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## SEEING WHAT THE PATRIMONY DIDN'T SAVE

### *Alternative Stewardship of the Activist Media Archive—A Conversation between Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore Kerr*

Alexandra Juhasz  
Theodore Kerr

“**Y**OU KNOW HOW IT IS WHEN PEOPLE DIE? Folks always be putting words in your mouth. This way, if I don’t say it on tape, I ain’t say it, baby.” These words are spoken by an actress who is playing an expectant grandmother living with HIV in a video. The tape is most likely from the mid-1980s and was created by Bebash, an AIDS Service Organization in Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup> The actress speaks in the final chapter from a series of short vignettes that focus on the linked impact of domestic violence, poverty, drugs, and HIV/AIDS on black women. In this section, a pregnant daughter is recording her mother’s life story for “the sake of posterity.” The soon-to-be grandmother does not believe that she will live long enough to share her life story with her grandchild. We see the grandmother through the camera, the eye of her daughter. Occasionally—often when the grandmother expresses doubt about telling her story on tape—we get a shot from a different, more distant perspective: of the two women sitting across from each other, the camera now acting as bridge between them, and between their story and our witness.

Titled *Grandma’s Legacy*, the vignette is one example of the numerous activist videos made in the United States during the early response to HIV.



Figure 4.1. Screenshot from *Grandma's Legacy* (2019).

Taking up new and affordable camcorder technology to create culturally specific tapes regarding the AIDS crisis, these tapes by and for people of color, women, and people living in poverty—the communities most impacted by AIDS, then and now—would be played wherever there were VHS players and monitors: in churches, in multipurpose rooms, and on cable access and mainstream television. Made for diverse audiences, they shared a commitment to foster more realistic depictions of and informed discussion about HIV/AIDS. This tape-based method of community organizing and video activism within the early stages of the North American AIDS movement has largely been lost, as have many of the tapes themselves. However, they exist as testaments to what we now call “intersectional” strategies; and they are waiting to be recalled by and regifted to a present that seems to have misplaced and could very much use this legacy.

Authors of the discussion below—scholar, video maker, and writer Alexandra Juhasz and writer and organizer Theodore Kerr—watched *Grandma's Legacy* together at Juhasz's home in the summer of 2016. This was the first time that Kerr had seen the work, and one of many viewings for Juhasz. The video was pulled from Juhasz's personal archive of AIDS tapes, amassed initially as research for her dissertation that would become her book *AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video* (1995). The act of re/viewing these tapes—stacked for years on her office shelves in their original

VHS format—and the lessons provided for activism and media making today organize the conversation below.

In previous conversations Juhasz and Kerr have identified, discussed, and refined a timeline of an AIDS media ecology, which begins with the highly active period of AIDS media making and dissemination, AIDS Crisis Cultural Production (1986–1996); followed by the Second Silence (1996–2008), a period of reduced creation, dissemination, and notice of AIDS-related media; to the present moment, the AIDS Crisis Revisitation,<sup>2</sup> marked by a notable increase in the production and dissemination of AIDS-related media that *looks back* at the early days of the known AIDS epidemic, often using video footage from the past.<sup>3</sup> Revisitation films are inspiring and enable discussion of a chapter of American social movement history that is little told in more formal educational settings. Yet, as Juhasz, Kerr, and others have noted, there is a troubling sameness around who and what is being historicized.<sup>4</sup> These media offerings primarily center on the stories of white, middle-class, often gay, cisgender men. In the films, these men are depicted as the dominant and sometime only demographic of people living with HIV, as well as those largely responsible for fighting against public apathy and governmental neglect. However, AIDS activism might be understood to be successful at this earlier time precisely because multiple communities and constituencies suffered and also struggled and achieved both discrete and shared activist goals. Only a handful of films from the Revisitation show the diverse constituencies within ACT UP, as well as other activist groups, who developed their own appropriate tactics to reach their own goals. In the conversation below, Kerr and Juhasz look at how this disparity came to pass by exploring the role of the archives in the making of history, and the impact of cultural producers like themselves and their allies.

Also lost within the Revisitation is how AIDS activism grew out of the rich traditions of the civil rights, gay rights, and women's health movements and other forms of activism. The North American AIDS activist and not-for-profit landscape was much more diverse, fertile, and complex than the current Revisitation lets on.<sup>5</sup> What we find before us looks more like a patrimony: a circulation of images and ideas primarily focused on white gay men. This is not to say that gay white men did not suffer and die from HIV in numbers both criminal and devastating, and are not still deeply impacted by the disease. They were and they are. But they are also not alone and never have been. Currently in the United States, around one in four people living with HIV are women,<sup>6</sup> and as the Centers for Disease Control report, "Blacks/African Americans have the most severe burden of HIV of all racial/ethnic groups in the United States."<sup>7</sup> And these numbers don't show the populations

that fall out of statistics. For example, only recently have trans women and trans men been counted at all. Advocates argue that this disappears the reality of communities impacted by HIV while also providing inaccurate insight into people's health and well-being.<sup>8</sup>

It is here where new stewards of video activism and the AIDS archive can help to make a break into history, revealing more complex and diverse narratives and strategies than those that are otherwise more readily available, be it through the Revisitation, statistics, or otherwise. The past is filled with video work largely ignored, video that was created by and featured a diversity of makers and communities. In going through the archive of tapes, a diversity of uses of the tapes (both then and now) also becomes apparent, uses that were initially central to their making, but which have largely fallen out of the conversation around video's role in the history of AIDS activism.<sup>9</sup> In reviewing the tapes, we selected seven works, primarily directed by black women, featuring black female actors, and/or concerning black women and women of color while also representing significant differences within this community. Beyond their diverse content, the tapes selected represent a spectrum of production values, budgets, and institutional support. Looking at AIDS video from this archival perspective, we steward our own small collection of video and *its* vision of AIDS: one that veers from, complements, and alters the history that becomes available from the patrimony's collection and the recent work it inspires.

### Exposing the Roots

Ted: Coming up in Edmonton, Alberta, in the late 1980s and 1990s as I did, where it seemed like no one was talking about AIDS at all, I can't fully convey to you the overwhelming feelings raised by going into your archive and seeing what had actually been created, and what I had never seen. I think for people of my generation and younger there is a sense that the educational and cultural inheritance we received around HIV/AIDS leads us to feast on scraps. We took what we could from whatever we could get our hands on, which was primarily prevention posters, memories of our own encounters with mass media, and stories from elders, primarily rooted in a pre-1996 reality. To have known and had access to a more diverse array of AIDS activist video would have blown me away and most likely changed the trajectory of how I came to understand HIV/AIDS. At the very least, I would have been more secure in my sense that AIDS always impacted people beyond the gay male community. As I will share later, without these materials at hand, this took me a long time to grasp.

Alex: One hard thing being an aging activist is determining when it is appropriate to share stories and strategies from the past. Although I lived and worked in the past, I am now part of present-day struggles. Looking backward can be detrimental to attending to the most important tasks at hand. But as critically, people working in the present often see the ideas, tactics, and troubles of the past as dated, tiresome, or overstated. You don't want to alienate your current comrades!

More critically, many ideas that are common sense for one period or generation within a larger activist history stay so for those who experienced or developed them but lose this familiarity for people who enter the movement later. For instance, the fact that there was a huge body of unimaginably diverse videotapes that were made by and for the AIDS activist movement, in its stunning complexity, and that for a time these were shared and then used in a variety of activist contexts—from the most remembered and visible activity of taping and sharing street-based activism, to the less remembered forms of what we called “trigger tapes,” or to the PSAs, informational videos, and artist's tapes we will soon discuss—this feels like something I just *know*. It wouldn't dawn on me that I would need to share this history with you, Ted. More so, the fundamental knowledge that AIDS is a crisis experienced disproportionately by poor communities of color, half of whom are women, is simply a *known known* for me. I wouldn't think: I need to share that “from the past.” Finally, I wrote my dissertation about these ideas and tapes. All of this work was developed in lively dialogue within a rich, active, and large community of thinkers, artists, and activists, and so I guess I thought I had said it already, as had many of my peers. Why would I need to say it again? And I hope that you don't take this personally, Ted, but I did know that you had actually *read* my book! So how come these ideas didn't pass forward to you?

The answer is not that you are a poor reader, or I hope, that I am an unconvincing writer. Instead, we must consider how the range of activist practices and the many possible archives that (might) hold them create the broader frameworks that produce, sanction, maintain, and pass on institutional and cultural memory and knowledge. Of course my *AIDS TV*, and many similar and linked interventions by scholars and writers and activists of that period, testified to the rich complexity and common-sense knowledge of our time.<sup>10</sup> However, if gay white men and their institutions are the stewards of the AIDS archive—which is what we are suggesting here—what is shelved, searched for, found, and reseen will primarily reflect this narrow point of view, one that centers and reflects their history, an important but partial one. To be clear, the gruesome and devastating experiences and ongoing needs of gay

white men within the North American AIDS crisis are central to this story, and worthy of our ongoing and historical attention. We merely ask: What do other archives hold? What picture of AIDS activist history and media making would emerge from them?

Lucky for us, we have found a strategy to begin to answer these questions! I had such an archive: small, partial, dated, to be sure. It was such a wonder to me, rewatching many of the tapes with you for this project, that you *did not know, could not imagine*, somehow *had not learned about* the amazing images and strategies that we had struggled so hard to invent, mobilize, and save, not so long ago. You, a person who had made this your goal! Where had we/I gone wrong? How do we fix this?

Ted: I often come back to this idea that I am working through a cultural inheritance of AIDS, what we are calling its patrimony. Of course I have read your book, but it took me time to find it, and even then I was reading it through what I knew. The first fifteen years of my involvement with HIV/AIDS was cutting through both the silence and the mainstream ideas around HIV/AIDS as seen in “Special AIDS episodes” of sitcoms, almost always featuring young white men who were implicitly or explicitly gay and who were always tragically dying. And it was not just prime time. On talk shows, the nightly news, and in magazines, white gay men were always pictured as central to the AIDS story, even when it was about women, babies, or “Africa.” Even in the process of moving the story of AIDS away from gay white men, their centrality was reestablished. It is only now, through your archive, that I know other ways of presenting AIDS existed. Your 1987 video *Women and AIDS*, which we will discuss later, does not wrestle the focus away from men. Rather it is a film about HIV populated by women as experts.

Alex: I have to intervene here, Ted. What you see as a revelation within my archive is exactly what we struggled to know and show then: that we had to wrestle the narrative to include women; that women’s experiences of HIV were different from gay men’s; and that a feminist, womanist of color, and what would become called, thanks in part to our work, “queer” and “intersectional” critique of dominant representation would be our visual and organizational templates. These strategies were rife across the early AIDS activist landscape, to be quickly lost it seems, except for in my memory (and that of my peers), on my office shelves, and my generation’s books and scholarly articles.



Figure 4.2. Image of Juhasz's *AIDS TV* book and Kerr's publication *This is How We Made Love*, with Zachary Ayotte (Photo by Kerr, 2019).

Ted: I guess that is why it seems so important to discuss the stewardship of AIDS archives. As a young gay man, it felt nearly mandatory for me to consider HIV—and the outright fear connected—as part of my identity creation and patrimonial legacy. What this conversation is illuminating is that what had been, I thought, a personal experience is actually now structural in terms of the way that the history of both gay white men and AIDS have been represented as one thing in the mainstream. For me this helps me understand my peers and why a film like *How to Survive a Plague* is so alluring for them. For gay men, and queers in general, the footage of young queer people fighting the system and having a major win is intoxicating. While no such AIDS films existed when I was growing up (or rather, I had no access to the legions of AIDS activist videos that did exist), gay history books, and soon enough, the internet, circulated images like *Silence = Death* and General Idea's AIDS logo. These images became seminal to how I could consider being in the world as a gay man. Volunteering and then working at AIDS service organizations was about wanting to be part of what I saw: the empowering gay white male

creative response to AIDS. *How to Survive a Plague*, and its subsequent Oscar nomination sell my choices back to me, affirming a place in history of white gay men succeeding.

Alex: The unpacking you are doing is valuable. But we have to be careful. When we speak so frequently about gay white men—even when we are working to destabilize the space they/you take up in this conversation and how that came to be—we end up not speaking about black gay men, gay men of color, straight men, and other people who may defy easy classification. Even in this conversation it seems that whiteness, man-ness, and gayness have become visible again, as well as rigid and too tied together. “Gay,” as an identity and an organizing principle in the ongoing response to HIV/AIDS in the USA and around the world, has been a vital position of strength, solidarity, and resources and can be claimed by any number of people from various backgrounds and life experiences.

My political project has always been to work inside communities to make visible the stories of the most impacted and yet somehow still least seen perspectives within AIDS (women, but also poor people, people of color, children, parents, drug users, prostitutes) because I have always understood AIDS to manifest and magnify the larger structural and institutional deficiencies of our society that deny some people equal access to health, education, dignity, safety, and even civil rights. However I remain (self) aware of the role of white people (like us), (gay) men (like you), and those of us who are privileged due to education, class, or other forms of cultural capital in the broader movement. “Intersectionality” is not simply about forefronting the experiences and points of view of people who are shut out of dominant, monocultural depictions of reality and history but also about understanding that there is really no monoculture to begin with: that the dominant position itself, if understood with care and complexity, can and does inspire alliances, as well as more nuanced understandings of the allegiances, motivations, connections, and differences which build, sustain, and sometimes topple movements.

Ted: I eventually got out of the myopic way of viewing HIV/AIDS. My worldview changed because of working primarily with women (of color, queer, and first nation), two spirit men, and a few older white gay guys. From them I received an education in critical race theory, indigenous ideas around community, and overall feminist approaches to public health. After years of thinking about HIV almost solely through a gay lens, I then went too far the other way. I became nearly intolerant when hearing HIV history related

almost solely through the lens of “gay men.” I had to learn to think about my sexuality, and history, in both personal and political ways. Part of what we are doing in this conversation is exploring the connections, limits, and impacts of unlacing gay from AIDS, as this relates to AIDS activist media and mainstream understandings. This process is frustrating, confusing, and I think possibly liberative.

Alex: It's interesting to hear this from you here because what drew me to you was precisely your enthusiasm, energy, and optimism, particularly in relation to what had always been core to my AIDS activist work that centers the experiences of women, people of color, and lesbians. I was so excited to find that you were cutting a new space for this (old) work; that was so invigorating.

Ted: A more balanced way of approaching HIV history arrived early 2016, when I was given a tour of the Schwules Museum in Berlin. A longtime volunteer explained to me the evolution of their collection. It started by acquiring with the gay experience in mind, then evolved to consider lesbian, bisexual, and eventually the trans experience. But from the beginning of the known AIDS crisis, the museum collected everything on the subject regardless of identity markers, and as a result, they have a cohesive HIV archive. It was clear, in his telling, that the museum's trajectory was an emblem of pride. Not only was he proud to be a volunteer with the museum, he specifically wanted to impress upon me the vast AIDS-related holdings that they had. In talking about this, a word came up: stewardship. The museum was acting as a steward of an expansive AIDS history, one that early on recognized that the crisis impacted all kinds of folks and an implicit understanding that AIDS was a gay concern.

In the year since, however, I have come to learn that most AIDS-heavy archives live within LGBT-focused archives. In Norway, for example, Norge-HIV donated all their papers to the nation's LGBTQ archive in Bergen. And closer to home, even your own records at the New York Public Library's large holdings of HIV related papers and artifacts are part of the Gay and Lesbian Collections. Similarly, Story Corps, which arguably began when the founder interviewed his straight neighbors living with HIV on the Lower East Side, has an initiative to collect stories about HIV. This too lives under their LGBTQ initiative.

As long as AIDS archives live within LGBTQ spaces, there will always be a tacit idea that AIDS is a gay disease, or a gay problem. Does that make sense?

Alex: Yes. But I don't think that we have settled the issue.

Ted: I am thinking now of two questions that our friend, artist and activist Pato Hebert, brought to our attention. His friend Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, a sociologist whose groundbreaking work focuses on queer Latina/o oral histories, asked: "How do we put into words experiences that are so meaningful or so painful they can't be spoken? What language do we use to remember things that historically are outside language?"<sup>11</sup>

When we watch a tape like *Grandma's Legacy*, we are not only seeing a black woman living with HIV (although the importance of that cannot be understated), we are seeing expression, concern, and movement, embodied by the actresses, caught on videotape, that are specific to a place, time, and real day-to-day experience affected by HIV: Philadelphia, late '80s, a black woman with her family in search of support. By putting *Grandma's Legacy* back into circulation, we take one small step, with many others, to begin to make history more complete. There are more stories, more realities, more experiences of living with HIV than we will ever be able to save or share. But that does not mean we should not try. The only thing worse than knowing what has been lost to history is not knowing what has been lost to history.

### Making Tapes

Alex: There is a vision of America that believes that one dominant version of our experience can and should cover for all, and then another understanding of our culture as being composed of codependent, coconstitutive, local, diverse experiences. AIDS activist video was committed to "narrowcasting" the second understanding of HIV/AIDS in North America: honoring each vantage with a vernacular and visual landscape that was particular, useful, and evocative in its specificity. At that time, we would then work to interweave or hold in tandem these distinct, discrete depictions of the realities of AIDS. So, one of the things that is so noticeable about the seven videos we selected to discuss is that each cuts through the project of representing AIDS by looking at, speaking to, learning from what at first might look like a narrow view. Yet what becomes obvious upon viewing them as a cohort is that it is both the specificity of these visions and the places of similarity and intersection that build out their intersectional strategies.

Ted: Right! These tapes were made within a flurry of activity where people were attending street protests, caretaking, going to meetings, video making,

and more. And it is likely that the same person would do any number of those activities in a week.

Alex: It's not just that there are intersections between communities made visible by these tapes that were made for each one, but intersections within activists who are themselves multiple. These are, of course, some of the important lessons of "intersectionality": that every person holds coconstitutive affinities, knowledges, histories, and lived experiences within themselves; that every identity or political group does as well; and that because of this there are ample sites of common ground (as well as irreconcilable differences) from which to mobilize action and produce community.

Ted: It is helpful for me in trying to place the space these videos had in culture to think about how in the same way one might now put up a Tumblr or make a website about something they cared about. In the eighties and nineties, folks made videos, the goal always being circulation. People were scrambling to be of service to each other. That spirit lives in these tapes. As they circulated, so too did ideas, concerns, and ways forward.

Alex: Self- and community expression is almost always understood to be a first step for activism: first get it out there, and then work to get it seen. I think one of the differences of our time now is that this instinct to share has been almost entirely commodified. The logic of this deeply human impulse (and one that has served activists so well) gets rewired today, under capitalist neoliberalism, as a matter of fame, attention, and volume. Sharing as the selling of one's self, ideas, and reality, as opposed to a process of connecting, building, and adapting between many.

Furthermore, social media isolates individual producers and consumers, ensuring that the site of production and consumption of words and images is the private self, computer, and home. I have always understood that coproduction of ideas and video, working and learning in collectives, and sharing between and among movements—these interactive, copresent processes (online or in person, no matter)—are as much the activism as are the demands we express and the actions we engender.

With the hindsight of time, and watching with you, I see something related in *Women and AIDS*, which is the first activist AIDS video I made, working with Jean Carlomusto in 1987 at the Gay Men's Health Crisis. The rich and diverse set of analyses of AIDS that dominated and circulated within the feminist of color AIDS activist community at this time is glaringly

apparent to me now. That tape holds as its framing point(s) of view that women, people of color, and poor people are internally diverse, can and must be voices (experts) of their own needs and experiences, and share an analysis of improving life with HIV/AIDS that is rooted in an intersectional analysis of the impacts of poverty as experienced in a racist, homophobic, sexist society that compounds the injuries of class.

Ted: If we construct a history of the experience of AIDS, and responses to it, only from the images circulating within the Revisitation, we may mistakenly get the sense that direct action was the only action, that urgency had only one mode of expression, and that AIDS video was primarily about documenting demos. But in viewing your archive—both through the lens of process and content—we see that is not true. *Grandma's Legacy*, *Are You with Me* [1987], and *Mildred Pearson: When You Love a Person* [1988] can all be viewed in conversation with each other, yet difference in their production values [access to professional training and equipment, registered as form] are also informative. *Mildred Pearson*, similar to *Grandma's Legacy*, was funded and produced by an AIDS nonprofit, in this case the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, a community-based organization serving the primarily black clientele of a neighborhood in Brooklyn predominantly peopled by African Americans and West Indians. *Are You with Me* is a production of AIDS Films, a nonprofit cultural organization that sought for and realized high-end production budgets and values to better target at-risk communities by making professional short films. Here already we have a difference in process. Community-funded films tend to be rooted in stories coming from the community either directly (as we see with *Mildred*) or indirectly (as can be surmised from *Grandma's Legacy*). In this case, the process of making the tape is a start of a community intervention around representation, and an illustration of local voices having power. Coming from a more commercial outfit, *Are You with Me*, takes pride in being culturally specific but also being written, produced, and directed with the mainstream in mind and professional production values at its core. But in all cases, we see familial love and life-saving messages being shared through a communicated sentiment around survival and personal agency. These videos center black mothers dealing with the impact of HIV on their families. *Grandma's Legacy* is exploring the inheritance of intimacy. With *Are You with Me*, we see a woman working to ensure her daughter does not put herself at risk of HIV, while she herself struggles to practice what she preaches: negotiating for safer sex with a male lover. With *Mildred Pearson*, we hear the voice of a mother talking about her son who died of AIDS-related causes as images



Figure 4.3. Screenshot from *Grandma's Legacy* (2019).

of him slideshow across the screen. With *Are You with Me*, we have the very real and relatable scenario of caregivers not always able to care for themselves (primarily because of sexism and misogyny within the black community and the culture more broadly), and with *Mildred Pearson*, we have a tender yet powerful example of how mourning can be a form of activism.

Alex: In the eerie, frustrating, and lovely redoubling back that has become the heart of our effort, I realize (by doing research by rereading sections of my own book that I have not looked at since I watched the tapes twenty years ago) that I, too, in my largely forgotten past, had already grouped together precisely these two videos and wondered about their use and efficacy given their form and sentimentality. This makes me want to shine a spotlight on the appendix of my “academic” book: Catherine Saalfield’s highly useful “Videography.” I commissioned her to write this part of the book because we shared with other AIDS video activists of the time a commitment to visual literacy and the using of activist tapes as a core part of our movement strategies. Working with activist video maker Ray Navarro, and supported by New York’s Media Network, they produced “Seeing through AIDS” Media Workshops that were held across New York to improve not simply “media literacy” but better “media use.” In the videography, Saalfield details strategies that activists

or educators can use when screening particular tapes that make them best suited for activist aims, including using shorter clips, having a trained and paid facilitator, and maintaining an easily available resource library. There, she anticipates the widely available media that defines our current moment, but also a set of uses for and politics of media that, sadly, do not seem to be as current as they should be: “Tapes can be used in classrooms, waiting rooms, support groups, prisons, community centers, mobile vans, drug treatment centers, homes testing sites, clinics and hospitals. One of the most effective uses of HIV material is in one-on-one counseling. A videotape can trigger personal reflection on taboo subjects like sexuality, death and dying, or any sort of drug use.”<sup>12</sup>

Ted: And we should be clear. These tapes were not just doom and gloom. I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of women-directed activist lesbian porn there is in the archive waiting to be seen, understood, and theorized in relation to HIV.

Alex: I was rather struck by the lesbian porn, too. I knew it was *there* (in my archive, in the past). I had seen it before. I had even taught some of it! But I found three things particularly striking on this recent go-round with the tapes. The first was how hard it is to make clear to contemporary viewers, like you, that the people, places, or things that would have been total standouts at the earlier time have since become rather commonplace, and thus invisible, in large part *because* of our activist media interventions. When *Safe Is Desire* was made, it was the first of its kind in many ways. But now we live in a society and with an internet that is saturated by porn, and a porn culture where all manner of people make porn and are seen having sex. When I was a young woman seeing this tape for the first time, I’m pretty sure I had never seen *any* pornography, let alone graphic depictions of lesbian sex (this, too, was largely undepicted in media, given that there was no such thing as “the new queer cinema” yet, a movement to which I would later help contribute the first African lesbian feature film). While I was already unquestionably a proud “prosex” feminist, I did not watch porn myself because almost all of it was misogynistic, patriarchal, and homophobic, and literally none of it was made by or for women. This safer-sex, lesbian porn by and for women was a first! Think about that. Thus watching it (as is also true for all the women-made tapes we’ve been discussing throughout) had a palpable radicality that is no longer visible.

The second thing that struck me rewatching this tape was something that one of the women expresses to her lover when they are first negotiating safer

sex: “This is the ’90s. Safer sex is a major issue of our time.” Nearly exactly the same thing is articulated by subjects in *Party Safe! with Diana and Bambi* (1992) when the party leaders say: “It’s a game of the ’90s; it’s a disease of the ’90s” and then again in *Hard to Get*. “We’re Living in the age of AIDS,” says narrator Ruby Dee. With hindsight I see and then remember that this was a party line for AIDS activists (pun intended) at this time. HIV/AIDS—and the strategies to educate, live together, and have sex it required—was understood as a defining issue of the time for many activist women, people of color, and lesbians. I think we’d be hard pressed to hear the expression of similar sentiments now, even as the words would be as true today as they were then. Thus, it is never the shocking statistics of death, illness, transmission, or vulnerability that make this statement—this is the major issue of our time—feel true for people or a community, or known, or common sense, but rather an activist community that makes and circulates and recirculates these ideas as *known knowns*, much like #BlackLivesMatter is today. We know this to be true at that time because we say so. Again and again. For different communities, in different vernaculars.

Third, in the 1980s and into the 1990s, women, and particularly lesbians, took on AIDS activism, care, and safer sex as core issues for themselves and their communities. From this newly named “queer” identity, activism, and even studies were born: lesbians affiliated with gay men around HIV/AIDS even though lesbians were not demographically or probably even at (much) bodily risk. To see the various subcultures of lesbians in this video take on safer sex education, practices, and care with all of their rich and diverse cultural, artistic, and personal capital stands out to me as a beautiful example of the “intersectional activist strategies, resources and concerns” mentioned above. At this time, there were very few lesbians with HIV, and these were women who contracted it through sex with men, contaminated blood supplies, or sharing needles. The risk of lesbians contracting HIV from lesbian sex was, and remains, rather small. This physical or statistical truth, however, paled in relation to a political and communal truth that was much more powerful and is at the heart of intersectional politics: what is true for my brothers must be true for myself. What is most amazing to me about that tape—which is made-for-profit *pornography*—is that the sexual act between the two leads of the film, a white femme and the black butch who must be convinced to practice safer sex before that particular money shot can even commence—is deferred for the entire forty minutes of the tape so that the entirely unsexy, nonpornographic scenes where they first fight about safer sex, then attend a lecture/performance/club organized around safer sex, then talk about it some more, and then finally have it, can take place. A lesbian feminist commitment to intersectional, diverse sexual politics proved to be much sexier to its

intended audience, and for its activist uses, than any of the kinky practices that are also highlighted in the porno.

Ted: Now I am thinking a lot about the different uses and audiences of all of the various work. *Hard to Get* [Alisa Lebow, 1991], for example, is clever, working on two registers. On the surface it is a well-produced and straightforward rebuttal to the paranoia that circulated at that time regarding the transmission of HIV. Produced by the New York City Commission on Human Rights to curb discrimination and workplace disturbances due to HIV/AIDS, it employs Ruby Dee—a highly respected actor famous for her theater, film, and civil rights work—to narrate factual information about issues like the risks of transmission and the rights of people living with HIV. A clear connection is drawn between the mandated intolerance of racism in the workplace and AIDS phobia.<sup>13</sup>

For me it also speaks to something I would not have understood if I was only seeing AIDS through the Revisitation. *Hard to Get* is about power disruption. The classic found footage that is being used in the video to illustrate how things were done in the past is from the 1950s and starring white men. The video winks at how white patriarchal power that worked in the past is part of an ongoing system that leads to inequality and AIDS discrimination. It is here that Dee's casting makes even more sense. She is not only a paragon of black empowerment, but as a black woman speaking in the film, she is the voice of authority authorized by the City of New York, an upending of the past's racism and sexism and an example of how things could and should be for a better present and future. Because of their understanding of the far-reaching impacts and implications of AIDS in the world, activists at the time, such as the women who made *Hard to Get*, were not just making tapes to address topical issues such as workplace harassment, they were also working for substantial systemic change within the system, at a government agency (sort of like how the lesbians were working within pornography!).

Similarly, a film like *Party Safe! with Bambi and DiAna* [Ellen Spiro, 1992] also works to use video to transmit ideas of how people can and ought to be together for a better world.<sup>14</sup> In the film, DiAna and Bambi travel around North America creating local, communal interactions—parties—that although not peopled only by queers, turn out to be very queer indeed. People of diverse races, sexual orientations, and gender come together in homes, bars, and community spaces to play games that allow them to speak frankly about sex. Instead of doubling down on censorship, as was happening in some cultural

spheres of the time, these sex educators and activists were opening up conversation and interaction and making sure to have that videotaped.

Given this radical practice, and others mentioned so far, it seems no accident that these videos have been lost to history. In their diverse ways, each of these videos contested prevailing modes of patriarchy and patrimony—what is saved and passed on and to whom. *Hard to Get* is about systemic change from within *paid for* by the City of New York. *Play Safe* was produced independently on the strength of the filmmakers' and collaborators' previous successes. Holding these videos and the practices and communities from whence they came in conversation with each other, one realizes how much AIDS activist video, while being about education, urgency, and social issues in both form and content was also about world making.

### Conclusion

Alex: What I am left with is that on top of how hard and fulfilling it is to make alternative legacies, it is equally hard if not more harder to sustain and maintain them. After making these videos, and then writing about them, I suppose I thought I had entered my political stakes into my moment of history and also into history more fully. Since my work was on video, and in print, it wasn't losable. And in some ways, my beliefs were true. When you conducted research to find the production date of *Grandma's Legacy*, you wrote an email to a worker at Bebash (which still exists in Philadelphia, but which has changed its mandate since the '80s when it began, like so many ASOs), and she wrote you back to say that she was new there and didn't know too much about the tape, but that you might want to look at the scholarly writing about the effort, for which she provided a link . . . to my book!

Then, in the last stages of writing this essay, I decided to watch all the videos one more time. It turned out that on my wild dash to the subway, en route to my yearly writing retreat—where I gather with other academic women to complete writing in a setting of mutual support, good food, exercise, and without children and significant others—both my player and all the DVD copies I had made of the VHS tapes fell out of my bag, left for some lucky potential viewer on the streets of Brooklyn. Lost to me. And yet their descriptions were findable *in my book*, from 1995, where I had engaged with this selfsame archive the *first time* (it was when they were lost that I went back to the book and found the inspiring and useful writing about them by Saalfield that we've included here).

It seems our matrimony *has left us with things*, albeit mostly hard to find and just plain easy to lose. These words and videos (and our conversations about them) point to what you didn't know but now do, and what I once did and could reimagine through conversation. In my small, personal, hard-to-find archive I found things that I forgot, and some that I remembered. By looking at the archive together, we also had access to things you know, and shared, which pushed my thinking and recollection. The videotapes and book and videography were made, and shelved, and we used them well. People did say things on tape, and we heard them.

Ted: We have reexposed and explored tapes that through content and process illustrate the intersectionality that has always been at the core of a matrimony within HIV work, along the way pushing back against the narrowness of how HIV is often understood and represented. Through our cross-generational conversation we have also highlighted something very important: we can't take for granted that information saved will be information shared, nor can we assume what other people, communities, or generations know is necessarily what others will know as common sense. This to me seems very poignant. Was video supposed to feel ephemeral, fleeting, up for being lost? It seems to me that video at the dawn of the AIDS crisis held the space that all new information-saving technology holds: the promise that nothing will be lost, and information will be able to be shared more widely than before. And yet here we are having this discussion over lost (and found) videos, and the lost (and found) strategies of forms of video activism that moved beyond capturing and disseminating images of direct action. We are amorphous, changing, local, and open for intersection, and video holds, shares, and inspires that, each time it is engaged.

## Notes

1. Our uncertainty about many details of the tape's provenance, despite several attempts to research it online, on the phone, and from earlier writing about it—namely, Alex's 1995 monograph on activist AIDS video, *AIDS TV*, where it is discussed—demonstrates what will be a recurring theme of this essay about patrimony: the easy loss of things that were hard to make in their time. We will consider what else might be needed to keep these valuable inheritances live.

2. Films such as *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013), *How to Survive a Plague* (David France, 2012), *United in Anger* (Jim Hubbard, 2012), *We Were Here* (David Weissman, 2011), *Sex Positive* (Daryl Wein, 2008), *Larry Kramer in Love and Anger* (Jean Carlomusto, 2015), *Back on Board* (Cheryl Furjanic, 2015), and *The Normal Heart* (Ryan Murphy, 2014), to name only a few, have been widely seen, earned awards, and captured the imagination of a cross

section of communities, bringing together those who lived through the early days of the crisis and those who, generations later, are inspired by and interested in how communities responded to a plague that was being ignored by the government and other powerful players in public health, medicine, and mainstream media.

3. Juhasz and Kerr's first conversation was for *Cineaste* and focused on the feature film *Dallas Buyers Club*. Their second conversation was months later for *IndieWire*. There, they worked to understand the HBO version of Larry Kramer's play *The Normal Heart*. They have had several more conversations, as articles, presentations, and now a book, about their timeline.

4. See the work of Jih-Fei Cheng, Nishant Shahani, Adam Gere, and Dagwami Woubshet, to name just a few.

5. See Alexandra Juhasz, "Forgetting ACT UP," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 98 (2012): 69-74.

6. "HIV Among Women," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed August 22, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/gender/women/>.

7. "HIV Among African Americans," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed August 22, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/raciaethnic/africanamericans/>.

8. W. O. Bockting et al., "Transgender HIV prevention: A Qualitative Needs Assessment," *AIDS Care*, 10 (1998): 505-25; "HIV Among Transgender People," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed August 22, 2016, <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/gender/transgender/>.

9. See Catherine Saalfield, "Videography," in *AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video*, ed. Alexandra Juhasz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), which spells out productive media use for each of the videos she lists.

10. See, as just a brief list of examples, the contemporaneous work of Douglas Crimp, Paula Treichler, John Greyson, Catherine Gund (Saalfield), Ray Navarro, Gregg Bordowitz, Jean Carlmusto, Ellen Spiro, Jan Zita Grover, Pratibha Parmar, Martha Gever, Cynthia Chris, Douglas Gere, and David Roman.

11. The questions are from the essay "Sharing Queer Authorities: Collaborating for Transgender Latina and Gay Historical Meanings," which appears in *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, ed. Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

12. Saalfield (Gund), "Videography," 274.

13. "Narrated by actress Ruby Dee, this tape is good for use in the workplace. Entertainingly debunks myths about HIV transmission, casual contact, and other workplace worries. Intercut with great black and white film clips" (Saalfield, "Videography," 282).

14. "In this sequel to *DiAna's Hair Ego*, DiAna and her partner, Bambi Sumpter, travel from South Carolina to New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Toronto, where they hold safer-sex informational parties (often in people's homes), complete with ingenious games guaranteed to make the participants more comfortable in imagining, talking about, and carrying through their decisions about sex. Includes explicit and frank discussion about human relationships. Clearly articulated and important perspectives on AIDS" (Saalfield, "Videography," 287).