CHAPTER 1

# THE POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY FILM ESSAY IS INFRASTRUCTURAL

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> Theorizing a concept such as information infrastructure—and, more broadly, the turn to information and infrastructure within media studies—through lesbian feminism might seem like a non sequitur. I argue that groups marginalized because of gender, sexuality, and race have the most to tell us about how, when, and for whom information matters.
>
> Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies,* 2020[1]

> How then can committed filmmakers escape the entrapment of traditional ideological forms and work within a truly revolutionary ideology? Not by finding and repeating a "correct" line, obviously, but by rooting them, work *within* actively ongoing political struggles; by making films, I repeat, not only about people engaged in these struggles, but also *with* and *by* them as well, and through this process, and with full awareness of the contradictions in play, hammering out the shapes of an evolving new revolutionary ideology around those struggles.
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> Thomas Waugh, *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, 1984[2]

## Film Writing as Radical Media Infrastructure

Some documentary scholars study filmic texts, their forms and meanings, others commit to media industries, the labor practices and political economies that define the

work of making film. Some look at national cinemas or genres, others the careers of great filmmakers, and most do this work by looking at mainstream film and television. In this chapter, I have been tasked with attending to infrastructures: all that underlies the making, sharing, watching, and lasting of documentary media. To do so, I will write about and also return to two political documentary traditions in which I play a part as maker and critic: feminist documentary and Black lesbian film. As per Cait and Tom above, I too believe that marginalized groups have the most to tell us about infrastructure because we build it ourselves from within ongoing political struggles. Beyond hard-to-access institutional systems, we assemble affective, communal, and social supports. This dense, fragile, necessary, people- and movement-centered infrastructure is what is needed for our precarious works to be made, shared, and saved, especially because this is done outside and in defiance of normative, dominant, monied, or powerful institutions. I will also suggest that scholarly and critical writing—my own and that of my peers, from and for the marginal and political communities engaged by any particular work—is part of this very process of creating and sustaining engagement and thus action in the documentary space. Movement-based writing about what Tom calls committed documentary, Cait calls lesbian information activism, I call activist video or political documentary, and the editors of this volume name progressive and socially engaged nonfiction is one of many community-based infrastructural conditions inseparable from what we consider, support, and underwrite.

Even as we call our distinct but linked media objects of attention variously, I call my first two interlocutors in this effort (with more to come) by their first names to signal that we have known and worked with each other, relied on each other, followed and assisted each other as academic workers and writers, thinkers, teachers, and activists who participate in the related but distinct movements we study, and in so doing build fields, films, and friendships. I first read Tom's book in graduate school in the late 1980s and at the beginning of my career as a film scholar. It jump-started and gave precedence to and permission for my scholarly *and* activist commitments about HIV/AIDS, at that time a new virus, movement, and related media. I read Cait's book this year (now mid-to-late career). It enhanced and energized my own recent and sweet returns to lesbian and queer activist methods, many of which had informed my HIV/AIDS work and the new queer cinema that grew in its wake.[3] But then again, I also recently spoke at Tom's gorgeous retirement event from Concordia University, one of several lucky friends and colleagues invited to celebrate his inimitable contributions to that institution of higher education as well as the larger fields of queer, gay, activist, AIDS, radical, and documentary media. And I recently included what would become a prizewinning essay by Cait about Kiyoshi Kuromiya's early internet AIDS activist organization Critical Path, and its revolutionary technologies of information, in a co-edited volume on the ongoing and historical crises of AIDS.[4]

Like others before us who "wove together into a complex web of emotional-political alliances"—as Kristen Hogan in another version of the "infrastructural turn" describes the lesbian antiracist and feminist accountability practices she researches, "the feminist

bookstore movement" that began in the 1970s[5]—scholars of activist media build and indeed also act as our own "feminist shelves": constituent parts ourselves of an infrastructure that holds and gives place to the media work of political movements (see Fig. 1.1). Because our objects of attention are so in need of support, because we care about them more so than do most others, because we are aligned with their world-changing goals, because we are in community with other scholar/activist/filmmakers who work in this lesser or at least smaller space within film studies, our attention to each other as scholars, mentors, mentees, friends, as well as to these objects of activist media is itself infrastructural. "Our descriptive work is most effective when it is understood as an ongoing and interactive endeavor,"[6] writes friend and colleague, Jacqueline Stewart in her 2019 introduction to *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film*, another sister effort. As per Jackie, in this effort I will cull from other's descriptive work, including several extracts from two previous bodies of my own writing: *Women of Vision, Histories in Feminist Media* from 2005[7] and *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African American Lesbian Media-Making,* co-edited with Yvonne Welbon, 2018.[8]

Yvonne is my friend and long-time professional ally. In the early 2000s, I interviewed her for my documentary and book, *Women of Vision,* one effort in radical media history-making, and then, many years later, I worked with her as a co-editor of her book, a linked project on Black lesbian cinema, itself another deepening and refining of connections and commitments. Our ongoing and multiple personal and professional interactions are another example of what Hogan calls "the electric web" that is born from the building of feminist infrastructure together and across time; what I named as "a powerful, exploding constellation of directions and connections defining the subject at hand: an impressive body of films made by and for a tightly knit community characterized by care, protest, and possibility," as I worked to describe and also hold the complex and rich history of Black lesbian film.[9] "The influence of social change documentary is primarily constitutive," writes friend, mentee, and collaborator, Angela Agauyo.[10] For a certain subset of political documentary—committed documentary, activist media—the supports that are needed, its extratextual conditions, its *infrastructure* is what makes it political. Cait explains: "The term 'infrastructure' describes technical systems in which resources operate in complex combination to make communication or knowledge work possible."[11]

Now in conversation and community with Cait, Tom, Yvonne, Jackie, and Angela, I am suggesting that we ourselves are some of those resources; that one of those systems is committed film scholarship; and these people and our practices in community link with, build for ourselves, and also support material institutions in which political documentary is shared, and can live and be used again, when most needed. "Certain developments in the field focusing on nontheatrical film distribution and production studies resonate with our focus on activist media by emphasizing ways in which media technologies and practices have been integrated into everyday life," add Chris Robé and Stephen Charbonneau in their 2020 introduction to their contribution to our small but vibrant sub-field, *Insurgent Media from the Front: A Media Activism Reader.*[12]


**FIGURE 1.1** Montage of photos of book covers. Books from my feminist shelf, an electric web, and exploding constellation of connections.

An everyday life in insurgent media means writing and reading about, funding, screening, teaching, curating, archiving, salvaging, and using political film as well as the mostly countercultural institutions that we build and support to do so. In some of my previous work—infrastructural contributions to "make knowledge work possible" in feminist and Black lesbian film, respectively—I name and list many of the components of the infrastructure that support(ed) these particular and small schools of political documentary. In *Women of Vision,* I provided an annotated list of what was available in the early 2000s—itself borne from countercultural commitments of the 1960s and 1970s—that allowed feminist film to flourish in those years: film clubs, film libraries, collections, archives, associations, conferences and professional meetings, artist collectives, nonprofit media centers, venues, film writing in journals, magazines, and books (like this one, *The Oxford Handbook of American Documentary*), distributors, media education, and Hollywood and commercial television. Many of these entities have since closed or make less sense in a media environment structured by the digital sphere, neoliberalism, and late capitalism. For instance, women's film festivals have all but ceased even as queer and now trans festivals flourish. Online festivals became regularized during COVID, expanding audiences and closing down face-to-face screenings and thus engagements with film professionals. Hence, writing thirteen years after *Women of Vision*, in the 2018 introduction to *Sisters in the Life,* I sought different words to explain more personal connections. I wanted to emphasize the affective, embodied, and communal interpersonal as core to the building of this "small community but active infrastructure" (according to fellow community member, Pamela Jennings). In that effort, I describe what makes this body of political film work live and last—"[T]ightly-knit community characterized by care, protest, and possibility"; "[E]mbodied, participatory relationships"; "[M]aking one's life as one makes one's work and history and community"; and "Conferences. Friendships, activism, partnerships, one-night stands . . . or was it the Middle Passage, or the Civil Rights or feminist or LGBTQ movements?"

I will excerpt from both of those efforts here, as part of my infrastructural maintenance of feminist and Black lesbian film. Our labor, legacy, and care work as writers and readers in scholarly traditions of radical media are often pigeonholed, siloed, and kept as marginal as are the communities and struggles with which we engage. Why would "theorizing a concept such as information infrastructure—and, more broadly, the turn to information and infrastructure within media studies—through lesbian feminism might seem like a non sequitur"?[13] Think about it. Dominant media is made and seen within the solid, oiled, familiar, hegemonic infrastructures of capitalism. Political documentary functions differently, "hammering out" evolving ideologies, as Tom previously explained, while critiquing those that more typically surround us. He continues: "How then can committed filmmakers escape the entrapment of traditional ideological forms and work within a truly revolutionary ideology?"[14] This is the political perspective Jackie establishes about Black nontheatrical film: "And while it has been argued that most nontheatrical film types are linked in their bid for a kind of social usefulness

(i.e. edification over profit), they can nonetheless reflect the limits imposed by the dominating thinking about race within which they are produced."[15]

Nontheatrical, political media reject the racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, imperialist, or capitalist systems (and infrastructures) of hegemonic culture, and its film infrastructures of production and distribution, archiving and writing, and thus build our own supports for our own media. As my friend and mentor, Julia Lesage explains, also in *Show Us Life*, from 1984, "Feminist documentary filmmaking has developed as a cinematic genre related to a political movement."[16] Her words are as relevant today as they were when written and published, even if activist media infrastructures take up the specific technologies, funding streams, issues, or analyses of their own places and times. Today's digital media and its neoliberal overlords have allowed for corporate-owned streaming, archiving, and messaging platforms; easier to use tools for the production, editing, and dissemination of media; global movements based in hashtags and social media; local movements that interlace media and place; surveillance and linked brutality; state and platform censorship; a notable shift to the preeminence of realist images and documentary; and much more. What are the streams, flows, places, and needs of today's movements—Black Lives Matter, climate justice, disability justice, and so on—given the rule and role of digital technologies?

Angela argues, "social change documentary manifests locally, with community-based organizing and coalition building with other struggles, coalescing in participatory media cultures invested in change."[17] As movements and their infrastructures move to or incorporate the digital, connections and visibility can be newly built reaching new audiences or, when overextended, getting lost in the flow. Radical documentary (and its many movements and communities) is defined by cycles of attention and support; ebbs and flows; remembering and forgettings; the passing on, loss, and re-finding of ideologies, movements, and the films that build and hold all this. Most of the films, as well as the hard-won lessons learned from lesbian feminism, or AIDS media, or Black lesbian cinema, stay within our small but rich communities of practice, well outside of dominant systems (including traditional media scholarship), even if our work sits or is shared on the internet. Even with more (digital) visibility, things we learned before stay hidden from others (intentionally and not), but then also from ourselves.

I learned from my communities that writing is an important part of the infrastructural work. For instance, in the excerpts of my own maintenance work that follows, I am bolstered by the words of friend and colleague, Patricia Zimmermann, who focuses on the feminist infrastructure that supported the Flaherty Film Seminar—the women (and others) who cleaned, typed, and allowed for this critical institution that itself supported political film. Without Patty's writing, the unsung labor of these many women would have been lost. Similarly, there's the behind-the-scenes support for my 2005 writing that was generously offered to me by my at-first-anonymous manuscript reader, Julia Lesage, who subsequently named herself to me by writing me an email offering to work with me to help me make that work stronger (I have continued Julia's practice of naming myself

and offering to further engage as a reader of younger scholars who are working in small committed subfields). This is another infrastructural practice that contributes to the work of feminist cinema.[18]

## Excerpt 1 from the Introduction Section, "The Personal Is the Infrastructural," *Women of Vision* (2005)

Cultural production in the United States, an increasingly larger sector of the national economy, produces a product that is simultaneously mass, popular, homogenized, profit-driven, corporate, and "universal." In contrast, feminist media work suffers from a lack of diffusion and an abundance of idiosyncrasy; one of its fundamental preconditions is a significant degree of inaccessibility. This is because the foundation for feminist media may include a commitment to things countercultural, nonindustrial, small-format, underfunded, highly intellectual, overtly political, transgressive, personal, sexual, racial, radical, or female. Thus, as Patricia Zimmermann suggests, "a truly feminist historiography" of alternative media practice investigates the noncommercial infrastructure that makes independent media possible. She writes that to understand alternative feminist media we must research and think differently: we "must analyze the institutions that created spaces where cinema could be imagined outside and as infiltrating the commodity exchange system of Hollywood and American nationalism . . . toward a larger terrain beyond films and toward an analysis of the institutions that give public life to most independent work and produce noncommercial media culture."[19] Such analysis is feminist because it values support systems over the individual, alienated, great (male) artist, or even his great works of art.

Feminist media has never received sufficient critical attention or a very large audience. This can be explained in many ways. It is still a relatively new field. Its work is tarnished in the eyes of the traditional academy and art establishment because it is overtly political. When produced in video, its product is readily reproducible (not easily bought, collected, or sold), while being overly connected to either lowbrow, mass cultural forms like television or highbrow, artisan traditions of the avant-garde. Feminist media is quickly lost to view (or is never made at all) because it is more expensive than other forms of art, activism, or communication (even as it is less expensive that commercial or film or television), is overshadowed by the for-profit model of the society's largest and most successful industry (entertainment), and continues to accrue less cultural capital for its makers and critics than other academic and artistic pursuits would.

# Excerpt 2 from the Section "Alternative Institutions and the Facilitation of Feminist Media," in the "Introduction" to *Women of Vision* (2005)

Alice Echols describes radical feminism of the 1970s as conversant with more general radicalism of the 1960s that sought to move beyond reforming society to transforming it.[20] While all of the women involved in feminist media are by no means "radical feminists," the creation of counter-institutions, an explicit tactic of radicalism, helped to create the thriving feminist, alternative media that initiates this history and makes feminist careers in the media possible. "Alternative institutions provide the space for something different, something oppositional, something aimed at trying to transform, revolutionize, the existing order," write the editors of the film journal *Jump Cut* in an overview of alternative film periodicals.[21] They explain that forums for writing about alternative film are a significant component in facilitating their production and use. However, in her interview (for the book and documentary, *Women of Vision* [1998]) Kate Horsfield, the executive director of the Video Data Bank, an organization that distributes art video, worries that an earlier, "1970s" preoccupation with infrastructure has adapted, over the course of twenty years, into a '1990s focus on individual success, inspiring many once "alternative" media makers to move into the "mainstream." It is true that more and more feminist makers now attempt to work within standard forms, have institutional sanction, or constrain their content. This is because, in part, the alternative structures that might have supported their more radical work have become harder and harder to find. In this vicious cycle, less work gets made and institutions that rely on this work are forced to close down.

But this 1990s move into individual professionalization will prove to be shortsighted and dangerous. Each of the book's interviewees (whatever her "generation") attests to how an established, organized, available infrastructure is the most significant factor responsible for enabling her feminist media practice. This infrastructure is composed of a significant variety of institutions and services, including those related to production, distribution, and education. I will discuss briefly a few of the most important institutions and services.

**Film clubs**: Leftist and/or avant-gardist organizations where people screen and discuss alternative media.[22] These institutions are still lively venues in other countries, but most have died out in the United States.

**Film libraries, collections, and archives**: Museums, colleges, and media centers build collections that provide opportunities for media makers to sell their work, and forums where viewers can see it.[23]

**Associations for media makers, media scholars, and media centers**: These support organizing that further collective needs. They often serve as fiscal sponsors or overseers for individual producer's grants.[24]

**Conferences and professional meetings**: These are often but not exclusively hosted by professional associations and allow people to meet face to face and share their latest work.[25] The 1970s and 1980s saw a large number of feminist film conferences that brought together scholars, makers, and critics for productive dialogue.[26]

**Artist collectives**: These allow access to equipment, facilities, and other artists. In the 1970s and 80s, a number of such collectives were formed, often espousing a radical political agenda as one of their founding principles.[27]

**Nonprofit media centers**: These provide education, production, and other services for media artists at low cost. They usually run film/video screening series for the public and teach classes in media making, often to beginners.[28]

**Venues to show independent work**: These include for-profit art houses, museum, community, and gallery spaces, educational settings, and media centers. The film festival is a major setting for alternative exhibition. In the seventies, there were scores of women's film festivals across the country beginning as early as 1971, when the Whitney Museum sponsored a series of films by women. The year 1972 saw the First International Festival of Women's Film and the First Annual U.S. Women's Video Festival, both in New York.

**Film writing**: These consist of journals, magazines, and books. Critical writing allows audiences to learn about current and past work. It also educates about the changing interpretations, themes, and approaches to both making and thinking about media so as to allow for collective dialogue and the progress of ideas. As John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans explain in a summary article of US film periodicals, "The film magazine forms an essential institution for the critical analysis of cinema and the existence of a film culture that allows and encourages its development."[29] Many would argue that the publication of Claire Johnston's "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema" in 1973[30] and then the 1975 publication of Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"[31] were the originary moments for the immensely productive subfield of feminist film theory.[32] However, the same professionalization that haunts '90s independent media making also haunts feminist media criticism, which focuses mainly on Hollywood film and broadcast television. Very little is written about independent media, feminist or otherwise.

**Distributors**: These crucial businesses ensure that media made outside the entertainment industry gets to its audience to the venues that support such work, and to collectors, educators, and others who buy it.[33]

**Media education**: This is a broad-based endeavor that occurs in colleges, universities, and high schools as well as at nonprofit community organizations and public access stations. In the 1970s, a great deal of energy went into creating organizations that taught media production and media literacy at low cost to low-income and working-class people. Only some remain viable.

**Hollywood and commercial television**: No counterinstitution exists outside or without the influence of the dominant model. All of the manifestations of alternative infrastructure listed thus far, at least in part, define themselves both in opposition to and

in dialogue with the profit-driven, globally powerful industries of traditional narrative filmmaking and broadcast television.

**Funding**: Given that film and even video are arguably the most expensive media for art or communication, a significant factor in this history has been women's ability to acquire capital. Because women have had little access to money and the power associated with wealth, women's roles have been minimal in Hollywood film, somewhat larger in television, and larger still in video, documentary, and experimental media. However, while some women work in nonindustrial forms simply because they are less expensive, most feminist media is also rooted in an explicit critique of the inherent sexism in the forms and functions of mainstream media and industrialized capitalism.

Further, given that its motivation is many things before economic (political, aesthetic, personal, social), feminist media history is mostly composed of work made despite a lack of available funding or with little possibility for profit. In her interview with me, Julia Reichert reviews the founding principles of New Day Films, the film distribution collective that she cofounded, in such terms:

> It's based on principles from the women's movement: the idea of collective action, not individual genius; and artists, or cultural workers, as I prefer to think of myself, taking control of their work. That means controlling the whole process, including getting the film to the audience. Your life could be about having an idea, making it work, distributing the result, and having that inform your next work. It's not just a business cycle, but a learning cycle.

Kate Horsfield similarly explains the motivations behind the many artists' interviews that she shot on video in collaboration with her late partner, Lyn Blumenthal:

> We didn't do it for anything other than to participate in the ideas of our generation. We wanted to build an organization and we did. We wanted to create a legacy of ideas and we did. I'm proud of it, and I hope people will have the patience to wade through some of the difficult decisions we made in terms of that work. It's hard, not easy, not about entertainment. It's about really listening to somebody talk about what's important to them and hoping that another person finds value in that.

As is true for all of these women, Julia Lesage insists that her largely unfunded media work of the 1970s—which included the founding of a women's Super 8 collective; a women's studies program run by teachers, undergraduates, and staff at the University of Illinois, Chicago; the founding of the journal *Jump Cut* and the first Chicago Women's Film Festival—was inspired by a political movement that created the confidence that "we could learn anything and teach it to others."[34]

A massive expansion of arts and humanities funding in the late 1960s and early 1970s opened up possibilities for many female producers. In their early days, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), NEA, and CPB supported liberal (and sometimes progressive) political artwork, some of which was by women (this was before the ongoing attacks by right-wing politicians initiated today's

self-defensive retreat by such cultural institutions). Recently, as these more established agencies have become increasingly traditional in their programming, the Independent Television Service (ITVS) was championed by media activists hoping to (re-)create some government support to fill the glaring lapses in broadcast programming. ITVS has a congressional mandate to fund television for and by people and communities underrepresented on broadcast (and public) television: for instance, women, people of color, the young and the aged, the disabled, and gays and lesbians. Of course, since the 1970s, cable access has allowed many such Americans to make and locally air their television for free.

Just as funding possibilities enable work, in their interviews several women attest to the direct impact of the defunding of the arts. For instance, both Wendy Quinn (from the Women in the Director's Chair Festival) and Margaret Caples (from the Community Film Workshop) note a steady decline, respectively, in entries for the festival and programs they offer, as arts funding continues to dwindle in the United States. In their interviews, Horsfield and Carollee Schneemann discuss how the complete defunding of film and video preservation denies contemporary artists access to valuable resources created in the past. And even when successful in attaining funding, contemporary artists acknowledge how a general atmosphere of intolerance (often expressed through the defunding of institutions and organizations) affects their sense of artistic possibility. Many of this study's younger artists share a spirit of cynicism and despair. In her book on guerrilla video of the 1970s Deirdre Boyle worries about the attitude of the youngest generation:

> Faith in the future, which seemed so natural to youth in the late 60s, is conspicuously lacking today if my graduate students are any indication. They are smart, talented, and deeply sensitive, but instead of boundless belief in themselves and in their ability to affect the world, many are plagued by depression, hopelessness, and doubt. The infrastructure created in the 1960s to support budding talent and public channels for art and information is rapidly being dismantled.[35]

Lack of funding, and the myriad other supports necessary to imagine oneself a media maker and then to actually make work, has meant that a significant number of women have entered this field only to leave it, or have never even entered at all. We will never know the histories of absent women and can only point toward the space of unmade work and non-careers, as a truly invisible but key manifestation of (the lack of) funding and infrastructure.

## Interlude between Excerpts: On Lack and Fullness

Scholarly writing about activist media names—and in so doing begins to correct—the absences and other lack of support that define political media cultures as well as

the things we know and have done together to respond. We build what we need because we must. Art, scholarship, activism, cultural production all happen in contexts and in a zeitgeist: national, economic, political, technological. For example, the countercultural infrastructure that was built by feminists in the 1970s described above was quickly dismantled by Ronald Reagan and other forces of growing neoliberalism. Even so, by the time I worked on *Sisters in the Life*, there were more Black women, lesbians, and feminists who had made media (including Yvonne), even as there was much less governmental support; there were more gay and lesbian film festivals even as almost none of the women's and feminist film festivals built by previous generations remained; there were more opportunities to make low-budget DIY media for marginal communities because of digital technologies and yet anti-Black racism still dominates American culture.

In 2018, our commissioned writers for *Sisters in the Life* considered these changing and maintaining systems in asking why there is so much Black lesbian media in a culture where this group is marginalized, systemically discriminated against, and undersupported. Several of the authors in our collection testify to how it was Black lesbians who made and make their own countercultural institutions—to name just a few: film festivals like Outfest's QYBIPOC Film Fusion[36] and QWOCMAP, the Queer Women of Color Film Festival[37]; online series like our anthology subjects' Shine Louise Houston's queer porn on her CrashPadSeries[38]; or Coquie Hughes Studios LLC which once streamed all her films[39]; and film schools and historical writing like anthology contributors' Thomas Allen Harris' Digital Diaspora Family Reunion,[40] Sangadore's Black Feminist Film School,[41] or Yvonne Welbon's brick and mortar Media Arts Center, Sisters in Cinema, and its linked digital repository.[42] When authors wrote for our collection, they did not know of COVID, #BLM, #MeToo, Trump, #fakenews, and yet they did know and write of the infrastructures—in media, society, history, and community—that work to support antiracist, feminist, and abolitionist analysis and practice. Today, working with digital technologies and their corporate owners, living in heightened late-stage capitalism and the accruing effects of global warming and the COVID 19 pandemic, we enjoy and suffer from specific infrastructural conditions: Zoom fatigue, totalitarian despots, manipulations of truth-by-media, social isolation, and also connection because of and inside of screens.[43] We can more easily make and share activist or Black lesbian media, yet it is harder to get people to see our work in a sea of more, and our current conditions of social distancing make it complex to come together.[44] We can more easily make connections using digital tools, but we understand these make weaker or different ties.[45] We have learned that movement work in media needs placed-based organizing and interaction.[46] All radical cinema is served by its communities, technologies, writers, and funders.[47] Black lesbian cinema was made from nothing into a vibrant community of practice in response to historical and systemic abuse and communal love (see Fig. 1.2).

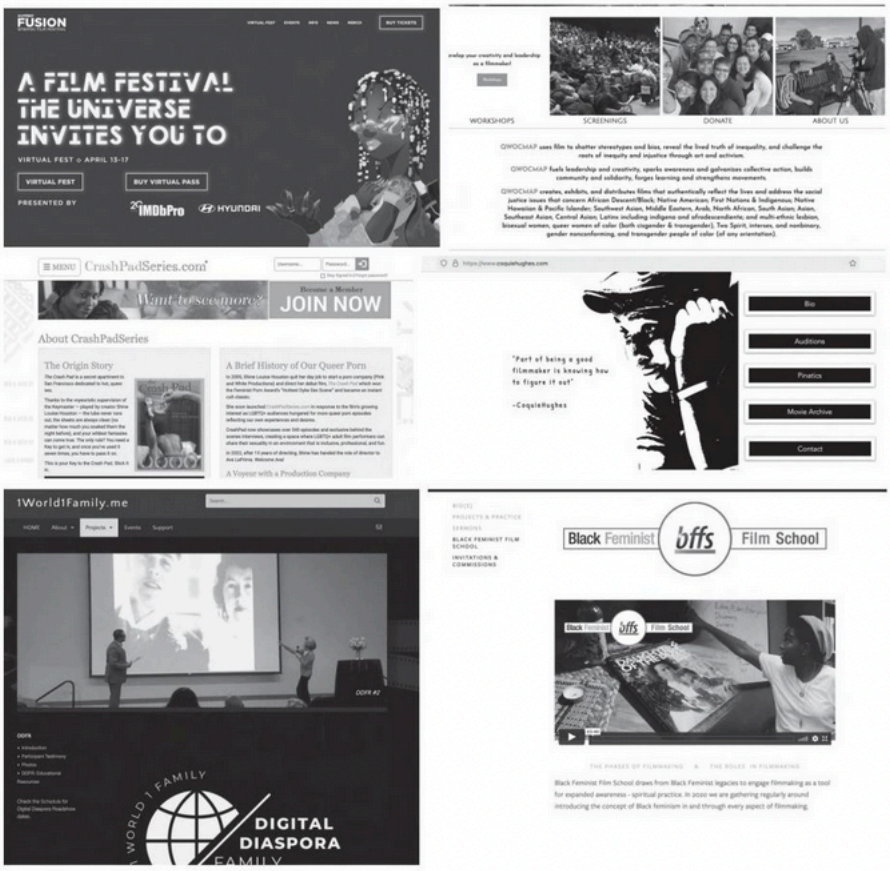


**FIGURE 1.2** Montage of screen shots of Black lesbian media orgs. We build what we need because we must.

## Excerpt 3: From the Introduction, "To be Transparent: Seeing Directions and Connections in Black Lesbian Film," from *Sisters in the Life* (2020)

The delicate tissues that link authors, filmmakers, films, and their audiences in *Sisters in the Life* become apparent in its totality as a powerful, exploding constellation of

directions and connections defining the subject at hand: an impressive body of films made by and for a tightly knit community characterized by care, protest, and possibility. As Yvonne Welbon explains, this relatively small group of artists has produced a disproportionate number of films within the canons of African American, women's, and queer cinema, and yet they go underrecognized. Hence this effort; hence so many efforts like it, all built from "a small community but active infrastructure," according to Pamela Jennings in the transcript of her video interview with Welbon, made for the trans-medial segment of this project.[48] And yet . . . this tradition *is* known well, and often deeply and dearly, to itself. The intentional knowing, making, sharing, producing, and loving of the Black lesbian film community is what allows for its productivity, permanence, and power.

In this vibrant community, artists, activists, and scholars make multi-directional and -dimensional connections of care and creativity to support each other and the work across time and space and in many relations to each other . . . . Contributors' movements (and the Black lesbian film movement's linked trajectories) are spatial, formal, economic and cultural: from city to city, job to job, girlfriend to girlfriend, 16mm to digital, digital to analogue . . . . There are many paths of connection. Roya Rastagar theorizes how "the embodied, participatory relationships incited through [Shari] Frilot's curatorial approaches reframe linear relationships between the spectator and screen and generate new dynamics that require people's collective presence to experience cinema."[49] Rastagar's thinking about Frilot's work marks the critic's and historian's role in these colliding orbits of Black, lesbian (self) representation. In our writing, we contribute to the world-making project initiated by filmmakers—or was this initiated by relationships? or community? curating? sex? or political exigency?—by placing their images into the traditions and frameworks of scholarly, historical, and teachable analysis.

Black lesbian films can be placed into the context, variously, of long traditions of African American expatriatism and the Black Atlantic, and art movements like the New Black Cinema, Third Cinema, Black Arts Movement, and the LA Rebellion. Some of the work is framed through discipline. For instance Pamela Jennings's work can be read through science, technology and society's interests in "computational-based creative expression,"[50] and Production Studies helps us to understand how the work of producers creates some of the necessary scaffolding for this tradition.[51] Of course, there are many, varied, and sometimes even competing institutional frameworks that support the work: for instance, Indiewood and the New Queer Cinema for some, and institutionalized Black Feminism for others: some of whom helped to "institutionalize" it, some who learn later from and grow its legacies. Meanwhile, the significance of the Black church frames other projects. Some are inspired by religion, other Black lesbian media makers reckon with the cruel force of religion.

But "us" and "them"—we faithful and they sinners, we critics and they filmmakers—like all the relations discussed thus far, is not a neat or even useful structure for this community, for many of the critics writing here are also filmmakers and our work focuses on people, images, and ideas that are also always circulating. Like me: I write this forward

and am also interviewed by Candace Moore as one of the producers in the tradition [of Cheryl Dunye's *The Watermelon Woman* (1996)]. Here's where transparency circles in as another kind of frame for seeing loss: in being transparent I can adequately explain my own circulation across this anthology and history, and better yet, I can introduce and frame co-editor Yvonne Welbon's. For, to be transparent, Yvonne and I—comparable to the relationships of so many authors in this collection—have worked together, eaten together, celebrated and championed together in uncountable and varied ways across the twenty-five-plus-year history of out Black Lesbian mediamaking, which is the living and loving that makes this work, and the book about it: a community that creates its own art, infrastructure, "scholarly proof" (or "materials to teach" as Yvonne calls its), databases, and archives—and their analyses—not only because no one else would (although this is one of our motivating political critiques), not only because we can do it better, but because the doing of it "*is* our lives and it saves our lives," as Pauline Gumbs suggests.[52]

Interestingly, the transparent telling of the community's making (and re-making) of itself is inextricably connected to the story of the films' making (how else could it have been done given the lack of support elsewhere!) and also to the films' narratives, which is to say that many of these films are about both the making of this community and the making of these films. "The networks among ourselves are both born from necessity and proximity. Many of us are closely connected to alternative media networks, know each other from our field of activism and have maintained those relationships," explained Jocelyn Taylor in 1997 in an early dialogue between black queer filmmakers, "Narrating Our Histories."[53] In 1997, already engaged in this project of self-reflexive, self-naming, and self-historicizing (at the very moment when the possibility for this tradition comes into being, as the tradition begins because the community makes it so), Taylor and others came together to document the moment and circulate it.

Conferences. Friendships, activism, partnerships, one-night stands . . . or was it the Middle Passage, or the Civil Rights or feminist or LGBTQ movements? As I've been noting, this history isn't told with neat causality. . . . And yet, two expansions, not repetitions seem useful here. First, over time, those artist-friendship-activist circles and their conversations *change*: new people join, either unaware of the earlier conversations or not able to have joined them in the first place; people die and others are born; relationships change as lovers and partners and even producers become ex; knowledge and audiences develop; the rules of entry and belonging shift, as do the names we call ourselves; American (and international) culture opens possibilities for people of color and queers as it closes others.

Second, technologies of transmission and connection grow. In the short time span of this history, "filmmaking" has taken up any number of media from celluloid to video to digital, and that alters Black lesbian product as much as process. But in the end, it is the community that most supports the work. It was always another member of this community who inspired one filmmaker to pick up a camera for the first time, or who showed her the right inspirational images, or who got her a gig, or who wrote that first article about her. Women in this tradition have made posters for each other, carried cables, and together made meals and archives. Of course, culture, politics, and technology have

shifted (often because we engaged in activism and filmmaking!) over these twenty-five years. Some members of this community no longer, or never, identified as women or lesbian, for example. Our community responds to and makes such changes.

And there's always more work and more community to be done. Our readers will be the community's new critics or filmmakers. You are welcome to join our authors as they speak with transparency, circularity, and pride, just as do the films considered, by naming their place within, their connections among, and their right to the tradition of out Black lesbian filmmaking that Welbon so generously set into radical motion with her life's work. With transparent connection, Alexis Pauline Gumbs follows, continues, and moves forward:

> If we say that Black lesbian feminist filmmaking and Black queer filmmaking are rooted in the lived experiences and organizing culture of Black lesbians that means that not only do the films we make draw resources (audiences, actors, crew, funding) from Black lesbians and the organizations that we have created, but they also replenish the soil by bringing people together, increasing visibility and providing a vehicle for necessary conversations in our community.

## Conclusion

> . . . How then do we talk about films whose aesthetics consist in political use-value?
>
> Tom[54]

While I have argued here about the centrality of infrastructure and writing for political film, perhaps it goes without saying that this is the case for all film, for all culture. But also this: dominant cultural production depends upon the infrastructure of hegemonic culture—its powerful banks, funders, technologies, publishers, distributors, protocols for professionalization, and also norms, forms, and ideologies. The precarious, precious, noncommercial, political infrastructures of the countercultures that make radical documentary, including the work of its writers, demand different modes of engagement and care, and this is what I have attempted here as I try to keep alive and maintain my own and others past efforts in infrastructure. Changes in recording and distribution machines—from film to video to digital, for example—demand infrastructural response and change, yes, but people power is a technology that persists. If you choose to join us as part of the infrastructure of radical documentary—and I really hope you do—you can learn from what has been said and built before, and who has worked and fought and loved together before you; but then you must decide what you want to change about this awful, beautiful world, and build that, with others.

## Notes

1. Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2020), 3.
2. Thomas Waugh, *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), xiv.
3. Alexandra Juhasz, "Two Queer Scholarly Books Distill Ideas about Dyke Networks," *Lambda Literary Review*, January 7, 2021, accessed April 12, 2022, https://www.lambdaliterary.org/2021/01/lesbian-feminist-communities.
4. Cait McKinney, "Crisis Infrastructures: AIDS Activism Meets Internet Regulation," in *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*, ed. Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 162–182.
5. Kristen Hogan, *The Feminist Bookstore Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
6. Jacqueline Stewart, "Introduction," in *Screening Race in American Nontheatrical Film*, ed. Allyson Nadia Field and Marsha Gordon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), xix.
7. Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).
8. Alexandra Juhasz and Yvonne Welbon, eds. *Sisters in the Life: A History of Out African-American Media-Making* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).
9. Juhasz, "Introduction," *Sisters in the Life*, xii.
10. Angela Aguayo, *Documentary Resistance: Social Change and Participatory Media* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6. Angela and I recently co-edited a special issue on activist media *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 4 (Fall 2019).
11. McKinney, *Information Activism*, 7.
12. Chris Robé and Stephen Charbonneau, eds., "Introduction," in *InsUrgent Media from the Front: A Media Activism Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2020), 4.
13. McKinney, *Information Activism*, 7.
14. Waugh, *Show Us Life*, xiv.
15. Stewart, *Screening Race*, xiv.
16. Julia Lesage, "Feminist Documentary: Aesthetics and Politics," in Waugh, *Show Us Life*, 223.
17. Aguayo, *Documentary Resistance*, 5.
18. Excerpting my own work, in some length, calls into question protocols surrounding the ownership of scholarly research, as well as an unchecked mandate on the new and original within academic writing. I already *did* the labor to research, write, and publish my thinking. Why is there a premium on doing this work newly, particularly if the conditions I describe have stayed the same, or perhaps, as interestingly, if they have changed? My words aren't a widget needing perpetual innovation for a market clambering for the new.
19. Patricia Zimmermann, "Flaherty's Midwives," in *Feminism and Documentary*, ed. Janet Walker and Diane Waldman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 25.
20. Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 16.
21. John Hess and Chuck Kleinhans, "US Film Periodicals," *Jump Cut* 38 (1993): 105.
22. For example, the Worker's Film and Photo League of the 1930s, Frontier Films of the 1930s, the Film Arts Society of the 1950s, and the Film-Makers Cooperative of the 1960s. See John Downing, *Radical Media: The Political Experience of Alternative Communication* (Boston: South End Press, 1984).

23. For example, the Museum of Modern Art's Film Collection, the Pacific Film Archives, Anthology Film Archives, the Video Databank, and Electronic Arts Intermix.
24. For example, the Association of Independent Film and Videomakers, the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, the University Film and Video Association, the National Association of Media Arts Centers, the National Asian American Telecommunications Association, the National Black Programming Consortium, the National Latino Communications Center, the Native American Public Broadcasting Consortium, and Pacific Islanders in Communications.
25. The Robert Flaherty Seminar, for instance, is not run by a professional organization. For more on its history and contributions to independent media, see Patricia Zimmermann, "Flaherty's Midwives," in *The Flaherty: Decades in the Cause of Independent Cinema*, ed. Patricia Zimmermann and Scott MacDonald (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017).
26. The Edinburgh Women's Event in 1972 and Edinburgh Film Festival in 1979 hosted two meetings where foundational, if contentious, discussion was produced. These and other early feminist film festivals are discussed in detail in Ruby Rich, *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988).
27. For example, Newsreel (which later became Third World Newsreel), Women Make Movies, The Boston Women's Film Co-op, Cinewomen, Kartemquin Films, Film/Video Arts, and Paper Tiger Television.
28. For example, Global Village, Downtown Community Television, Appalshop, Film Arts Foundation, Scribe Video, the Community Film Workshop, Visual Communications, Asian CineVision, the Bay Area Video Coalition, Educational Video Center, New Orleans Video Access Center, and Pittsburgh Filmmakers.
29. Hess and Kleinhans, *US Film Periodicals*, 105.
30. Claire Johnson, "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema," in *Notes on Women's Cinema,* ed. Claire Johnson (London: Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973), 24–31.
31. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18.
32. Feminist film publications first emerged in the 1970s: *Women and Film* was founded in 1972, *Jump Cut* in 1974, and *Camera Obscura* in 1977. And 1973 proved to be a watershed year for feminist book publishing about film with the release of Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus*, and Joan Mellen's *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film*.
33. In the 1970s, there were a significant number of feminist distribution companies, including New Day Films, Iris Films, Women/Artists/Filmmakers, Women Make Movies, the Women's Film Co-Op, Video Data Bank, Third World Newsreel, and Serious Business. Today Women Make Movies is this country's only dedicated feminist distributor, and the majority of the businesses listed above have folded.
34. From written notes provided to me by Julia Lesage, one of the readers of the manuscript for the University of Minnesota Press.
35. Deirdre Boyle, *Subject to Change: Guerilla Television Revisited* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
36. Outfest, Fusion, accessed January 10, 2025, https://www.outfest.org/outfestfusion/.
37. QWOCMAP, accessed April 12, 2022, https://qwocmap.org.
38. CrashPadSeries.com, accessed April 12, 2022, https://crashpadseries.com/queer-porn/crashpadseries.

39. For more on Coquie Hughes, accessed January 9, 2025, http://sistersinthelife.com/about/about-the-filmmakers/1294350312-coquiehughes/.
40. 1 World 1 Family.me, Digital Diaspora, Family Reunion, accessed April 12, 2022, http://1world1family.me/ddfr-roadshows.
41. Sangodare, Black Feminist Film School, accessed April 12, 2022, https://www.sangodare.com/bffs.
42. To learn more about the specific institutions, players, and histories of this scene, I invite your interaction with the anthology, Yvonne Welbon's detailed introductions in the anthology, and her entire oeuvre which has been devoted over decades to finding, listing, sharing, and saving Black women's and lesbian film; see Sisters in Cinema, accessed April 12, 2022, https://sistersincinema.org.
43. Laliv Melamed and Philipp Dominik Keidl, eds., *Pandemic Media* (Lüneburg: Meson Press, 2020), https://meson.press/books/pandemic-media.
44. Alexandra Juhasz, "Intellectual Property and Creative Labor in a Rising Tide of Everything," *Restless Image III: The Urge to Share*, catalogue at the Etc. Galerie, Prague, 2019, Etc. Galerie, accessed April 12, 2022, https://etcgalerie.cz/en/neklid-obrazu-iii-potreba-sdileni-2].
45. See Aguayo, *Documentary Resistance*.
46. See McKinney, *Information Activism*.
47. In his editorial comments, Joshua Glick shared with me about "publications and grant-giving organizations that support contemporary documentary; for example, coalitions like A-doc and Brown Girls Doc Mafia, studios such as Firelight, funders such as JustFilms, and community facilities like the Echo Park Film Center." For this chapter, I've chosen to highlight some of the contemporary infrastructure that supports Black lesbian film, but each movement and community has specific institutions, people, technologies, funders, writers, and makers that match their needs.
48. Sisters in Cinema, accessed April 12, 2022, http://sistersincinema.org.
49. Roya Rastagar, "A Cosmic Demonstration of Shari Frilot's Curatorial Practice," in Juhasz and Welbon, 86.
50. Kara Keeling, "Construction of Computation and Desire: Introduction to Yvonne Welbon's Interview with Pamela Jennings" in Juhasz and Welbon, *Sisters and the Life*.
51. Candace Moore, "Producing Black Lesbian Media" in Juhasz and Welbon.
52. Pauline Gumbs, "Creating the World Anew: Black Lesbian Legacies and Queer Film Futures" in Juhasz and Welbon, *Sisters in the Life*, 250–251.
53. Jocelyn Taylor in "Narrating Our History: Selections from a Dialogue among Queer Media Artists from the African Diaspora," Ibid.
54. Waugh, *Show Us Life*, xxii.