewer of these deal with safer sex for lesbians. This is both oppressive and

> dangerous because in order to educate lesbians about safer sex we have to establish what it is. (Carlomusto and Bordowitz, 22)

Carlomusto, in her words and with her tape, argues that there is no one more qualified to say what is sexy (and safe) for lesbians than lesbian producers. And what better way is there for the larger community to gain insight into a discourse of desire different from their own than by watching the images lesbians create for and of themselves?

Certainly, questions of exhibition and audience are critical for such work. GMHC has a specific distribution strategy to target audiences addressed in the tape: the safer-sex shorts are to be played in bars, projected before porn features, or used during safer-sex workshops. Of course, there is little chance that *Current Flow* will flow onto the videoscreens of people uninterested in lesbian sex. Although exposing straight people to lifestyles different from their own is a powerful political tactic (Queer Nation, a spinoff of New York's AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power [ACT UP], stages queer kiss-ins at straight singles bars, for example), it is not usually the politics of indigenous media. Many minority producers need the certainty of an accepting audience to feel comfortable speaking the things that, in "mainstream" culture, often bring antagonistic responses and discrimination.

Furthermore, I believe that indigenous or alternative production is always about communication, about a willing dialogue. Unlike mainstream media, a tape like *Current Flow* is not made to reach a mass audience, nor to make money, but rather has an explicitly limited audience and agenda. When and if such a tape gets outside its particular target community, this is almost always because someone brought it there. Works with a specific agenda need specific distribution: screenings at conferences, workshops, community organizations, or classrooms; screenings accompanied by literature, speakers, or other forms of contextualization. Straight people can and should see *Current Flow*, but in a context where they can discuss lesbian sexuality in a productive and not a punitive fashion.

Like A Prayer/Stop the Church (1990) is DIVA's third tape. The collective, a loose affinity group of both male and female members of ACT UP, understands their video production as a form of direct action. The group was organized specifically to provide counter-surveillance and documentation of ACT UP's March 28, 1989 "Target City Hall" protest. Members of DIVA work primarily with their own video cameras and therefore produce with

minimal funds.

Like A Prayer documents ACT UP and WHAM's (Women's Health Action Mobilization) greatly publicized "Stop the Church" demonstration. The tape is broken into six major sections dealing with issues like the history of the Catholic Church's position on condom use and safer-sex education, a critique of mainstream press coverage of the demonstration, and the activities of Operation Ridiculous, an organization of clowns who attend demonstrations of the militant pro-life organization Operation Rescue. Each section was produced separately by individual members of the collective. The varied sections are held together by Madonna's song "Like a Prayer," by interviews with Catholic members of ACT UP who were denied a voice in mainstream coverage of the incident, and by humorous advertisements performed by the late DIVA member and AIDS media activist, Ray Navarro. Dressed as Jesus, Navarro advertises a pro-sex Catholicism: "Make sure your second coming is a safe one. Use condoms."

Clearly, such humor makes this a tape that isn't for everyone. Similarly, not all viewers may be convinced that direct action, something the tape takes as a given, is the only response to the AIDS crisis. For instance, the women involved in the WAVE project, certainly committed to AIDS activism, discuss feeling distanced from many ACT UP tapes, either because the demonstrators reflect the largely gay white male constituency of ACT UP, because the time commitment (and implicit economic privilege) of direct action is unimaginable for working women with children, or because direct action and civil disobedience are not a form of activism with which everyone feels entirely comfortable. After viewing *Like a Prayer/Stop the Church*, we evaluated how it wasn't exactly for us (which depends upon analyzing what exactly is for us), while also thinking about what we do have in common with ACT UP. But the pertinent point raised here about alternative media concerns the importance of alternative distribution and exhibition, of how and where, and by whom, such tapes are viewed.

Identification and Identity Politics in Alternative Media

Tapes like *Current Flow* and *Like a Prayer* exemplify how alternative AIDS media moves toward a production and audience of *the specific*, just as the mainstream media continues to fabricate work for a generalized, disease-free public to which none of us really belongs. The mainstream media's failure to communicate any of the specificities of infection seems

to have laid the groundwork for this hygienic identity. But a lesbian or activist viewer of *Current Flow* or *Like a Prayer* finally sees an explicit and proud version of herself in a public forum. She sees cunnilingus performed by a woman; she hears a new list of the Seven Deadly Sins: "Assault of Lesbians and Gays, Bias, Ignorant Denial, Endangering Women's Lives, No Safe Sex Education, No Condoms, No Clean Needles." Unlike how she may have recognized herself previously, through "aberrant readings" that are "against the grain" of the homophobic or apolitical work usually presented to her (Stam and Spence, 646), she instead recognizes herself as a "lesbian" or an "activist" in her similarities to and her identification with the images constructed before her—images that insist they come from communities with these explicit identities.

Yet of course no identity, even an "identity politics," is that simple, so she will also always see an image that is not of herself, and see how she differs from others who call themselves lesbians or activists. Maybe she is an Asian-American, or a Southerner, or a woman who understands her own lesbian or activist identity differently than do the video producers. Furthermore, alternative media that willingly identifies its construction out of a position of difference, opinion, and politics can function similarly when it speaks to "others" who are outside this position. It is precisely in moments of identification, when a nonlesbian or nonactivist viewer of *Current Flow* or *Like A Prayer* sees herself and her needs in another's—in the "Other's"—that communication, and politics, begin. "I'm a heterosexual, but that looks pleasurable to me"; "I'm straight, but that's what oral sex feels like for me"; "I'm Catholic, but I do not believe that the oppression of gays is condoned by God." In such moments of identification, a more complicated notion of identity is supported as I witness my own lesbianness or activistness (or blackness or whiteness or maleness), even as I am not a "lesbian," "activist," "black," "white," or "man."

Ginsburg finds such cross-cultural identification in indigenous Australian aboriginal media: "the work is not simply an assertion of existing identity, but also a means of cultural invention that refracts and recombines elements from both the dominant and minority societies" (Ginsburg, 107). She describes a postcolonial situation where ethnic or indigenous identity is affected and inflected by knowledge of, and participation in, the culture of the colonizer: "reflections of 'us' and 'them' to each other are increasingly juxtaposed" (Ginsburg, 108). Similarly complex understandings of identity are expressed by black cultural critics. Cornell West insists that:

> social theory is what is needed to examine the historically specific ways in which "Whiteness" is a politically constructed category parasitic on "Blackness," and thereby to conceive of the profoundly hybrid character of what we mean by "race," "ethnicity," and "nationality." Needless to say, these inquiries must traverse those of "male/female," "colonizer/colonized," "heterosexual/homosexual," et al., as well. (West, "New Cultural Politics," 105)

The recent accessibility of video technology allows for a place in culture where this more fluid construction of images and identities can occur. Thus, alternative media production allows the complicated work of identification to occur both within oppressed communities and between different communities. Indigenous media allows for the possibility of "marginal" self-definition even as it creates the possibility for the "center" to identify with its "margin." In fact, it allows the center and the margin to begin to see their own reflections in the lives and experiences of the other.

New Centers from Old Margins

A most interesting example of this phenomenon is *Women and Children Last* (1990), directed by Amber Hollibaugh and Gini Reticker. The directors hope to produce the first feature-release documentary about women and AIDS, and this ten-minute tape serves as a trailer to raise funds for the project, in which they have redefined the "general public" for whom films are usually made. Their public is composed of working- and middle-class black Americans. The film is thus predicated on the idea that viewers from a "center" can identify with a "marginal" voice.

The tape focuses upon Janice Jirau, an HIV-positive black woman. Filmed in the intimate detail that close relations between filmmakers and subjects tend to produce, we hear Janice speak about the impact that AIDS has had on her life. She discusses her husband's death from AIDS and her own infection with the virus because he refused to use a condom. She participated in unsafe sex because she wanted to "prove she loved him . . . [and to] reassure him . . . because he was hurting." We also watch a moving gathering of her family, where they eat, sing, and speak together about Janice's illness and their love and support for her. In conventional and beautifully shot documentary footage, we see what television rarely shows

us: a strong black woman and a strong black family—not the Cosbys, but a black family with a class, ethnic, and political identity. A black woman and her family become the recognizable "center" of the tape. But this center—Janice's interview—is framed with information that helps the viewer make sense of black female experience, at least in a political sense—a frame that is a story about "white" representation of black women as "filthy and diseased."

This framing asks all viewers, white or black, male or female, to understand the contemporary phenomenon of a black woman's experience with AIDS in relation to a long history of racial and sexual oppression, in and out of representation. To understand how critical it is for Janice to not understand herself as simply either a "good girl" or a "bad girl," to not take on the legacy of guilt and responsibility for the spread of disease, especially as a black woman, one must consider how white representations have constructed blacks, and how blacks construct themselves in light of the legacy of such images.

Distribution and Reception Organize Alternative Production

Mainstream media flows quickly through our lives, is broadcast and then gone. Alternative media is usually painstakingly funded over a long period of time. Especially in the present period of defunded and censored art production, it takes a serious dedication to a particular production to procure enough funds to see it through. Furthermore, because alternative media is not necessarily made to be broadcast, each project develops its own mode of production, formal strategies, and plans for distribution and reception, all in response to the particularities of the project.

Take for example two recent AIDS tapes by women. For a critical understanding of the work, one must first understand the specificities of the project. *The Embrace/El Abrazo: A Video Performance* (1990) is the documentation of a theater piece of the same name produced by Pregones Touring Puerto Rican Theatre Collection, a group using the interactive theater technique known as Forum Theater. Directed by Diana Coryat, actors perform a scenario raising issues about AIDS common to the Spanish/English communities they perform for in East Harlem. (In the performance documented on the tape, a married couple with a child decides to kick out the wife's brother, whom they believe is using drugs and therefore infected with AIDS.) At a critical point in the performance, a Joker character stops

the action and asks the audience to identify the most oppressed character in the scenario. The audience is then asked to consider how they would resolve the confrontation. The scene is then enacted again, with an audience volunteer playing the part of the oppressed character. The new performance can be interrupted at any time by other audience members if it is decided that the situation could still be handled differently.

The video sticks to this interactive format, "encouraging critical thinking and audience participation" by using the Joker as a narrator who instructs the spectators to turn the video off and discuss or even enact their solutions. When the video is turned back on, documentary footage of two actual audience solutions are presented. Question-and-answer sessions from live performances, interviews with participants, and sections providing accurate safer-sex information are also included in the tape. Clearly, this tape, which is funded as AIDS education and not through media or arts organizations, challenges many expectations about the purposes and possibilities of media. Unlike television, which asks for the limited interaction of a universalized viewership, *The Embrace/El Abrazo* is made to be seen by small community groups (particularly Latina women and youth) and to incite audience education, participation, and action, as well as to entertain. Unencumbered by TV's mode of financing, *The Embrace/El Abrazo* entirely refashions the television screen for local, specific, interactive education.

If *The Embrace/El Abrazo* challenges norms of audience reception, *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS* challenges norms about the uses of media production and distribution. I would like to describe my own project as the final example of what I see to be assumptions shared by all alternative AIDS videos by women: that the best education comes from the communities to whom the video speaks, that the process of media production and spectatorship can be empowering and political, and that identity politics problematizes the simple binaries that usually construct minority identity.

Through the WAVE project a model was developed whereby women affected by AIDS learned to make their own videos about the issues most important to them. The members of WAVE met for six months in an innovative video support group, discussing with a social worker and a videomaker (myself) both their concerns regarding AIDS and how to make videos about those concerns. We also watched much of the mainstream and alternative media about AIDS produced to date, and thought critically about not only the documentary form, but also about the representation (or

misrepresentation) of our needs, our communities, and our struggles with AIDS.

Why the group decided to make a video for care providers—as well as to address the intended audience so explicitly—illuminates how the production of community media is both educational and a good vehicle for the reproduction of cultural and personal identities. Having seen most of the available alternative AIDS videos, we knew that there was virtually nothing produced for the ever-expanding population of care providers. And we also knew that the most effective media we had seen had a very specific and explicit agenda: media that announced its use value, that made explicit its "address." Also, as a group of seven diverse women, the one thing that made us a community from which to speak and shoot videos was that we were all AIDS care providers. This common place from which and to which we spoke cut across the class, ethnic, and educational backgrounds that "split" us, binding us together in the concerns and experiences we had in common.

And this binding together across boundaries of difference occurred in our conception of our audience as well. We made a tape assuming that the majority of our spectators, as was true of the producers of the tape, would be urban people of color affected by AIDS. We assumed that they would be people who wanted to know more, who would also benefit as we had from a sense of community. And we assumed our audience would share experiences with us, share our concerns—which is why they would after all choose to watch a tape with this title.

The tape is organized into informative sections focusing on the advice of care providers themselves. Typically, a section's speaker will introduce herself to the anticipated audience of AIDS care providers before speaking about the topic at hand: available services, ways to relieve stress, issues around death and dying. The dialogue form of the tape reflects the concept of explicit, local address: "Hi, I'm Glenda, and this is Sharon. We're going to tell you about some of the services available to you if someone you know is newly diagnosed with AIDS." A powerful example of the value of direct address is a sequence called "Being at Home With HIV." A direct cut from the title opens upon an image of a beautiful and strong middle-aged black woman who looks into the camera and says: "Hi. I'm Marie, and I'm HIV-positive. I'd like to take you on a tour of my apartment and show you what has and has not changed, now that I'm positive." In a society where, because of discrimination and misinformation, it is almost impossible to be "out" with HIV as a middle-aged woman (or as anyone, for that matter), Marie's

willing address and tour of her home is comforting: "This is my living room," she says. "It's the same as it's always been. I need a new carpet, but that's another story."

Another integral facet of the project, in both its funding and organization, is distribution. One-third of the budget was dedicated to getting our completed tape out. The six months of support-group meetings have been almost matched now in distribution time and effort. The budget pays WAVE members to screen *We Care* in our distinct communities. The self-empowerment found in media production is equally matched by the tremendous power and pride often felt by the members of the group as we take our work to our churches, schools, jobs, and families.

I have developed many of my ideas about the reception of community-specific media by watching various audiences watch *We Care*: women in a homeless shelter in Brooklyn, AIDS educators at GMHC, white prep school students in Southern California, and academics at documentary conferences. The kinds of identification encouraged by indigenous media that I mentioned earlier—both within a self-defined community and between communities—are evidenced in the reception of *We Care*. In some places, people watch the tape for the vital information it provides about services. For people less directly affected by AIDS, they speak of identifying as women who know the weight of many kinds of care provision or as individuals who have experienced the totalizing effect of other illnesses or personal crises. Some audiences focus on their shared concern about strategies of production.

Yet all audiences speak of the sense of comfort, ease, and community that is produced by the tape and that invites them in, regardless of their class, ethnicity, gender, or HIV status. This sense of comfort is hard for me to describe, but I know it's there, too. I recognize it to be an integral facet of successful indigenous media, just as it marked successful "feminist documentaries" of the seventies. As Barbara Halpern Martineau writes, "The relationship of commitment between filmmaker and subject, and between these two and the audience, provides a little-discussed dimension to the issues of how women are 'represented' in [feminist] documentaries" (Martineau, 254).

Conclusions

It does not surprise me that the comfortable and explicit relationship between filmmaker, subject, and audience noticed in 1970s feminist documentaries is also seen in the alternative AIDS tapes I have analyzed in this article. It is an integral feature to all indigenous media production. In the 1970s, feminists were making indigenous media were noticing similarities between the experiences of women and empowering themselves to speak from and to other women. In the 1990s, we have a 20-year-old sense of community from which to speak and build.

What I see when I view women in these videos, as a woman who has been moved to act myself because of the tragedy of AIDS, are communities of women both similar to and different from myself who have also been moved to act. I see lesbians making love in *Current Flow*, women protesting in the street in *Like A Prayer/Stop the Church*, Janice and her family in *Women and Children Last*, the women in the audience participating in the theatre workshop in *The Embrace/El Abrazo*, or the women in WAVE talking to the camera. I see myself in them: in their strength, and purpose, and politics—in the common struggles we have shared as women. I see myself outside of them: in their differences of language, needs, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. I see that I have a community around me. And there I find power to go on as I learn what has been done, what still needs to be done. And as I learn, I learn that I am not alone.

Notes

[1]Discussions of representation in mainstream AIDS media can be found in my own "The Contained Threat: The Representation of Women's Sexuality in Mainstream AIDS Media," *The Journal of Sex Research* 27 (1990), 25-46, and "Constructing Authority: Documentary Form and AIDS," *Video Guide: World AIDS Day* 10 (Nov 1989), 10-11. See also Landers, Treichler, Grover ("Visible Lesions"), and Watney.

[2]For example, various groups have produced work that is explicitly for and/or about particular communities of women:

1. Women in general: *AIDS and the Women's Community*, 1986, by the San Francisco AIDS Foundation; *Women and AIDS*, 1987, by Alexandra Juhasz and Jean Carlomusto; *Doctors, Liars and Women: AIDS Activists 'Say No to Cosmo'*, 1988, by Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti; *A Test for the Nation: Women, Children, Families, AIDS*, 1988, by Juhasz, all for GMHC; *Women and AIDS: A Survival Kit*, 1987, by California AIDS Clearinghouse; *Women, Children and AIDS*, 1987, by Jane Wagner; *Dying for Love*, 1987, by Shari Cookson for Lifetime Cable Network.

2. Haitians: *Se Met Ko*, 1989, by Patricia Benoit.

3. Latinas: *The Second Epidemic*, 1987, by Amber Hollibaugh for the AIDS Discrimination Unit of the Human Rights Commission; *AIDS in the Barrio: Eso No Me Pasa A Mi*, 1989, co-produced by Frances Negron; *Vida*, 1989, by Lourdes Portillo for AIDSFilms; *The Embrace/ El Abrazo: A Video Performance*, 1990, by Diana Coryat for The Pregones Touring Puerto Rican Theatre Collection.

4. African-Americans: *Mildred Pearson: When You Love a Person*, 1988, by The Brooklyn AIDS Task Force; *AIDS, Me and My Baby*, 1988, and *AIDS is About Secrets*, 1989, produced by the HIV center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies; *Are You With Me?*, 1989, by M. Neema Barnette for AIDSFilms; *Diana's Hair Ego: AIDS Info Up Front*, 1989, by Ellen Spiro; *He Left Me His Strength*, 1989, by Sherry Busbee and Merle Jawitz; *Women and Children Last*, 1990, by Amber Hollibaugh and Gini Reticker.

5. Native Americans: *Her Giveaway*, 1988, produced by Renee White Rabbit.

6. Third World women: *Reframing AIDS*, 1987, by Pratibha Parmar; *Viva Eu!*, 1989, by Tanya Cypriano.

7. Prostitutes: *Prostitutes, Risk and AIDS*, 1988, by Juhasz and Carlomusto; and a large and important body of tapes by prostitutes' rights and AIDS activist Carol Leigh (a.k.a. the Scarlot Harlot), including *Safe Sex Slut*, 1988, and *Outlaw Poverty Not Prostitutes*, 1990.

8. IV drug users: *Bleach, Teach and Outreach*, 1988, co-produced by Catherine Saalfield for GMHC; *Drugs and AIDS: Getting the Message Out*, 1988, by State of the Art, Inc.

9. Teenagers: *The AIDS Movie*, 1986, and *Til Death Do Us Part*, 1988, by Ginny Durrin; *All of Us and AIDS*, 1987, co-directed by Durrin and Kathleen Laughlin.

10. Lesbians: *Clips*, 1989, by Debbie Sundahl and Nan Kinney; *Current Flow*, 1989, by Jean Carlomusto for GMHC.

11. Activists: *Why Inside The Church?* and *Who Has the Power?*, 1990, by Suzanne Wright; *Testing the Limits*, 1987, and *Voices From the Front*, 1990, by women members in the AIDS video collective Testing the Limits; *Target City Hall*, 1989, *Pride*, 1989, and *Like a Prayer/Stop the Church*, 1990, by members of DIVA.

12. Workers: *Hard to Get: AIDS in the Workplace*, 1990, by Alisa Lebow for the New York City Commission on Human Rights AIDS Task Force.

13. Incarcerated women: *So Sad, So Sorry, So What*, 1990, by Jane Gilloolly.

More information about the distribution of the tapes listed can be found in Media Network's "Seeing Through AIDS: A Media Guide," (212) 619-3455, in Catherine Saalfield, "AIDS Videos By, For, and About Women," and in The ACT UP/NY Women and AIDS Book Group's *Women, AIDS & Activism* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

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