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Bad Archives

How do marginalized communities archive media forms in crisis, and what can we learn from their critical practices? In particular, how does evidence of queer life persist in pandemic times? Queer culture is always at risk of illegibility, invisibility, and erasure. Within traumatic conditions such as the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s, and again during the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence of queer life persists in the *urgent artifacts* that emerge in crisis—artifacts that arise expediently as part of efforts to advocate for slowness, care, mutuality, queer joy, pleasure, refusal, and community. Media made by queer, Black, and Indigenous people, people of color, disabled people, immigrants, and others out of dire necessity "spread the word" to those who are otherwise unable to access services or support. Ephemeral in nature, urgent artifacts are distributed cheaply and quickly in real time, creating visibility within a community and recording experiences that might otherwise be lost. Examples include flyers, newsletters, readers, zines, buttons, meeting minutes, bulletin board posts, protest signs, video clips, spreadsheets, and other grey media that help these communities to organize in isolation. In urgent artifacts, we can see communities alive and in action, using print and digital material as connective, healing tissue; they help us reconnect and repair incomplete histories. Their circulation depends upon *alternative networks* that form in marginalized communities as a matter of survival. To learn from these networks, we need to look to the informal, independent, improper archives where queer life accumulates.

These "bad archives" take form lovingly and messily in private homes, in basements, in closets, in storerooms, and during protest, resulting in dead-end hand-coded web pages, unorganized folders and boxes, YouTube playlists, and other media collections that live beyond the sanitized logic of the institution. These are sometimes unsearchable archives that are cared for

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by stewards who personally invest time and energy in the survival of queer life, desperately protecting their collections under precarious conditions while maintaining access for the communities they serve.

I'm in search of bad archives, but I'm also the proprietor of one. Queer. Archive.Work (QAW), which is a project based in Providence, Rhode Island, enables me to bring together different facets of my practice as an educator, artist, and community organizer, within a physical space where queer life gathers in real time. The history of QAW runs parallel to COVID-19's timeline. It was incorporated as a non-profit organization on March 2, 2020, just days before the United States went into its first lockdown. For the next two and a half years, the project expanded, and it now involves a growing library of more than one thousand urgent artifacts (see Figure 1). The library is located within a two-thousand-square-foot print production studio, which also contains risograph printers, screen printing equipment, and a letterpress printer. The entire project, including the library and all of the print resources, is collectively cared for by dozens of people, none of whom are archivists. It's a loving community that shares responsibilities, works together, and occasionally opens the studio to the public for programming, including open library hours.

QAW is a space for labor, play, and storage, and there is so much joy and collaboration in the active mixing of these modalities. But how do we engage? Our answer to this question continues to be directly shaped by the wild contours of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges we encounter around access and safety. From issues involving masking and consent, to how equipment is shared, to the digital spaces that extend our community and allow us to connect in isolation, QAW is a product of the pandemic.

At QAW, we maintain a focus on print media as a crucial aspect of our mission, which manifests both in how we work and in what we collect in the archive. Our members include queer, trans, BIPOC, disabled, and immigrant folks. The print work we produce at QAW circulates through *queer time and space*, traveling non-linearly in multiple directions: out of our machines, into our library, into the Providence community, and onto digital platforms. At QAW, members have access to resources to print their own urgent artifacts and add them to the archive. This material commingles with the work of queer ancestors (such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Leslie Feinberg, José Esteban Muñoz, and others) and allows us to imagine other futures with artists and writers who can't be with us as well as futures with one another. We are not alone in this work; we are joined in energy by contemporary projects such as GenderFail, Wendy's Subway, Many Folds Press, Interference Archive, Brown Recluse Zine Distro, Digital Transgender Archive, and others who practice *archival justice*—"telling the truth about people who are alive today and about people who are already dead."[1]

1 This is just a small sample of the many small, independent presses, archives, and zine distribution collectives that have inspired QAW: the GenderFail Archive Project, https://genderfailpress.com/genderfail-archive-project.html; Wendy's Subway, https://www.wendyssubway.com; Many Folds Press, https://printingfortunes.info; Interference Archive, https://interferencearchive.org; Brown Recluse Zine Distro, https://www.brownreclusezinedistro.com; and Digital Transgender Archive, https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net. K. J. Rawson, "Archival Justice:

Figure 1. The library at Queer.Archive.Work (QAW), Providence, Rhode Island. Photograph by Paul Soulellis.

Searching for practitioners of archival justice recently brought me to the Sexual Minorities Archive, a twenty-thousand-item collection that has grown for over fifty years in a large, pink Victorian house in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Its archivist Ben Powers is a trans man who lives in the archive and collects

An Interview with Ben Power Alwin," *Radical History Review* 122 (2015): 185, https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2849603.

LGBTQIA media that might otherwise be discarded, including matchbooks, postcards, buttons, cassette tapes, posters, and pulp fiction novels. There's even a portion of a graffiti-covered wall from a queer bookstore in the collection; it was destined for the trash before it was saved by Ben, who now stores it in his garage. Because Ben finds materials in his everyday life to bring back to the house, he notes in an interview, "the collection is then almost an extension of my body and where my body goes."[2] As he describes, the only safe place for such a collection is a space where queer folks live and work—what Ben refers to in his interview as "queer materials in queer hands." Says Ben, "Also, it's a matter of control and being in my hands, which are transgender hands."[3]

Providing safety and care is central to bad archives, even as collections are sometimes stored in less than desirable conditions. PDFs, badly scanned images, and haunted listservs exist precariously, untethered to institutional servers, but give us permission to time travel, searching for lost voices, like those found in the Queer Zine Archive Project (QZAP), the Computer History Museum, and the ACT UP Capsule History, which are full of media that have somehow survived, now preserved as digitized files and spread out in many locations.[4] Searching for evidence of ourselves, of them, of whom we lost, we find improper archives that hold traces of community organizing, artistic projects, activism, and life. These are messy spaces of possibility and action.

During the HIV/AIDS crisis, in some of the same places where intense suffering was happening—New York City and San Francisco, among others—the early internet was blooming. New kinds of relations were forming on community bulletin board systems, between connected terminals, and, later on, in web browsers. Modern network culture emerged within a national context of enormous crisis, and they seem to contradict each other in spirit and outcome, one being a disaster (a failure of old systems) and the other a dream (a construction of new systems). While the HIV/AIDS pandemic and the early internet haven't previously been considered together, new work is emerging. Building upon the scholarship of Marika Cifor and Cait McKinney, we can trace the tangled evolution of new networks and radical alternatives to failed institutions through HIV/AIDS activism. Cifor and McKinney write, "Reframing what we know about HIV/AIDS through digital media places different people, groups, and technologies of response at the center of our Internet histories. Focusing on digital media can help to shift historical attention towards care and maintenance work, such as building and maintaining networks, circulating information, and keeping Web archives operational."[5]

Kathryn Brewster and Bonnie Ruberg map the early history of the internet with the HIV/AIDS crisis by examining a paper printout of the

2 Rawson, 182.

3 Rawson, 180, 185.

4 QZAP—Zine Archive, accessed January 10, 2023, https://archive.qzap.org; Computer History Museum, accessed January 10, 2023, https://computerhistory.org; and ACT UP Capsule History, accessed January 10, 2023, https://actupny.org/documents/capsule-home.html.

5 Marika Cifor and Cait McKinney, "Reclaiming HIV/AIDS in Digital Media Studies," *First Monday* 25, no. 10 (2020), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i10.10517.

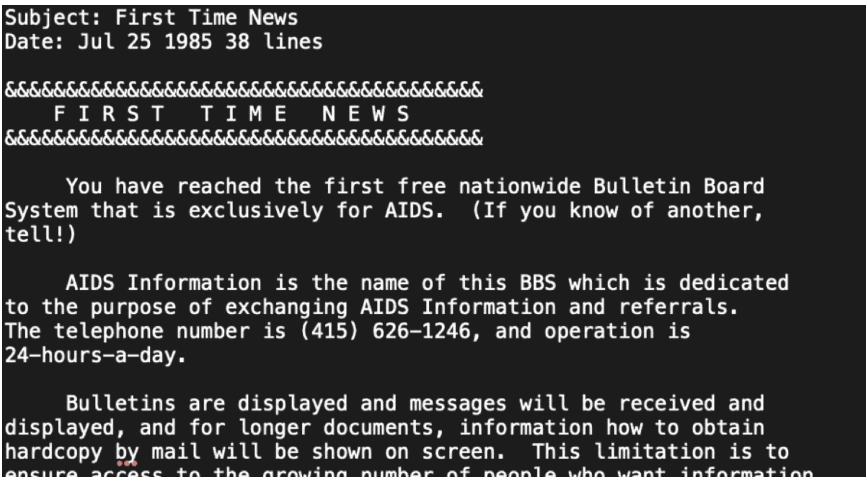

Figure 2. AIDS Info BBS "Open Forum," 1985. Screenshot by Paul Soulellis.

SURVIVORS bulletin board system (BBS), an "electronic support group" for members living with HIV/AIDS from 1982 to 1990. Brewster and Ruberg argue "that it is not only the content but indeed the precarious, shifting media format of the SURVIVORS printout, born digital and now preserved on paper, that gives it its meaning" and that the SURVIVORS printout "keeps a critical piece of the interrelated histories of HIV/AIDS and the Internet alive, while also raising valuable questions about the archiving of these histories."[6]

And so I go back to those early years of the network, to what's referred to as the digital dark age—just before connectivity was ubiquitous—to better understand what it felt like to search for others beyond the limits of physical isolation: to yearn for connection while the floor was dropping away.[7] When normative systems fail during crises, alternatives are built as a matter of survival, though they are often less visible in the shadow of monumental failure. I see it right there in the very first AIDS Info BBS "Open Forum" in 1985 (see Figure 2), in messages posted in 1995 to the AIDS Info BBS's "Caregivers Mailing List," and in the digital trans newsletters that circulated in the early 1990s. This media is difficult to find, but many of these examples and others live on in the Queer Digital History Project, a remarkable initiative curated and maintained by Avery Dame-Griff.[8] Included within the material on the project's website is Dame-Griff's Transgender Usenet Archive (TUA), which "offers access to over 400,000 posts (from 1994 to 2013) collected from six

6 Kathryn Brewster and Bonnie Ruberg, "SURVIVORS: Archiving the History of Bulletin Board Systems and the AIDS Crisis," *First Monday* 25, no. 10 (2020), https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i10.10290.

7 Terry Kuny, "A Digital Dark Ages? Challenges in the Preservation of Electronic Information" (paper presentation, 63RD IFLA Council and General Conference, Copenhagen, Denmark, September 4, 1997), https://archive.ifla.org/IV/ifla63/63kuny1.pdf.

8 Queer Digital History Project, https://queerdigital.com.

English language transgender-themed Usenet newsgroups."[9] Surfacing these survival networks gives us an important perspective on the hybridized nature of network culture, both then and now, based in both tech-utopian ideals and localized activism.

Within early digital forms, decentralized analog media such as community bulletin boards and telephone chains—along with the circulation of zines and artists' books, public space interventions, early video activism, record keeping, and community centers—are the connective tissue that we're looking for, where we'll find evidence of queer life and lost stories in pandemic crisis. But new forms have also emerged in response to the isolation and loss experienced now during COVID-19, including collaborative documents, mutual aid spreadsheets, Zoom meetings, Discord servers, and other tools for collective organizing. This hybrid mix of analog and digital media is necessary for survival. It reflects a powerful drive to use whatever is at hand to make connections and build networks that transcend the limits of geography and linear time, extending care and access to information in crisis.

We're using many of these tools and modalities at QAW, and this keeps us pliable as the pandemic continues to unfold. QAW is very much a "community memory terminal," a creative, social portal both inward and out.[10] Our name is also a way to open up dialogue about how we work. *Queer* both welcomes and limits whom the project serves. For those who share studio space at QAW, queerness is an expansive idea that resists definition. We use words like *archive* and *library* interchangeably and non-cooperatively, refusing to organize or classify the materials and ideas that exist in our collection, bringing what Kate Eichhorn has termed an "anarcho-punk-influenced philosophy" to our collective librarianship practice.[11] Eichhorn writes that this "is not about disregarding the necessity of order in either the library or the archive; rather, it is an attempt to alter the hierarchies that these spaces reify through their established practices of collecting and categorization."[12] Our library changes daily as different people and activities occupy the space, altering the collection, adding to it, and reorganizing it, keeping its structure fluid.

And we use the word *work* in our name to acknowledge the ongoing labor involved in these alternative practices and how communal care, cooperation, and collective organizing in a space of production and storage require hard work that is rarely seen. As the burden of that work is often put upon the same people who are most oppressed by racism and heteropatriarchy, much of what we do is about prioritizing equity and the fair distribution of labor, through collaboration and cooperativism.

9 Avery Dame-Griff, "Transgender Usenet Archive Project," Queer Digital History Project, accessed January 10, 2023, http://queerdigital.com/tuarchive.

10 A reference to "Community Memory" (1973), one of the earliest public computerized bulletin board systems, with its first terminal located inside Leopold's, a record store in Berkeley, California. For more information, see Bo Doub, "Community Memory: Precedents in Social Media and Movements, *CHM Blog*, February 23, 2016, https://computerhistory.org/blog/community-memory-precedents-in-social-media-and-movements/.

11 Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 126.

12 Eichhorn, 126.

On one of the library shelves at QAW is a treasured copy of *Cruising Utopia*, by José Esteban Muñoz, written shortly before his untimely death in 2013.[13] Queer theory emerged from the necropolitics of the Reagan-Bush HIV/AIDS pandemic years, and it gives us a way to look beyond chaos and crisis toward other futures. Queer theory directs our gaze not just to cables, clouds, and terminals but also to queer kinship, solidarity networks, and speculative imagining, away from heteronormativity. Muñoz wrote about the "then and there" of queer futurity, an idea that gives us permission to use history to move beyond the present.[14] This is an approach that helps us go beyond the limits of the historical archive by granting permission to travel in non-linear ways, navigating queer time through messy and radical ideas about printing, publishing, networks, theory, collectivity, queerness, erasure, and futurity.

Not everyone has survived. More than six million people are dead from COVID-19 worldwide.[15] What are we doing? What are we learning, in this extended moment? We do what we can: sharing skills, using publishing as an empowering force, and making zines and collaborative docs and other urgent artifacts to self-organize and self-educate. We collect, protect, and give access. We build bad archives with messy, queer, non-cooperative logics. We invent new ways to gather and create new kinds of hybrid network cultures, to make change, and to prepare for whatever's next. These impulses travel through time and connect to larger trajectories, allowing us to speak with ancestors, always emerging below and within crisis. We survive by sharing and communicating in community, with the garage door to the bad archive left open by us, to us.

13 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

14 Muñoz, 1.

15. Ensheng Dong, Hongru Du, and Lauren Gardner, "An Interactive Web-Based Dashboard to Track COVID-19 in Real Time," *The Lancet* 20, no. 5 (2020): 533–534, https://doi.org/10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30120-1.