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Cable Comes Out: LGBTQ Community Television on New York Public Access Stations

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the development of public access cable television programming made by and for LGBTQ people in New York City. Through archival research, interviews with the producers of these shows, and analysis of their content and textual features, I argue that LGBTQ public access programming reflected and amplified particular affects and experiences circulating in LGBTQ communities between the 1970s-2000s. My research traces the production and distribution of these programs to examine the possibilities afforded by and constraints inherent to creating local, low-budget television by teams of under-resourced producers. I suggest that cable access allowed LGBTQ people to experiment with and develop methods of queer television production before this opportunity was available on broadcast and commercial cable networks. A focus on affect and emotion throughout my analysis demonstrates how these programs function as what Ann Cvetkovich calls mediated “archives of feeling,” providing contemporary viewers with new windows into the study of LGBTQ culture and history in the U.S. My project thus illuminates the *feel* of queer television production, as a source for joy, empowerment, and community-building as well as precarity, conflict, tension, and loss for their producers.

According to my research, LGBTQ producers created more than 150 cable access programs over the past 50 years. My scholarship adds this programming into the archive of television history, which still heavily emphasizes commercial networks. LGBTQ media studies scholarship similarly focuses on commercial programming, typically recounting the dearth of queer television representation from the 1950s-1980s. As I discuss, the history of public service programming designed for LGBTQ community use has not yet been addressed. My dissertation chapters explore the historical significance of particular LGBTQ cable access shows in New

York City—the first city wired for cable, and therefore home to more than 60 LGBTQ cable access programs. I focus my analysis on New York’s cable market to explore the significance and impact of these shows on LGBTQ community culture within the city.

LGBTQ people interested in creating media, but unable to or uninterested in working in the commercial industries, took advantage of public access as an available platform through which they could produce television. My research suggests that LGBTQ cable access programming is a historically significant yet under-researched antecedent to contemporary queer community media, offering scholars, producers, artists, and activists a historical record of LGBTQ culture, news, arts, entertainment, and activism as well as a model for producing sustainable and independent queer media.

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I wish for every graduate student the opportunity to have an adviser and mentor as compassionate, caring, earnest, and thoughtful as Nick Davis. Nick supported me through virtually every aspect of my graduate education, listening patiently and attentively to my ideas on many long talks and phone calls over the years. His wisdom shepherded me through interpersonal conflicts, feelings of imposter syndrome, ethical quandaries about research and teaching, and anxieties about the job market. He went above and beyond—editing my job market materials line by line!—to ensure I was as prepared as possible for the years ahead. Our many conversations about queer media and gender and sexuality studies shaped my thinking about these subjects and my research—in particular, his careful facilitation of Northwestern’s Gender Studies Colloquia in 2017 and 2018 provided me with a welcoming academic environment to explore my own research in these subjects and to experiment with critical generosity as a student and scholar. I am so grateful for his kindness and am so lucky to be his student.

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activism that centers marginalized communities and his investment in my research has buoyed me throughout this process.

A number of other Northwestern faculty members have deeply impacted my graduate education. I am grateful to every member of the Screen Cultures faculty in the Radio/Television/Film department for teaching me how to be a scholar of media studies when I came into the program with virtually no background on the subject. Thanks in particular to Miriam Petty for her mentorship and friendship: I knew when we chatted happily about *RuPaul's Drag Race* during my graduate school interview that we were going to have much in common. When I served as a TA in her "Passing" class, Miriam modeled for me what it looks like to be an attentive educator invested in equity and access in the classroom. I am grateful to her for believing in my work and for listening to, encouraging, and partnering with graduate students in our advocacy. I am also grateful to Ariel Rogers, who served as my adviser during my first year of grad school and mentored me through many decisions early on, including how to choose classes and navigate Northwestern's systems. Her kindness helped me progress through my first year, and her partnership and mentorship this past year as my supervisor during my Graduate Assistantship felt like coming full circle at the end of this journey. Additional thanks to Mimi White, whose passion for feminist media studies helped ignite my own, and whose many insightful comments on my work during her Prospectus class in Spring 2018 shaped the direction of this project for the better.

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“Our feelings will lead us to theory, our theory to our action, our feelings about that action to new theory and then to new action.”  
– Kathie Sarachild, “A Program for Feminist ‘Consciousness Raising’”

“We should never presume the absence of something before we have looked for it.”  
– George Chauncey, *Gay New York*

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## INTRODUCTION

### Queering Cable Television on Public Access

“I learned everything I know from television. So in the early ‘80s, when cable television became king, part of their deal was they had to give the public access to certain channels on the cable box. So public access was a way for everyday people to produce television. And a lot of it was rotten, which made it so, so good. But when I saw it, I saw these irreverent, Monty Python, liberal, gorgeous freaks on their television show, I said that’s my tribe. So I joined in and I started making television in 1982 with them.”

– RuPaul Charles

In a 2019 interview with *Vanity Fair*, world famous drag queen and media mogul RuPaul Charles answered the question “how did public access TV affect your development as an artist?” with the above response.<sup>1</sup> RuPaul, known in the 1990s for his dance club hit “Supermodel of the World” and more recently as the host and producer of Vh1’s *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (2009-present), began his career in the 1980s on public access cable television in Atlanta. Appearing on *The American Music Show* (People TV, 1981-2005), a comedy program that included musical skits, interviews, and pre-taped segments shot in and around Atlanta, RuPaul often credits his early appearances on public access television with launching his career. Indeed, in his 2018 Emmy Award acceptance speech, RuPaul thanked Dick Richards, the openly gay co-host and producer of the show, for introducing him to his longtime business partners. As Charlotte Howell suggests in her microhistory of *The American Music Show*, “Where else could a young drag queen in Atlanta in the 1980s get regular exposure and on-camera experience by performing on television?”<sup>2</sup> A local, low-budget show that was “irreverent, antiestablishment, Southern, and

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<sup>1</sup> *RuPaul Answers Increasingly Personal Questions | Slow Zoom | Vanity Fair*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72AA1Ca1Nko>.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte E. Howell, “Symbolic Capital and the Production Discourse of The American Music Show: A Microhistory of Atlanta Cable Access,” *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 1 (2017): 23, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0053>.



unconcerned with the notions of good taste,” *The American Music Show* provided a platform for RuPaul to experiment with drag aesthetics and television performance.<sup>3</sup>

*The American Music Show* is one out of more than 150 cable access programs made by LGBTQ people over the past 50 years.<sup>4</sup> Starting in New York City in the 1970s, gay men and lesbians began to produce public access programming to shine a spotlight on their experiences, communities, concerns, and businesses. A site for formal experimentation, local politics, and activist content, public access television has historically provided an outlet for alternative media that reached communities underserved by the broadcast networks. RuPaul is one among a number of other well-known LGBTQ media makers who have created public access television. This list includes his longtime business partners and collaborators, Randy Barbato and Fenton Bailey, founders of World of Wonder, the production company responsible for *Drag Race* as well as a number of other LGBTQ-oriented films and television shows. This list also includes world-famous artist Andy Warhol, who produced two television shows on Manhattan public access channels between 1979-1983. Warhol’s cable television productions reflect the “pop” spirit of his independent films; experimenting with local television allowed Warhol to adapt “popular broadcast genres as a means of publicizing the everyday lives of people that network TV presented only as subjects of prurient display.”<sup>5</sup> Other independent LGBTQ artists, activists, and filmmakers, such as Jean Carlomusto and Gregg Bordowitz, began producing media on public access television in response to the emerging AIDS crisis in the 1980s: cable access became a valuable distribution method for safer sex education videos and the latest news about

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<sup>3</sup> Howell, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Public access cable TV programs are sometimes called “cable access” or “public access”—I alternate between both of these terms in my writing. They are synonyms.

<sup>5</sup> Lynn Spigel, *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 283.

HIV/AIDS. LGBTQ people interested in creating media, but unable to or uninterested in working in the commercial industries, took advantage of public access as an available platform through which they could produce television.



Figure 0.1 RuPaul on an episode of *The American Music Show* in 1985.

LGBTQ cable access programming similarly offered a diverse array of LGBTQ activists and artists, who often experienced discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, tokenism, and fetishization in mainstream broadcast and cable news interviews, a welcoming forum to discuss and debate their ideas and to present their artwork. On cable access shows over the years, filmmakers John Waters, Marlon Riggs, and Derek Jarman promoted movies deemed “controversial” by the mainstream press because of their queer content; writers Cherríe Moraga and Barbara Smith discussed the difficulties of publishing work as Mexican American and Black lesbian feminists, respectively; activists Michael Callen, Larry Kramer, and Vito Russo urged viewers to respond to the AIDS crisis and Sylvia Rivera and Leslie Feinberg protested transphobia within LGBTQ communities; actors Harvey Fierstein and Kate Bornstein sat for interviews about their latest theater projects; and queer, transgender, and gender non-conforming

performers like Holly Woodlawn, Ani DiFranco, and Divine showcased their talents on stage. These on-screen interviews and performances now provide contemporary scholars, artists, and activists with an expansive historical record of LGBTQ culture, news, arts, entertainment, activism over the past 50 years.

My dissertation adds LGBTQ public access programming into the archive of television history, where it has mostly been overlooked. With the exception of Eric Freedman's dissertation on gay cable access programming, a number of articles about the "queer potential"<sup>6</sup> of cable access, and brief references to cable access among other studies of queer alternative and independent media, there is scant mention of LGBTQ cable access programming in existing scholarship. Histories of cable television tend to focus on the programming of commercial networks like HBO, BET, Showtime, and Animal Planet, primarily because of their large audiences and high production values. Existing scholarship on cable access television often prioritizes its regulatory history and relationship to commercial cable, rather than the content, aesthetics, and political commitments of particular programs. LGBTQ cable access programming is also largely absent from studies of queer television history, which typically recount the relative dearth of representation in broadcast network programming from the 1950s-1980s, noting the way in which LGBTQ people were depicted as social problems, often via stereotypes and innuendo, when mentioned at all. Yet as Quinlan Miller writes, "being relegated to the butt of the joke is far from the whole story" of LGBTQ television.<sup>7</sup> A closer look at the history of cable access programming helps demonstrate how queer subcultural content appeared on television

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<sup>6</sup> Howell, "Symbolic Capital and the Production Discourse of The American Music Show," 3.

<sup>7</sup> Quinlan Miller, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

long before what Ron Becker, borrowing from *Entertainment Weekly*, dubs the “Gay ‘90s.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, as Amy Villarejo asserts, “television has always been queer.”<sup>9</sup> While often discounted by both critics and academics for its low production value and hyper-local content, the history of LGBTQ public access cable television presents scholars with a significant cultural archive.

Through interviews with the producers of these shows and analysis of their content and textual features, I find that cable access television made visible queer affective experiences that were typically overlooked in mainstream television programming. I argue that LGBTQ public access programming reflected and amplified particular affects and experiences circulating in LGBTQ communities in their contemporary moment. Tracing the production and distribution of these shows, I examine the possibilities afforded by and constraints inherent to creating local, low-budget television by teams of underpaid and under-resourced producers. Weaving together an analysis of production cultures, oral histories, and textual analysis, I suggest that cable access allowed LGBTQ people to experiment with and develop methods of queer television production before this opportunity was available on commercial broadcast and cable networks or online. A focus on affect, emotion, and feeling throughout my analysis demonstrates how these programs function as what Ann Cvetkovich calls mediated “archives of feeling” that provide new windows into LGBTQ culture and history in the U.S. These shows illuminate the *feel* of queer television production as a source for joy, empowerment, and community-building as well as precarity, conflict, tension, and loss for their producers.

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<sup>8</sup> Ron Becker, “Prime-Time Television in the Gay Nineties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics,” in *Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (New York: Routledge, 2004), 389–403.

<sup>9</sup> Amy Villarejo, *Ethereal Queer: Television, Historicity, Desire* (Durham; London: Duke University Press Books, 2014), 3.

## **Cable TV and Cable Access in New York City: History, Regulations, Practices**

In 1970, New York became the first major city wired for cable.<sup>10</sup> The invention of cable television, first known as Community Antenna Television (CATV), signaled a new era of television history: it added a number of channels to the television dial, expanding programming beyond the broadcast networks. Originally intended to improve reception of broadcasting to rural areas in the 1940s and 1950s, the cable industry experienced rapid growth in the 1970s as established media companies speculated on cable's potential as a lucrative new medium for commercial television programming.<sup>11</sup> The launch of new cable channels, HBO and Showtime in particular, and the inauguration of satellite television distribution, generated excitement about the possibility for "pay TV" to cater television programming to niche markets of paying subscribers across the country.

In 1972, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) issued an order requiring cable television systems in the country's top 100 markets to offer access channels for public use.<sup>12</sup> As a new category of television programming, public access channels would ideally shift power away from the cable operator and towards the general public. The FCC mandated that cable companies make available airtime and rent equipment and studio space to individuals and community groups to use for their own programming. The impetus for public access was similar to the ethos of public broadcasting, which sought to create noncommercial and educational television programming in the service of the public interest; indeed, the Public Broadcasting Act

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<sup>10</sup> Patrick R. Parsons, *Blue Skies: A History of Cable Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 309–13.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, and Anthony Freitas, eds., *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting* (New York, N.Y.: NYU Press, 2007), 18–19.

<sup>12</sup> Although federal courts eventually struck down the FCC's mandate for access programs as a result of the *FCC v. Midwest Video Corp* case in 1979, access channels became commonplace across the country in local franchise agreements.

in 1967 created “the philosophical and legal foundation” for public access television five years later.<sup>13</sup> The 1972 FCC order created four types of access channels: noncommercial public, educational, and government (PEG) access channels, and leased access channels run on a commercial basis. Airtime on PEG channels were offered to the public on a first-come, first-serve basis, whereas producers had to purchase airtime for leased access programming and in exchange, could run advertisements during their shows.

Public access was a key part of the “blue skies” discourse about cable television in the 1970s and 1980s. The term blue skies “came to suggest the unlimited, cloudless horizon of possibilities embodied in the emerging technology.”<sup>14</sup> According to media scholar Thomas Streeter, the enthusiasm for cable, expressed by a cross section of social groups including activists, cable operators, policy makers, television executives, and economists, centered around its potential to solve a number of social, political, and economic problems.<sup>15</sup> Television executive Fred W. Friendly, the president of CBS from 1964-1966, was one of the chief architects of public access in New York: as head of the Mayor’s Advisory Taskforce on CATV and Telecommunications, he recommended the implantation of channels for public use in a 1968 report.<sup>16</sup> Friendly was openly critical of the commercial imperatives of television broadcasting and hoped public access could “return television to its public interest mandates.”<sup>17</sup> Progressive policy makers like Friendly as well as community media activists imagined that cable television could interrupt the traditional “one way” nature of broadcast programming by offering a way for

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<sup>13</sup> Laura Linder, *Public Access Television: America’s Electronic Soapbox* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), 1.

<sup>14</sup> Parsons, *Blue Skies*, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Streeter, “Blue Skies and Strange Bedfellows: The Discourse of Cable Television,” in *The Revolution Wasn’t Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin (New York: Routledge, 1997), 228.

<sup>16</sup> Stephanie Harrington, “What’s All This on TV?: Naked Man in Bath, Traffic-Light Protest, School-Board Hassle, Real-Estate Advice,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1973.

<sup>17</sup> Howell, “Symbolic Capital and the Production Discourse of The American Music Show,” 6.

individuals to interact with and create their own television. Public access channels provided this opportunity: these channels were imagined as an “electronic soapbox”<sup>18</sup> or televisual town square that could cultivate a democratized form of local and mass communication.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, community activists hoped public access could fulfill “the dream of localism,” or the desire for televisual media to serve underrepresented communities.<sup>20</sup> Media activist and scholar DeeDee Halleck, founder of the nonprofit video collective Paper Tiger Television, stressed, “The opportunity that public access provides for wide dissemination of progressive issue-oriented media is an emancipatory moment yet to be realized.”<sup>21</sup> The optimistic promise that cable could serve the public interest lasted well into 1990s.

In 1970, two years before the FCC’s order, the New York City cable franchises “were the first in the country to require cable companies to reserve special channels for leasing to members of the public on a first-come, first serve basis.”<sup>22</sup> Manhattan’s two cable television companies, Sterling Manhattan Cable and Teleprompter Cable TV, inaugurated their access channels, Channels C and D, in 1971. In the first two years of operation, a *New York Times* article reported over “1500 hours of programming” on these channels including “school board meetings, block-association events, traffic light protests, discussion of tactics by Gay Liberation activists, abstract tapes, experimental films, ecology projects, children’s stories, antiwar protests, information about real estate, housing and business administration, feminist news, even flying lessons.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Linder, *Public Access Television*.

<sup>19</sup> Parsons, *Blue Skies*, 374.

<sup>20</sup> Howell, “Symbolic Capital and the Production Discourse of The American Music Show,” 4.

<sup>21</sup> DeeDee Halleck, “Paper Tiger Television: Smashing the Myths of the Information Industry Every Week on Public Access Cable,” in *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 123.

<sup>22</sup> Harrington, “What’s All This on TV?: Naked Man in Bath, Traffic-Light Protest, School-Board Hassle, Real-Estate Advice.”

<sup>23</sup> Harrington.

Manhattan public access television cablecast a diverse set of programs with varied production values, aesthetic formats, audience sizes, and political projects that were otherwise unseen on broadcast television.

As the *New York Times* review suggests, shows about subcultural, ethnic, and religious communities and political organizations in New York aired alongside pre-taped cabaret performances, live call-in shows, psychic readings, public hearings, roundtable discussions about current events, independent documentaries, puppeteers, alternative news programming, home videos, and unstructured conversations, musical performances, jam sessions, and casual on-set hang outs. The “Gay Liberation activist” show mentioned in this article was mostly likely *The Lambda Club*, a program produced by the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), a prominent gay liberation group known for its media-savvy public demonstrations or “zaps.” GAA members filmed their public protests on video in order to have a record of the demonstrations, after which members of the GAA videotape committee edited footage together for their weekly cable access show.<sup>24</sup> While no footage of this show remains, *The Lambda Club* was one of the earliest LGBTQ shows on cable access. Despite its impressive breadth and the political significance of some of its content, public access television programming was frequently met with scorn from critics. A *New York Times* review of a week’s worth of cable access programming called it “often-tedious.”<sup>25</sup> The DIY aesthetics of cable access confused and bored many viewers used to watching tightly edited, high-budget commercial programming.

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<sup>24</sup> Bill Bahlman, interview with the author, October 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Alex Witchel, “Vox Pop Video: A Public Access TV Guide,” *The New York Times*, October 30, 1994.



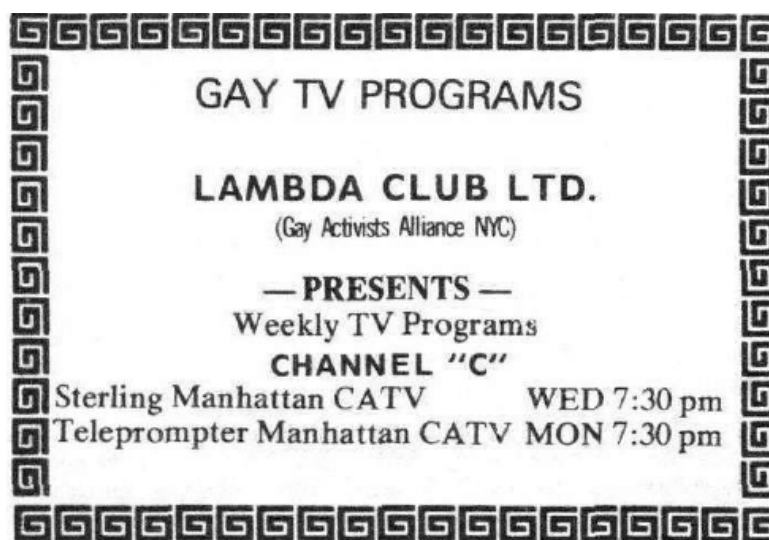


Figure 0.2 An advertisement for *The Lambda Club*, featured in the periodical *Gay Activist*, no. 11, pg. 6, April 1972. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/STRWLV586936699/AHSI?u=northwestern&sid=AHSI&xid=bf87c89e>. Accessed 22 June 2020.

In the mid-1970s, sexually explicit content on Manhattan cable programs began to cause controversy after the introduction of Channel J, a third cable access station in Manhattan added for leased access programming in 1976. “The cable company lawyers are biting their fingernails and many of the other public-channel users are worried about public access’s distorted image,” one *New York Times* journalist reported.<sup>26</sup> Critics and cable operators argued that late-night shows featuring nudity and explicit discussion of sexual activity “distorted” the purpose of cable access as a community forum. Consequently, television producers like Anton Perich, a Yugoslav immigrant and a member of the downtown counterculture, Al Goldstein, founder of the pornographic tabloid magazine *Screw*, Robin Byrd, a former sex worker, and Lou Maletta, the founder of the Gay Cable Network (the subject of my fourth chapter), endured public controversy and legal censorship of their long-running and provocative shows: Perich’s *Antonin*

<sup>26</sup> Harrington, “What’s All This on TV?: Naked Man in Bath, Traffic-Light Protest, School-Board Hassle, Real-Estate Advice.”

*Perich Presents* (1973-1978), Goldstein's *Midnight Blue* (1974-2003), Byrd's *The Robin Byrd Show* (1977-1999), and Maletta's numerous shows on the Gay Cable Network (1984-2000).

These shows included advertisements for phone sex hotlines, condoms, sex toy stores, and other sexually oriented businesses, which helped fund production, but drew ire from viewers and critics. While sexually explicit programming "confirmed the opinion of many in the heartland that Manhattan was a den of iniquity," their producers believed that discussions about sex and sexuality were not inherently obscene nor offensive, and that discussing sexuality without stigma was key to promoting healthy attitudes about sex.<sup>27</sup>

Courts struggled to regulate "obscenity" and "indecent" in cable programming through the 1990s. As Luke Stadel argues, "The discourse around cable television produced during the 1980s saw television reimagined as a sexual technology."<sup>28</sup> The presence of pornography on television produced new understandings of a medium historically associated with the domestic family. Cable access in particular became associated with explicit content because of its complex regulatory structure. Cable access is subject to federal, state, and local regulations, laws which sometimes contradict one another. FCC rules prohibit the distribution of "obscene" or "indecent" material over the airwaves, but state law in New York and the city's cable franchising agreement forbid cable operators from controlling cable access programming. Because cable operators in New York were not supposed to censor access content, producers could showcase sexually explicit material as long as it was not considered "obscene" by community standards, often defined loosely. Not subject to the same scrutiny and regulation as broadcast programming, LGBTQ cable access producers could openly discuss aspects of gay sexual culture on television,

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<sup>27</sup> Linder, *Public Access Television*, 10.

<sup>28</sup> Luke Stadel, "Cable, Pornography, and the Reinvention of Television, 1982–1989," *Cinema Journal* 53, no. 3 (2014): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2014.0026>.

including cruising, pornography, sexual liberation, and the burgeoning urban “gay lifestyle,” as I discuss in Chapter One. Into the 1980s and 1990s, this became especially important to LGBTQ producers after the onset of the AIDS crisis, as activists could include safer sex education videos and tutorials on their cable access shows, which I discuss in Chapters Two, Three, and Four.

Despite regulatory loopholes that allowed for explicit sexual content on cable access, in the 1980s and 1990s, the regulation of sex on cable television was the frequent subject of national social, political, and legal debate. Repeated attempts to block, regulate, and censor programming throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were challenged by cable access producers and civil liberties organizations. To date, the Supreme Court has continually struck down laws that attempt to censor sexually explicit cable access programming on First Amendment grounds.<sup>29</sup> In part because of these controversial and headline-grabbing legal battles, public access programming permeated broader television cultures in the 1990s. Popular recurring segments on *Saturday Night Live* and *In Living Color* like “Wayne’s World” and “Men on Film” respectively, along with episodes of *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, parodied the aesthetics of public access, exaggerating the perceived silly, self-indulgent, and amateurish nature of some of its content as well as its small audience sizes. Despite the often-critical view, the inclusion of public access TV in mainstream satirical television comedies signified a collective cultural awareness of public access as a televisual medium. By the late 1990s, public

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<sup>29</sup> A 2019 Supreme Court case, *Manhattan Community Access Corp. v. Halleck*, ruled that the nonprofit organization running public access TV in Manhattan can block particular programming from the air, because the nonprofit is a private entity and not a state actor, and therefore cannot be sued for violating the First Amendment. This 5-4 ruling, written for the majority by Justice Brett Kavanaugh, marks a change in public access regulation. How broadly it will be implemented remains to be seen. For more on this ruling see: <https://www.scotusblog.com/2019/06/opinion-analysis-court-holds-that-first-amendment-does-not-apply-to-private-operator-of-public-access-channels/>.

access television was seen as a key part of the American television system, regardless of its low-budget aesthetics and audience size.

Public access programming in New York entered a new era with the launch of Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) in 1992. Established by a franchise agreement with Time Warner Cable, then the primary cable operator in the city, MNN is a non-profit organization that began to operate Manhattan's (then four, now five) public access channels.<sup>30</sup> This signaled a shift in public access regulation in the city: MNN is a private entity contracted to run cable access programming in place of the cable operator. The structure of MNN as a non-profit organization opened up new possibilities for its programming. MNN became a "media learning, production, and distribution hub" housing state-of-the-art TV studios and organizing media education and production workshops for residents of the city.<sup>31</sup> Like many other public access stations adapting to contemporary funding pressures and new technologies, MNN has become a community media center. As Christopher Ali writes, community media centers "continue to fulfill their mandates of giving voice to the voiceless, empower community residents through media production, 'demystify' the media production process and foster digital literacy skills."<sup>32</sup> Amidst growing questions about the relevancy of cable access programming in the age of increased access to digital media technologies and the Internet, community media centers frame themselves as vital organizations that provide "a place to the placeless," or physical locations in specific communities that offer training in digital literacy and media production.<sup>33</sup> MNN's resources have provided producers of cable access programs with audiovisual equipment, studio space,

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<sup>30</sup> James Barron, "The Big Picture: What's On, What's Coming," *New York Times*, April 10, 1994.

<sup>31</sup> "About," Manhattan Neighborhood Network, accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.mnn.org/index.php/about-us>.

<sup>32</sup> Christopher Ali, "The Last PEG or Community Media 2.0? Negotiating Place and Placelessness at PhillyCAM," *Media, Culture & Society* 36, no. 1 (January 2014): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713507815>.

<sup>33</sup> Ali, 72.

production workshops, and additional funding in the form of production grants. For LGBTQ programs like *Dyke TV*, which I discuss in Chapter Three, and *Gay USA*, which I address in Chapter Four, the availability of MNN's resources alleviated some of the financial precarity faced by earlier producers. MNN continues to serve as a hub for community television in New York. Most of MNN's programming is now made available online as well as on cable television channels.

A number of regulatory decisions have impacted the structure and impact of cable access programming since the 1970s. The Cable Communications Policy Act of 1984, the 1992 Cable Act, and the 1996 Telecommunications Act deregulated and promoted competition within the cable industry. Most significantly, the 1984 Act "contained strong language in support of PEG access channels" but, unlike the 1972 FCC order, did not require cable operators to establish these channels themselves.<sup>34</sup> Instead, the 1984 Cable Act and subsequent regulations "allow franchisers, usually municipalities, to require public access of the cable operator as part of the franchise agreement."<sup>35</sup> State and local governments may opt out of providing cable access programming because there is no federal mandate for it. According to one study, public access stations have recently experienced a sharp decline in funding and "more than 100 communities have lost their PEG access stations since 2005."<sup>36</sup> Despite this decline, according to the Alliance

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<sup>34</sup> Eric Freedman, "From Excess to Access: Televising the Subculture," in *Spectatorship: Shifting Theories of Gender, Sexuality, and Media*, ed. Roxanne Samer and William Whittington (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 172.

<sup>35</sup> Linder, *Public Access Television*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Wenhong Chen et al., "Still Relevant? An Audience Analysis of Public and Government Access Channels," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 57, no. 3 (July 2013): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2013.816707>.

for Community Media, more than 870 community television stations across the country are still currently in operation.<sup>37</sup>

I provide a detailed account of this regulatory history to underscore how a complex set of legal and social processes have shaped cable access production over the past 50 years. As Thomas Streeter suggests, “the cable fable is a story of repeated utopian high hopes followed by repeated disappointments.”<sup>38</sup> While discourse and scholarship about cable access television has argued that it has the potential to create a public sphere that produces democratic forms of communication, scholars have begun to interrogate these qualities as inherent to the form.<sup>39</sup> Legal regulation, the threat of censorship, and financial precarity have curtailed the ability of public access programming to achieve democratic ideals. As Ali writes, “there is a disconnect between television policy and practice that obfuscates” the realities of local and low-budget television production.<sup>40</sup> The “blue skies” rhetoric about cable faded as the cable industry became increasingly marked by business competition, deregulation, and corporate conglomeration. Public access programming still exists, yet it rarely inspires the kind of utopian rhetoric expressed in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

As Carolyn Marvin argues, media “are constructed complexes of habits, beliefs, and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication. The history of media is never more than the history of their uses, which always lead us away from them to the social practices and conflicts they illuminate.”<sup>41</sup> I am interested in exploring how individuals have used

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<sup>37</sup> “Community Media Directory,” Alliance for Community Media, accessed July 17, 2020, [https://www.allcommunitymedia.org/ACM/About/Community\\_Media\\_Directory/ACM/Directory/Community\\_Media\\_Directory.aspx?hkey=8936f226-f206-43fd-b24e-2b4b337e1af0](https://www.allcommunitymedia.org/ACM/About/Community_Media_Directory/ACM/Directory/Community_Media_Directory.aspx?hkey=8936f226-f206-43fd-b24e-2b4b337e1af0).

<sup>38</sup> Streeter, “Blue Skies and Strange Bedfellows: The Discourse of Cable Television,” 238.

<sup>39</sup> Ali, “The Last PEG or Community Media 2.0?,” 71.

<sup>40</sup> Ali, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Carolyn Marvin, *When Old Technologies Were New: Thinking About Electric Communication in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Reprint edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 8.

cable access, rather than in its utopian possibilities or potentialities. While in many cases LGBTQ producers were inspired by blue skies rhetoric, this is not the determining or only framework expressed by these producers in their understanding of cable television and video technologies.

I consider LGBTQ public access programming under the rubric of community media. Kevin Howley defines community media as “grassroots or locally oriented media access initiatives predicated on a profound sense of dissatisfaction with mainstream media form and content, dedicated to the principles of free expression and participatory democracy, and committed to enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity.”<sup>42</sup> As one form of community media, LGBTQ public access television is grounded in queer community culture, history, and events. Largely inspired by dissatisfaction with how mainstream media addresses LGBTQ concerns, these shows have provided queer and transgender people with the opportunity to create their own television programming and to address their own social and political issues. For LGBTQ cable producers, political developments like the gay liberation movement and the AIDS crisis deeply shaped their understanding of the power and purpose of community television production. My analysis of these shows demonstrates how they address contemporary political issues and advocacy, in the service of “enhancing community relations and promoting community solidarity.” Howley’s definition of community media retains some of the idealistic rhetoric present in much scholarship on the topic. My focus on the production and distribution of LGBTQ cable access programming illuminates the structural issues and personal struggles faced by queer producers creating community television, as well as its political

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<sup>42</sup> Kevin Howley, *Community Media: People, Places, and Communication Technologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

possibilities. While other studies of public access refer to it as “alternative” or “independent” television, I prefer to use “community media” as term and analytic because cable access is a part of the cable system. The production and distribution methods of public access may differ from commercial programming, but as an institutional facet of cable that relies upon cooperation from cable executives and operators, it is not as alternative or independent as those concepts might suggest. Describing public access as community television helps preserve the differences between mainstream and local programming without erasing the ways it is tied to corporate television structures.

### **LGBTQ Media Activism and Queer Community TV**

The emergence of the gay liberation movement and LGBTQ media activism in the 1960s and 1970s created the conditions of possibility for LGBTQ cable access television. “From the Stonewall riots of 1969 to the American Psychiatric Association’s decision to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973, the U.S. gay and lesbian movement achieved unprecedented mass mobilization and unparalleled social change,” writes historian Marc Stein.<sup>43</sup> Existing social movements of the time and a number of LGBTQ uprisings in the 1960s marked by increased frustration with ongoing legal discrimination and police harassment of LGBTQ people helped catalyze the gay liberation movement. Gay liberation sparked the growth of LGBTQ institutions, services, newspapers, business, social outlets, and advocacy groups across the nation, establishing and affirming new understandings of gender and sexuality. As a consequence of gay liberation and the broader sexual revolution occurring in American culture,

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<sup>43</sup> Marc Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement* (Routledge, 2012), 79.



LGBTQ activism emerged as a powerful national movement that helped to destigmatize homosexuality.

The emergence of LGBTQ media activism was a crucial part of the gay liberation movement. A number of social and technological developments, in dialogue with widespread political movements of the 1950s-1970s, sparked the formation of media activist movements. The invention of cheaper and lightweight video technologies, such as the port-a-pak and the camcorder, granted marginalized groups newfound access to the means of film, video, and television production on a small budget. The simultaneous development of an alternative media infrastructure, including non-profit media centers, cable access stations, artist collectives, film clubs, conferences, and media journals, created “counter-institutions”<sup>44</sup> that established new professional networks for independent film and video-makers. Via alternative media movements, including Third Cinema, the L.A. Rebellion, the Chicano cinema movement, guerrilla video collectives, Black public affairs television, and the feminist film movement, marginalized artists, filmmakers, and television producers created their own independent media to express their artistic and political visions.<sup>45</sup> Using the resources at hand, these artists simultaneously pressured mainstream film and television writers, producers, and executives to address the ways in which media historically reproduced structures of inequality in front of and behind the screen. “An

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<sup>44</sup> Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of Vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, Visible Evidence ; v. 9 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 15.

<sup>45</sup> For more on rise and significance of television activism, see Devorah Heitner’s *Black Power TV* (Duke University Press, 2013), Chon Noriega’s *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000), Aniko Bodroghkozy’s *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement* (University of Illinois Press, 2013), Kathryn Montgomery’s *Target: Prime Time: Advocacy Groups and the Struggle over Entertainment Television* (Oxford University Press, 1990), Heather Hendershot’s *Saturday Morning Censors: Television Regulation before the V-Chip* (Duke University Press, 1999), and Deirdre Boyle’s *Subject to Change: Guerilla Television Revisited* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

emerging sense that representation was a right, not a privilege, structured media activism in this era,” writes Devorah Heitner.<sup>46</sup>

In the 1970s, newly formed activist groups like the Gay Activist Alliance, the Gay Media Task Force, Gay Media Action, and the National Gay Task Force adopted tactics used by African American, feminist, and Latinx media activist groups in order to hold television, film, and news media accountable for reproducing stereotypes about and pathologizing LGBTQ people. All three broadcast networks experienced pressure from LGBTQ activists in the early 1970s: this included picketing, letter writing campaigns, holding meetings with network executives, building friendships with closeted gay and lesbian television writers, and, when non-confrontational tactics proved unsuccessful, disrupting talk shows and news broadcasts and overtaking television offices with dozens of protesters. The efforts of gay media activists received national press attention and successfully changed best practices in Hollywood: by 1975, the networks pledged to avoid gay stereotypes in their scripts and began to develop new lesbian and gay characters on primetime shows like *Soap* (ABC, 1977-1981) and *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979). While activists continued to protest, lobby, and negotiate with networks, television portrayals shifted so dramatically that *The Washington Post* labeled 1976 as television’s “Year of the Gay.”<sup>47</sup>

Producing community television became another form of gay media activism, a way for individuals to create media steeped in LGBTQ culture rather than stereotypes and prejudice. These shows offer a promising example of what Cait McKinney calls “information activism,” a type of media activism that “brings together people, their visions of justice, and the media they

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<sup>46</sup> Devorah Heitner, *Black Power TV* (Durham; London: Duke University Press Books, 2013), 9.

<sup>47</sup> For a full account of gay television activism, see Steven Capsuto’s *Alternative Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000).

use to organize, store, and provide access to information” about contemporary social movements and marginalized histories.<sup>48</sup> As mentioned previously, GAA produced *The Lambda Club* in the early 1970s, one of the first LGBTQ-oriented shows to air on cable access. Between 1971-1973, a student activist group at New York University called Homosexuals Intransigent also produced a weekly cable access show called *Homosexual Renaissance*.<sup>49</sup> The existence of these shows suggests that LGBTQ groups were interested in using cable access for activist purposes from its very beginning. *The Emerald City*, which aired on Manhattan cable between 1977-1979, is the oldest LGBTQ cable show still available to watch—its records were donated New York’s LGBT Center and many episodes of the show have been digitized by producer Steven Bie. The subject of my first chapter, *The Emerald City* embraced the burgeoning “gay lifestyle” in cities across the U.S., showcasing performances by LGBTQ artists, writers, performers, and filmmakers, interviews with LGBTQ activists, and commercials from sexually oriented businesses.

Into the 1980s and 1990s, the production and distribution of LGBTQ programming on cable access television became a national phenomenon. From *Arizona Gay* in Tucson to *The Homo Homo Show* in Seattle, *Slightly Bent News* in Portland to *Between the Lines* in Nashville, and *One in 10 People* in Fairfax to *Texas Gay and Lesbian Review* in Austin, LGBTQ people around the country volunteered with their local cable access stations to produce television programming.<sup>50</sup> While many cities offered one or two LGBTQ-themed shows throughout this time period, New York makes for a rich site of analysis because of the sheer number of LGBTQ

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<sup>48</sup> Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*, Sign, Storage, Transmission (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

<sup>49</sup> Alan Henry Wurtzel, “The Electronic Neighbor: A Source and Content Analysis of Public Access Channel Programming on a New York City Cable Television System.” (New York, New York University, 1974), 82–83.

<sup>50</sup> Because few detailed records exist of cable access television, it is difficult to determine the exact dates that these shows aired. However, my research indicates that each of these shows aired at some point during the 1980s and/or 1990s.

shows that aired on Manhattan cable's multiple access channels: at least 60 programs, according to my research. I focus my analysis on Manhattan cable's LGBTQ shows to explore the significance and impact of these shows on the New York cable market and on LGBTQ community culture in the city. The quantity of LGBTQ shows in the region can perhaps be attributed to the fact that LGBTQ people in New York had access to cultural and technological resources that queer people in other parts of the country lacked: it was one of the only cities with multiple alternative media resource centers and more than one cable access channel. While my chapters focus on the New York programs, my insights and analysis are based upon viewing and learning about LGBTQ shows that aired around the country and interviewing the producers of shows in Chicago, Cincinnati, Vermont, and Florida as well as in New York.

The 60+ LGBTQ cable access shows in New York reflect the wide variety of television genres present on cable access. This included shows like *The Gay Dating Game* and *Be My Guest*, tongue-in-cheek satires of 1950's games shows; television news programs like *Pride and Progress*, *Gay USA*, and *Out in the 80s!*, which reported weekly local and national LGBTQ news, entertainment, and health information; variety shows like *Gay Morning America* and *Candied Camera*, which combined interviews, musical performances, comedy skits, and news programming; on the street interview programs like *The Glenda and Brenda Show*, on which drag queens Glenda Orgasm and Brenda Sexual combined drag and street theater to start discussions about LGBTQ and AIDS activism; scripted soap operas, like *Dark Secrets* and *Sixth Floor Harrison*, that often starred amateur gay actors in gay roles; comedic cooking shows, like *Come 'N Get It!* and *Bluegrass Country Cookin'*, often hosted by drag queens; soft core pornography, like *Men & Films*, *The Closet Case Show*, and *Robin Byrd's Men for Men*, which incorporated interviews with porn stars, clips from porn videos, and/or footage of sex at

nightclubs and parties; and shows focused on broadcasting activist content, such as *Lambda Club* and *Dyke TV*, which aired footage from weekly protests and demonstrations. The diversity of this programming conveys that LGBTQ producers used cable access as an outlet to experiment with and adapt standard televisual genres—news, comedy, satire, melodrama—long before out LGBTQ producers were able to produce analogous programming on broadcast, cable, and digital television. Interestingly, the genre diversity of this content increased over time. Jay Blotcher, an Associate Producer on the LGBTQ series *Our Time* (1983), reflected, “As we started to get more freedom and we started to push back with the advent of ACT UP and Queer Nation...we could explore other aspects of the artistic expression...we could be provocative and transgressive in other ways that were not always well behaved.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Jay Blotcher, interview with the author, October 2019.



Figure 0.3 A review of *The Gay Dating Game* in a July 3, 1989 issue of *OutWeek* magazine. Reprinted by permission from *OutWeek* magazine.

It's worth highlighting that a number of shows specifically focused on televising news and information about HIV/AIDS. These shows, including the Gay Men's Health Crisis' program *Living with AIDS* and ACT UP's *ACT UP Live*, helped educate and activate viewers around the AIDS crisis. Alexandra Juhasz defines these types of programs as "alternative AIDS television," characterized by "the use of video production to form a local response to AIDS, to articulate a rebuttal to or a revision of the mainstream media's definitions and representations of AIDS, and to form community around a new identity forced into existence by the fact of

AIDS.”<sup>52</sup> Alternative AIDS media is expressly political; it “comes from an explicit (or sometimes newly developing) political, educational, or personal commitment to prophesizing about the AIDS crisis.”<sup>53</sup> My analysis of LGBTQ cable television intersects with Juhasz’s analysis and other studies of AIDS activist video, examining how programs were designed to educate and galvanize New Yorkers around HIV/AIDS, especially in response to a lack of coverage by mainstream media outlets and a lack of political action by local, state, and national officials.

However, many LGBTQ cable access shows covered other topics, including entertainment, theater, legal advocacy, local and national politics, hate crimes, and community events, as demonstrated above. While the AIDS crisis was a vital concern to many of these producers and was the impetus for many to create their own programs, a comprehensive analysis of LGBTQ cable shows demonstrates that LGBTQ people discussed and debated a wide variety of political and social issues in the 1980s and 1990s that often intersected with but also exceeded the AIDS crisis. Analysis of these shows affirms Lucas Hilderbrand’s impulse “to argue against remembering AIDS activism exclusively in terms of trauma.”<sup>54</sup> That is, an analysis of access shows demonstrates both the wide variety of queer responses to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s as well as the many other issues, events, and experiences LGBTQ people experienced simultaneously.

My dissertation research focuses primarily on newsmagazine shows, which typically combined multiple genres of programming, including news, interviews, performance, comedy,

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<sup>52</sup> Alexandra Juhasz, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Juhasz, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Lucas Hilderbrand, “Retroactivism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 307.

pornography, and activist footage. Television newsmagazines represent “an extremely heterogenous, composite genre, combining both fictional and expository narratives and their various subgenres. In essence, this is a ‘montage’ genre in which a number of genres and discourses meet head to head.”<sup>55</sup> Using the newsmagazine format, producers showcase a wide variety of programming and therefore can cater their show to a wide audience. The shows I discuss—*The Emerald City*, *Our Time*, *Gay Morning America* (1983-1985), *Gay USA* (1990-2021), and *Dyke TV* (1993-2006)—each incorporate a heterogenous mix of interviews, performances, discussion, debate, news, and entertainment programming into their content. I focus on newsmagazine shows in part to get a broad sense of the scope of LGBTQ programming over time. Combining art, activism, sex, and entertainment, these shows help demonstrate the wider diversity of this programming within their different episodes and segments. Interestingly, newsmagazine programs have been better preserved than most other types of LGBTQ programming, perhaps because they are more often considered historically significant as compared to shows with a single focus. The preservation and digitization of these shows has facilitated my ability to study them, which I address towards the end of the Introduction.

Of the shows I study, none have received substantial scholarly attention. Academic research on LGBTQ cable TV has traced the establishment of the LGBTQ community as a specific market in the mid 1990s and early 2000s to which advertisers as well as cable and subscription-based channels began to promote their content.<sup>56</sup> While the creation of the LGBTQ

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<sup>55</sup> Hamid Naficy, *Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1993), 97.

<sup>56</sup> See Ben Aslinger’s article “Creating a Network for Queer Audiences on Logo TV” (*Popular Communications* 7, 2009), Ron Becker’s *Gay TV and Straight America* (Rutgers University Press, 2006), Anthony Freitas’ chapter “Gay Programming, Gay Publics: Public and Private Tensions in Lesbian and Gay Cable Channels” in *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting* (NYU Press, 2007), and Katherine Sender’s *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (Columbia University Press, 2005).



market has provided queer media studies with the opportunity to explore the sociopolitical stakes of visibility and mainstreaming, little research has focused on the significance of queer television programming before the 1990s, particularly with regards to the emergence of gay and lesbian programming via noncommercial and local television. Gregory Wood's chapter "'Something for everyone': Lesbian and gay 'magazine' programming on British television, 1980-2000" helpfully explores the historical significance of LGBTQ British newsmagazine shows on the public service network Channel 4; my research adds to this work by focusing on LGBTQ newsmagazines on American cable access. I build on Howell's study of *The American Music Show* and Kara Cormack's Master's thesis "*Antonin Perich Presents and TV Party: Queering Television via Manhattan Public Access Channels, 1973-1982*," which both explore how cable access shows sporadically hailed queer counterpublics on screen.<sup>57</sup> My research expands this archive by focusing on programming produced specifically by and for LGBTQ people. I also build on Eric Freedman's dissertation "Producing (Queer) Communities: The Politics of Public Access Cable Television," which offers the most extensive discussion of LGBTQ cable programming to date. Freedman surveys the production and distribution of gay and lesbian public access TV in the 1980s and 1990s in California and New York, focusing his analysis on entertainment programming and shows responding to the AIDS crisis. Freedman examines "how useful public access has been in the counter-technology movement" and suggests that "many queer access producers are adopting strategies of assimilation" when they employ conventional

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<sup>57</sup> Kara Carmack, "Anton Perich Presents and TV Party : Queering Television via Manhattan Public Access Channels, 1973-1982" (Master of Arts, The University of Texas at Austin, 2010), [https://www.academia.edu/30927992/Anton\\_Perich\\_presents\\_and\\_TV\\_party\\_queering\\_television\\_via\\_Manhattan\\_public\\_access\\_channels\\_1973-1982](https://www.academia.edu/30927992/Anton_Perich_presents_and_TV_party_queering_television_via_Manhattan_public_access_channels_1973-1982).

televisual aesthetics into their programming.<sup>58</sup> Freedman argues, “More public access programs need to start acting queerly, and need to begin by developing a constructive televisual aesthetic—one that needs to either break down the walls of the studio, or at the very least call attention to its architecture.”<sup>59</sup> While I too examine cable access production and distribution and its relationship to LGBTQ politics, I am less interested in evaluating particular programs as radical or mainstream in relation to their televisual aesthetics and content. My analysis focuses instead on the historical and affective significance of these programs: their contributions to queer television archives and the queer production cultures they helped establish.

### **Televisual Archives of Feeling**

My analysis of LGBTQ cable access TV follows recent work attuned to the way in which affect, feeling, and emotion circulate through and are “archived” in media texts. Community television programming is an important archive of LGBTQ history: this wide set of shows helps mediate, document, and preserve varied responses to formative and tumultuous sociopolitical contexts, including gay liberation, the AIDS crisis, and lesbian feminism, most significantly. I look to cable access television to trace emerging queer affective experiences in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. As Ann Cvetkovich argues, “Lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism, all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive.”<sup>60</sup> Cvetkovich looks for this radical archive of emotion through the study of “archives of feeling,” in which she situates

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<sup>58</sup> Eric Freedman, “Producing (Queer) Communities: The Politics of Public Access Cable Television” (Doctor of Philosophy, University of Southern California, 1998), 110–11, 162.

<sup>59</sup> Freedman, 155.

<sup>60</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 241.

“cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception.”<sup>61</sup> The study of archives of feeling is particularly important to the study of minoritarian histories: personal memories, ephemera, and experimental media provide accounts of LGBTQ life that are often absented in institutional archives.

Visual culture is a key site for the study of what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling,” which describes how “affective elements of consciousness” reflect and shape political transformation in the social world.<sup>62</sup> Williams argues, “a structure of feeling can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming.”<sup>63</sup> As Williams suggests, scholars of film and television may look to contemporary and historical media to trace the formations of structures of feeling. For example, in his study of the viral circulation of images of Black people, Herman Gray examines the “everyday mediated expressions and circuits of Blackness” to demonstrate “how it mobilizes action and sentiments (e.g., anxiety, stress, anger), perhaps even more general public feelings (e.g., indifferences, fatigue, impatience) about Black and Brown people.”<sup>64</sup> For Gray, an attention to the circulation of affect and feeling in digital media provides a compelling method for exploring the significance of “everyday mediated expressions” of Blackness. Similarly, Joseph Deleon argues that archives of LGBTQ video posted on YouTube, like that of the late gay videographer Nelson Sullivan, produce a “queer archive affect” in which historical content collected and digitized by LGBTQ individual

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<sup>61</sup> Cvetkovich, 7.

<sup>62</sup> Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132.

<sup>63</sup> Williams, 133.

<sup>64</sup> Herman Gray, “The Feel of Life: Resonance, Race, and Representation,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1109.

can capture individual and communal experiences, including friendship, intimacy, solidarity, nostalgia.<sup>65</sup> Finally, in her study of Black Power era television programming, Gayle Wald considers *Soul!* (1968-1972), a public television show that aired on W-NET, as a televisual archive of structures of feeling, “expressive both of a particular time and place and yet-to-be-realized formations.”<sup>66</sup> Wald discusses the feel of the Black Power era as archived in *Soul!*, looking to the show’s aesthetics, format, and programming to establish the way in which the show foregrounded Black cultural production and performance.

Following in this tradition, I suggest that studying the “everyday mediated expressions” of queerness on cable access calls attention to how community television circulates public feelings about LGBTQ people. I examine particular interview segments, recorded performances, person-on-the-street interviews, commercials and public service announcements, talking head direct address segments, as well as set design, genre, cinematography, and editing to explore how the formal televisual structure of these shows visually establishes themes and patterns that enhance the content of the program. Throughout my analysis, I demonstrate how televisual aesthetics typically deemed “amateur” or “low budget” help make visible queer affective experiences typically overlooked in mainstream television programming of the era. Hollis Griffin suggests that “The affective experience of gay and lesbian media is often one of normativity” that reflects a desire for “freedom and belonging...a flush of recognition and a fantasy of generality.”<sup>67</sup> I explore how LGBTQ cable access television circulates a wide variety of feelings,

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph DeLeon, “Nelson Sullivan’s Video Memories: YouTube Nostalgia and the Queer Archive Effect,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 86 (September 2020): 16–26, <https://doi.org/10.7560/VLT8603>.

<sup>66</sup> Gayle Wald, *It’s Been Beautiful: Soul! And Black Power Television* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>67</sup> F. Hollis Griffin, *Feeling Normal: Sexuality and Media Criticism in the Digital Age* (Bloomington ; Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2017), 1–2.

including pride, desire, anger, silliness, resentment, fear, and love, some of which are deeply tied to the fantasy of belonging and recognition in a heteronormative society, and others that express deep frustration, pain, and disidentification with normative and oppressive social structures.

It is worth noting that the terms “affect” and “emotion” are difficult to define, and particular scholars employ different definitions for these terms. Brian Massumi’s influential work considers affect as a “potential,” force, intensity, or capacity to be moved.<sup>68</sup> The difference between affect and emotion is crucial to Massumi’s mode of inquiry, in which affect signals a precognitive sensory experience whereas emotion represents the conscious processes and cultural constructs that make sense of affect.<sup>69</sup> A parallel mode of affect studies has emerged from critical race scholars, queer theorists, and feminist theorists attuned to the analysis of trauma, sentimentality, intimacy, violence, shame, hope, love, and anger, especially as negotiated and experienced within the public sphere.<sup>70</sup> Unlike the former project, the difference between affect and emotion is purposefully often less precise in these accounts, emphasizing the slippage between such terms. My dissertation follows Cvetkovich’s usage of affect as “a category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling” in order to retain the “ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive sensations.”<sup>71</sup> Like Cvetkovich, I fluctuate between the use of the terms affect, feeling, and emotion; the imprecision here signals

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<sup>68</sup> Eric Shouse, “Feeling, Emotion, Affect,” *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 8, no. 6 (December 2005), <http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/0512/03-shouse.php>.

<sup>69</sup> Shouse.

<sup>70</sup> Work by Sara Ahmed, Ann Cvetkovich, Lauren Berlant, Avery Gordon, Kathleen Stewart, and Jennifer Nash investigates affect, feeling, and emotion with particular attention to race, gender, and sexuality. See Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010), Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), Avery Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007), and Jennifer Nash’s *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>71</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2012), 4.

“a conception of the mind and body as integrated.”<sup>72</sup> As Griffin argues, “Gay and lesbian media blur feeling, emotion, and affect to present a range of ideas about desire and sociality.”<sup>73</sup> I interweave these categories in line with a queer and feminist project designed to locate feelings as historically contingent personal and public experiences that can evoke the experience of living under structural conditions of power.

### **Queer Production Cultures**

My analysis of LGBTQ cable access programming interweaves an attention to affect and feeling with a production studies approach alongside textual analysis. Taking seriously Griffin’s assertion that “Gay and lesbian media forms are sites of psychic investment and bodily experience for both the people who make them and people who consumer them,” I examine how individual LGBTQ producers interpret and influence the development, production, and distribution of queer media.<sup>74</sup> As Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks, and John Caldwell argue, production studies investigates “the lived realities of people involved in media production as the subjects for theorizing production as culture.”<sup>75</sup> This approach asks, “How do media producers represent themselves given the paradoxical importance of media in society? How do we, as researchers, then represent those varied and contested representations?”<sup>76</sup> Production studies looks both to the lived experiences of producers as well as the industry and the texts themselves to understand how meaning is produced in a cultural object.

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<sup>72</sup> Cvetkovich, 4–5.

<sup>73</sup> Griffin, *Feeling Normal*, 3.

<sup>74</sup> Griffin, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John T. Caldwell, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), 4, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/northwestern/detail.action?docID=446571>.

<sup>76</sup> Mayer, Banks, and Caldwell, 4.

Studies of cable access television have too often focused on the relationship between cable access and public sphere, ignoring the “critical possibilities inherent in the *production* of public access television.”<sup>77</sup> When analyses of cable access do examine production, they often focus on the “cheap,” “amateur,” or “bad” aesthetics of these shows. For example, Patricia Aufderheide criticizes the “pathetic, homemade version of entertainment” found on cable access, suggesting that many “fringe” shows distract from the “true” purpose of public access as a forum made to enrich the “marketplace of ideas” in the public sphere.<sup>78</sup> As King and Mele write, “‘Amateur’ quality video is seen by producers, activists, and audiences alike as threatening the medium’s utopian promise.”<sup>79</sup> A closer look at cable access production demonstrates the significance of “fringe” programming with “low” production value to broader cultural conversations and debates, as well as to audiences, activists, and the producers themselves. As RuPaul suggests in his 2019 YouTube interview with *Vanity Fair*, the amateur, irreverent quality of cable access was central to its appeal to LGBTQ producers: “a lot of it was rotten, which made it so, so good.”

Building upon work in queer production studies, I suggest that queer community television on cable access expanded opportunity and access to marginalized producers typically excluded from the mainstream culture industries. In his defining work on the topic, Alfred Martin, Jr. asserts, “queer production studies makes space for queers to use entrepreneurial methods to create media that reflect their experiences...queer production studies is invested in

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<sup>77</sup> Donna L. King and Christopher Mele, “Making Public Access Television: Community Participation, Media Literacy, and the Public Sphere,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 43, no. 4 (Fall 1999): 607.

<sup>78</sup> Patricia Aufderheide, “Cable Television and the Public Interest,” *Journal of Communication* 42, no. 1 (March 1, 1992): 58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1992.tb00768.x>.

<sup>79</sup> King and Mele, “Making Public Access Television: Community Participation, Media Literacy, and the Public Sphere,” 607.

the many facets of queer production *and* the production of queerness.”<sup>80</sup> For queer production studies in particular, it is essential to analyze how gender and sexuality inform the production process as well as how LGBTQ identities are produced on screen via particular industrial and cultural practices. Television is an important site for queer production studies: marginalized filmmakers, who often have difficulty sustaining careers in film, have historically found more opportunity to write, produce, and direct in television. Aymar Jean Christian’s analysis of digital television production and distribution provides a good example. Exploring the development of hundreds of web series produced by LGBTQ, Black, and Latinx creatives, Christian writes, “When producers work independently and release online, they circumvent legacy television’s longstanding structures, opening up possibilities in art, production, distribution, and politics.”<sup>81</sup> By interviewing the producers involved in developing, producing, funding, and distributing web series, Christian finds independent and digital distribution allows LGBTQ producers and producers of color to “address the personal, cultural, social, and political realities and fantasies of the communities they represent.”<sup>82</sup>

LGBTQ cable access television shows are rich in what Christian calls “cultural production value.” The measure of production value in legacy television typically considers “complex, seamless technical execution supported by large crews of workers—lighting, sound, design, visual effects.”<sup>83</sup> Christian suggests that determining the quality of programming based on conventional notions of production value privileges media creators with the power, social

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<sup>80</sup> Alfred Martin Jr., “Introduction: What Is Queer Production Studies/Why Is Queer Production Studies?,” *Journal of Film and Video* 70, no. 3–4 (2018): 5, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jfilmvideo.70.3-4.0003>.

<sup>81</sup> Aymar Jean Christian, *Open TV: Innovation beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), 71.

<sup>82</sup> Christian, 110.

<sup>83</sup> Aymar Jean Christian, “Expanding Production Value: The Culture and Scale of Television and New Media,” *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 14, no. 2 (June 2019): 255, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1749602019838882>.



connections, and financial resources to fund this programming—producers who are typically white, heterosexual, cisgender, and male. Christian proposes cultural production value, a different metric that looks at “the degree to which workers’ cultural capacity informs the final product,” to take seriously the work of marginalized media producers.<sup>84</sup> This includes considering if the producers and/or crew are a part of the communities they strive to represent on screen, if the narrative sincerely represents the community in question, and if the narrative challenges or reveals power dynamics experienced by that community. Measuring cultural rather than technical production value expands conventional understandings of quality television: it opens up these categories to include smaller-scale, independent, under-resourced productions created by underrepresented media makers. Indeed, LGBTQ cable access television shows reflect their producers’ deep investments in LGBTQ community, history, news, and culture, even as they typically lack robust financial resources. Examining the production and distribution of these shows in terms of their cultural production value allows scholars to reframe judgements of value around “available resources and cultural context” rather than exclusionary commercial standards.<sup>85</sup>

Conducting interviews with producers of these programs provides insight into the everyday realities of community television production and distribution. Interviewing is a key method of production studies. As Julia Himberg writes, “cultural workers serve as mediators of sociopolitical life.”<sup>86</sup> In her interviews with LGBTQ media executives, producers, market researchers, and advocates, Himberg finds that “industry workers actively integrate their own

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<sup>84</sup> Christian, 262.

<sup>85</sup> Christian, *Open TV*, 11.

<sup>86</sup> Julia Himberg, *The New Gay for Pay: The Sexual Politics of American Television Production* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 7.

diverse concerns, values, and causes with the needs of the business.”<sup>87</sup> In my own research, interviews with the producers and hosts of LGBTQ cable access shows have been a crucial source of information about the social experience of queer television production. In total I interviewed 30 individuals for this project. I primarily interviewed people who produced, created, and/or hosted these shows. I was able to locate many participants from their personal and professional websites and asked each person I spoke with for referrals to other people to interview. I was able to conduct a number of interviews in person, but I spoke with the majority of people over the phone, since most still live in the New York area and I conducted most of my research remotely from Chicago. Interviews typically lasted between 45-90 minutes.

Most people were enthusiastic about sharing their stories and experiences (and sometimes, to my great appreciation, their photos and personal records) from their time working on particular shows with me. As Himberg suggests, investigating the experiences of cultural workers reveals “the ‘micro-politics’ of everyday meaning-making” in television production that can’t be understood “by looking at television representations themselves as finished products.”<sup>88</sup> Each person I interviewed helped explain details of the production and distribution process I would not have been able to glean from watching the shows themselves: frequent topics of conversation included prepping for the production of an episode, inviting guests, fundraising, advertising, maintaining equipment and technology, and measuring audience response.

These conversations have helped me capture the “felt and even traumatic dimensions” of queer television production.<sup>89</sup> For many LGBTQ cable access producers, creating television was a deeply affecting experience. Throughout my interviews, participants voiced how “the process

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<sup>87</sup> Himberg, 133.

<sup>88</sup> Himberg, 6.

<sup>89</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 167.

of media production is itself politically transformational.”<sup>90</sup> Creating LGBTQ television often shaped the personal and political commitments of my interviewees, particularly their relationships to wider LGBTQ communities and their appreciation for LGBTQ history. Most felt that their individual contribution to a particular show helped shape LGBTQ community life in New York and LGBTQ history in general. While producing cable access television was an empowering and affirming experience for many, the experience evoked bittersweet and difficult feelings for others, including grief, nostalgia, and lingering resentment. The loss of friends, colleagues, and loved ones to AIDS was a frequent topic of discussion—recalling memories of working with those who died of AIDS-related complications was an emotional experience for many I interviewed. Other difficult topics included unresolved conflicts with former colleagues (and, sometimes, lovers), political disagreements, general frustration with financial instability during production and the lack of technical precision in their shows, unequal divisions of labor in production and distribution, and occasionally, tensions and conflicts across racial, gendered, and class differences. While some of my interviewees were reluctant to share information that might be deemed personal, gossipy, or critical, others were interested in discussing the conflicts, intimate relationships, and disagreements they remembered. It has been extremely helpful to help understand these conflicts and difficult feelings, which often signaled larger issues in the experience of queer community television production.

Analyzing the emotional experiences described by my interviewees allowed me to establish what I refer to as the *feel* of queer production throughout my chapters. As Deborah Gould writes, emotion is “a crucial means by which human beings come to know and understand

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<sup>90</sup> King and Mele, “Making Public Access Television: Community Participation, Media Literacy, and the Public Sphere,” 608.

themselves and their contexts, their interests and commitments, their needs and their options in securing those needs.”<sup>91</sup> Both emotion and feeling—or “bodily, felt experience”—provide individuals with ways of knowing, interpreting, and critiquing the personal and political.<sup>92</sup> While the differences between affect, feeling, and emotion are imprecise, I typically refer to affect in relation to collective emotional experiences circulating through LGBTQ communities in a given time period, and feeling in relation to the specific experiences of those I interviewed. As Gould affirms, examining emotion and feeling can provide insight into the affective appeals of particular social movements: “Affect is a key force in social change.”<sup>93</sup> Recounting the emotion work of ACT UP, Gould suggests that activist movements “are sites for nurturing counter-hegemonic affects, emotions, and norms.”<sup>94</sup> Building on Gould’s work, I suggest that affect is a key force in queer television production. Exploring the emotional experiences of LGBTQ television creators reveals the affective appeals of media production, particularly as a source for community connection and social change. While certainly conflict and financial struggle produced experiences of frustration and resentment amongst producers, analysis of the interviews I conducted demonstrates the “pleasures and intensities” of queer television production as a process through which individuals imagined and enacted practices of resistance to heteronormative commercial media.<sup>95</sup>

I was moved by the conversations I had with my interviewees, particularly because I realized that my opportunities to speak with and learn from older LGBTQ people have been few

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<sup>91</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS*, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 17.

<sup>92</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS*, 22.

<sup>93</sup> Gould, 26.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

and far between. Most people I interviewed were 30-40 years my senior. It was rewarding to have conversations about LGBTQ politics, activism, and life with older LGBTQ adults and seniors. Cable access is “old media” (even though it still exists), and my interviewees generally appreciated the opportunity to participate in my project to document a history they helped establish. These conversations shaped my relationship to my research; while we did not always agree, I began to feel a deep sense of responsibility to my conversational partners in order to do justice to their work. To address some of these subtleties, I incorporate autoethnographic reflections about the interview process into my analysis. In these sections I critically analyze the content of the interviews and the interview process, paying close attention to the social dynamics of these conversations.

### **Locating Queer Cable TV: Methods, Archives, and Absences**

I watched hundreds of episodes of LGBTQ cable access programming as part of my research, in addition to interviewing the producers of these shows. The process of searching for viewable cable access TV from the 1970s onward revealed precarities found both in the study of queer history and television history. José Muñoz writes, “Queerness has an especially vexed relationship to evidence.”<sup>96</sup> While LGBTQ people have historically been surveilled, policed, and punished for expressing queer sexuality and desire, LGBTQ histories have been subject to institutional neglect from traditional academic libraries, archives, and museums. “That gay and lesbian history even exists has been a contested fact, and the struggle to record and preserve it is exacerbated by the invisibility that surrounds intimate life, especially sexuality,” writes

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<sup>96</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 65.

Cvetkovich.<sup>97</sup> LGBTQ cable access television programs are subject to multiple erasures: as local television programs that focus on queer subject material, they are not often considered historically significant cultural objects deserving of the substantial human and financial resources necessary for preservation and digitization. Addressing some of the archival difficulties I encountered while researching this programming, I describe here how I navigated the relative dearth of viewable access television content, the notable absence of racial and gender minorities on screen, and the difficulty of studying cable access reception.

### *Finding Queer TV Archives*

I located the records of a number of LGBTQ cable access shows in queer community archives, including the archive of the LGBT Community Center in New York and the Gerber/Hart Library and Archives in Chicago. To account for “erased and invisible histories,” LGBTQ people have founded these community based archives and oral history projects to preserve queer histories, often relying upon individual donations from private collectors, activists, academics, and others invested in these histories.<sup>98</sup> Queer archives offer both a material history of LGBTQ ephemera as well as a site for collective memory and queer world building, what writer Dana Phillips calls “the capacity of queer people who have been marginalized or ostracized from society to create alternative cultures, spaces, or histories for themselves.”<sup>99</sup> The preservation of cable access programming in queer archives has helped collect and create LGBTQ histories. Yet because archives rely upon individual donations, collections of LGBTQ history are piecemeal—much of

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<sup>97</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 242.

<sup>98</sup> Cvetkovich, 8.

<sup>99</sup> Dana Phillips, “Queer Worldbuilding: The Radical (Re)Imagining of Space, Time, and Self,” *Prizm Magazine* (blog), December 2, 2019, <https://prizmnews.com/2019/12/02/queer-worldbuilding/>.

what is preserved is left up to a chance and is based upon what particular individuals have deemed historically significant.

Television history is similarly piecemeal. As Lynn Spigel has argued, “Given its ephemeral nature, television is still largely viewed as disposable culture, and what is saved is in large part based on what happens to be recorded, what happens to be in someone’s basement, a thrift store, flea market, someone else’s flight or fancy.”<sup>100</sup> This is particularly true for local television programming: television archives tend to preserve commercial cable and broadcasting programming, which are considered historically significant because of their wide audiences. Histories of local television stations in cities across the country are lesser known and not well preserved. Existing records are often incomplete: producers of these shows frequently taped over their own programs when producing new episodes to offset the cost of videotape, effectively erasing their own programming from the historical record. Consequently, like the ephemera in queer archives, the local television programming that remains available to watch is not necessarily representative of the whole: particular episodes of a show may be missing or may have degraded in quality so that they cannot be watched anymore. When local TV shows are preserved and digitized, these records exist sometimes by chance, and sometimes because individual producers and/or viewers have invested time, money, and energy into the preservation process by donating tapes to archives and libraries and by uploading digital files to YouTube themselves. The majority of LGBTQ cable access programs are no longer available to watch either on tape or online: taped episodes may have been recorded over, thrown away, or remain in basements and thrift stores, likely deteriorating.

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<sup>100</sup> Lynn Spigel, “Our TV Heritage: Television, the Archive, and the Reasons for Preservation,” in *A Companion to Television*, ed. Janet Wasko (John Wiley & Sons, 2009), 92.

Jack Halberstam argues that a queer archive “is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity. In order for the archive to function it requires users, interpreters, and cultural historians to wade through the material and piece together the jigsaw puzzle of queer history.”<sup>101</sup> I have been able to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of this history via a wide variety of methods: oral history interviews with producers, listings and reviews of the shows in both the mainstream and gay press, press releases, photos, notes from board meetings, marketing materials, awards, audience research, show logs, correspondence, fan mail, journal entries, and the content of the shows themselves. I have been able to find these records at the New York Public Library, the Fales Library at New York University, the Smith College Special Collections, and on YouTube, in addition to the programming preserved in queer community archives. From this research, I amassed an extensive online database of LGBTQ cable access programs, likely the first of its kind.<sup>102</sup> While I learned about LGBTQ cable access shows that aired in cities across the country, as a media studies scholar I focused my research on shows available to watch to get a sense of their textual aesthetics, which narrowed my focus to a small number of shows. Constructing a history based on varied sources has allowed me to fight back against the erasure of LGBTQ cable access shows from archival records.

### *Exploring Race and Gender on LGBTQ Cable Access*

Throughout my research, I experienced firsthand how records of LGBTQ history often reflect structures of power and familiar silences. The accomplishments of white gay and lesbian

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<sup>101</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), 169–70.

<sup>102</sup> My database can be accessed at this link: [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1yNJE\\_0DOWP-5DD3mtX3u4uo1oZaIxW33tVNze2lbelk/](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1yNJE_0DOWP-5DD3mtX3u4uo1oZaIxW33tVNze2lbelk/).



activists and artists from coastal cities tend to dominate LGBTQ history collections, whereas the histories of queer and transgender people of color, particularly in the Midwest and South, have not been as thoroughly preserved. Indeed, the vast majority of institutionally archived and digitized LGBTQ cable access shows—that is, those I was able to watch at libraries and archives affiliated with public and private institutions—are those created by white queer people. This is not to say that queer people of color did not create their own alternate film, television, and video programming. Recent histories of alternative television and video production demonstrate some of the ways LGBTQ people of color created media for political and artistic expression. For example, both Wald and Heitner’s work on Black public affairs television highlight Black gay producer Ellis Haizlip, who hosted the groundbreaking program *Soul!* between 1968-1973.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Black lesbian writer and activist Jewelle Gomez began her career in media as a staff member on *Say Brother*, a Black public television program in Boston.<sup>104</sup> Through video collectives such as House of Color and Not Channel Zero in the late 1980s and early 1990s, LGBTQ people of color created short independent films screened at festivals and community centers. At least two cable access television shows in New York focused on LGBTQ Latinx people: *Homovisiones* and *Latinos en Acción*.<sup>105</sup> Yet while LGBTQ people of color have created public television, alternative video, and cable access television, these media are less frequently archived and preserved than the work of their white peers. To my own great frustration, I could not find or access archived and/or digitized records of LGBTQ cable access shows created by

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<sup>103</sup> See Gayle Wald’s chapter “Freaks Like Us: Black Misfit Performance on *Soul!*” in *It’s Been Beautiful: Soul! and Black Power Television* (Duke University Press, 2015) and Devorah Heitner’s chapter “The New Black Magic: Black Arts and Women’s Liberation on *Soul!*” in *Black Power TV* (Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>104</sup> Heitner, *Black Power TV*, 19.

<sup>105</sup> While I hoped to watch and write about *Homovisiones*, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented me from traveling to visit the show’s archives at the Hunter College Center for Puerto Rican Studies. As far as I am aware, *Latinos en Acción* has no digital or archival presence.

people of color, so I could not watch and write about these shows, even though I know they existed.

Because the majority of shows I could watch were produced by white LGBTQ people, white, well-educated, and cisgender gay men and lesbians made up the vast majority of my interviews. My research indicates that the majority of LGBTQ people who produced cable access shows were white cisgender gay men. I was at first surprised that this homogeneity mirrored divisions and exclusions within mainstream media industries, where white and well-educated men tend to hold the majority of the positions of power. A closer look at cable access production helps explain this dynamic. First, cable access production typically occurs on a volunteer basis. While theoretically anyone can produce a program at their local cable access station or community media center, it is likely that white gay men historically have had greater access to the social and financial capital and free time necessary to produce cable access shows, as compared to women, queer people of color, and transgender people, who typically face greater financial precarity because of institutional sexism, racism, and transphobia. Many of my interviewees described, explicitly or implicitly, how certain privileges aided their work: many solicited funds from wealthy friends, lovers, and/or family members to offset the costs of production, invested their own money into their programming, eschewed nine-to-five work in order to prioritize producing their shows, and relied on social networks to find on-screen guests and gain access to community events. It was common for producers to work closely with their friends and romantic partners on these shows, who were often other white gay people. Of the shows I study, only *Dyke TV* undertook outreach efforts to community groups to solicit work with and from LGBTQ people of color, which I discuss in Chapter Three. Through my interviews, it became clear that successful cable access production—that is, production that

lasted longer than one episode or one season—often relied upon the privileges and social networks of white, wealthy, and educated gay and lesbian people.

Segments featuring queer people of color and trans people on LGBTQ cable access shows often yield dynamic and historically significant conversations that address topics related to race, gender, and sexuality and provide these guests with a platform to share their advocacy, performance, and life experiences—but these segments are generally few and far between. When people of color and transgender people appear on screen in LGBTQ cable access television, they most often appear as invited guests, rather than as the producers and hosts of the shows. RuPaul states, “public access was a way for everyday people to produce television” in the epigraph that begins this Introduction; however, it’s clear the “everyday people” often did not typically include out gay and Black people like him. Indeed, RuPaul was not the host of *The American Music Show* or any other gay public access show, but rather a frequent guest.

This structural archival absence also helps explain the relative dearth of transgender cable access programming. The vast majority of LGBTQ cable access programs have been created by cisgender gay and lesbian people and only occasionally discuss topics related to trans identity.<sup>106</sup> Of the 30 producers I interviewed, only one identified as transgender: Jules Roskam, a filmmaker who got his start in media production on *Dyke TV*. This does not mean there have been no other trans-identified cable access producers or trans-specific shows. I have found trace mentions of trans cable access shows in a number of books, articles, and websites. For example, when defending “fringe” cable access programming, King and Mele mention a show called *So, You’re a Crossdresser!* on Cape Cod public access in the late 1990s, which reportedly

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<sup>106</sup> In the final months of my dissertation research, I came across a long-running interview-based Manhattan public access show hosted by a trans woman called *The Diana Montford Show*, which has been on the air since 1990. I hope to research and write about this show at a later time.

“provide[d] public information to the community about transvestitism.”<sup>107</sup> Similarly, Elana Levine mentions the existence of a show called *Transsexuals* on New York cable access in the early 1970s in a passage about the “racy” nature of late night cable programming.<sup>108</sup> Alan Wurtzel, in his dissertation on early cable access programming in New York, writes, “On a program produced by *Global Village* about transsexuals, one of the participants exposed her genitals on-camera to show the results of her operation.”<sup>109</sup> None of these authors provides any detail about the production or content of these shows beyond these brief mentions. Still, these references to trans television production demonstrate that trans people appeared on cable access television long before out trans people produced legacy television programming, whether or not these shows have been preserved in a physical or digital archive or in cultural memory.<sup>110</sup>

Tracing the ways race and gender impact LGBTQ cable access production and historical preservation helps demonstrate the difference between the utopian hopes associated with cable television—that it would serve as an “electronic soapbox” for every and any American—and the reality of community television production in a world structured by racism, sexism and

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<sup>107</sup> King and Mele, “Making Public Access Television: Community Participation, Media Literacy, and the Public Sphere,” 613.

<sup>108</sup> Elana Levine, *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television*, annotated edition (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 2007), 56.

<sup>109</sup> Wurtzel, “The Electronic Neighbor: A Source and Content Analysis of Public Access Channel Programming on a New York City Cable Television System.,” 88.

<sup>110</sup> In 2016, moving image archivist Michael Grant stumbled upon a television show created by a Black trans woman on Manhattan Neighborhood Network in the 1990s while he was digitizing a set of tapes for another project. Grant, who discussed this scenario with a group of scholars and archivists known as the VHS Working group, knew little about the show based on the episode on the tape and was unsure what to do with this historically significant finding. Grant digitized the show and uploaded it to YouTube but has kept it under a “private” setting, so it is unsearchable in case the creator does not want the show to be watched. To Grant, it seemed unethical to digitize the program without the consent of the creator, which could expose her and her work to unprecedented public attention. Engaging thoughtfully with cable access archives means carefully considering the ethical implications of documenting and preserving queer and trans history. Still, the existence of at least one cable access show created by a Black trans woman leads me to believe there have likely been more—how many more, what these shows covered, and what their producers and audiences experienced in the process of production, distribution, and reception, we may never know. To read more about Grant’s experience and perspective on this show, see here: <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/queer-histories-videotape-and-the-ethics-of-reuse>.

transphobia. I attend to these questions throughout my chapters, exploring how differences across race and gender (or lack thereof) shaped particular shows from the 1970s to today. While generally I could not watch programs made by queer people of color and trans people, I made sure to ask my interviewees how their shows addressed race and trans issues in order to get a sense of how LGBTQ cable access TV engaged these topics. Discussing race and trans identity primarily with white cisgender people, especially those a generation or two older than me, was at times uncomfortable. While some interviewees were open to having self-reflective conversations on these topics, others were hesitant to examine whether or not biases may have impacted their programming. In my analysis, I have had to read between the lines of these conversations to assess if and how white gay and lesbian producers and hosts addressed race and trans identity in their programming. Additionally, I made sure to contact and interview the few queer people of color and trans people who did volunteer with these shows. In these conversations, I asked interviewees about their experiences as racial and gender minorities on set. These conversations helped me understand the experiences of marginalization and tokenization that underrepresented minority producers and hosts sometimes experienced. I explore these dynamics in my analysis of shows discussed in Chapters Three and Four. Finally, throughout my analysis of the content of these shows, I point to moments that showcase the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality on screen, specifically analyzing the segments and commercials of these shows that feature queer people of color and trans people. When relevant, I note the absence of racial and gender diversity in a number of shows, exploring how LGBTQ cable access programs at times reproduced whiteness as a hegemonic norm and a default. While I cannot undo the structural and interpersonal biases reflected in these programs, when possible I write the experiences and representations of racial and gender minorities into the history of LGBTQ cable access TV.

*Studying Reception on Local TV*

I primarily attend to production and distribution in my analysis because of the difficulty of assessing local television reception. Television ratings measurements have historically ignored local television programs. Consequently, it is difficult to estimate the audience sizes of LGBTQ cable access programs and the reach of their content. Scholarship on commercial film, television, and digital media often implicitly assumes that large audience size determines the social significance of media, which occasionally and implicitly dismissing the ways programs with comparatively smaller audiences create meaning for particular audiences. My research helps demonstrate the social, political, and historical significance of local programming with smaller and indeterminate audience sizes, particularly for LGBTQ producers and audiences.

When possible, I have relied a number of resources to explore LGBTQ cable access reception to understand how these shows impacted viewers. First, industry statistics about the increase in cable service over time provide a larger context for cable's growing subscriber base from the 1970s onward. For example, news reports indicate that Manhattan residents began to receive access to cable television in the late 1960s, but the residents of the outer boroughs had to wait another 20 years before receiving cable service. Select neighborhoods in Queens, Brooklyn, and the Bronx were not wired for cable until the mid-late 1980s.<sup>111</sup> It wasn't until the mid-1990s that every New York City neighborhood was wired for cable.<sup>112</sup> The relatively slow spread of cable technologies in New York demonstrates just how local cable television reception has been. Because access to cable has depended upon one's neighborhood, cable television reception reflects the wider political, financial, and social inequities across the New York boroughs, and

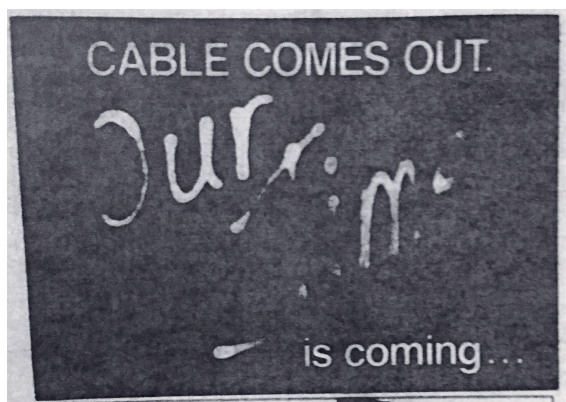
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<sup>111</sup> Sam Howe Verhovek, "For Many New York Areas, Wait for Cable TV Ends," *New York Times*, November 9, 1988.

<sup>112</sup> Barron, "The Big Picture: What's On, What's Coming."

the privilege of Manhattan residents in particular. This information helps provide a clearer picture of who watched the TV programs I analyze: most likely, these programs were primarily viewed by middle and upper middle class residents of Manhattan who could access and afford a cable subscription.

Second, reviews in the gay press and, occasionally, the mainstream press have demonstrated how these shows were interpreted by critics in their contemporary moment. These reviews demonstrate that LGBTQ viewers were invested in cable access television as a mode of representation, politics, art, and activism. New York's gay press often covered the premieres of new LGBTQ shows, included ads for these shows in their contents and in weekly listings of what to watch, and followed controversies and conflicts that arose between producers, audiences, and cable executives. Similarly, fan mail from viewers preserved in archival collections and contemporary comments on digitized episodes of these programs on YouTube demonstrates viewers' historical and continued reactions to these shows. While it is difficult to make generalizations based upon a small number of letters and reviews, these responses illustrate LGBTQ viewers' appreciation of and investment in these shows. Finally, two self-run studies of audience size conducted by Lou Maletta, producer and founder of the Gay Cable Network, do provide statistics and demographics about the viewers of the GCN programs. Maletta conducted audience research in order to market his shows to advertisers. Maletta's surveys, which I discuss in Chapter Four, provide the most concrete information about audiences for LGBTQ cable access programs to date. While reception studies is not my primary method of analysis, information about the reception of LGBTQ cable access shows provides compelling evidence that LGBTQ viewers watched and responded to this programming, even as it demonstrates how circumscribed audiences may have been.



### Tuning In: A TV/Radio Guide for *OutWeek* Readers

Information must be received by Monday to be included in the following week's issue. Send items to Rick X, Tuning In, Box 790, NY, NY 10108.

**A&E** (Arts & Ent, 555 5th Ave, 10th Fl, NYC 10017; 961-4520)  
**CCTV** (Rick X, Box 790, NYC 10108)  
**GBS** (Gay Broadcasting System, Bulch Peason, 178 7th Ave, Ste. A-3, NYC 10011; 243-1570)  
**GCN** (Gay Cable Network, Lou Melillo, 32 Union Square East, Suite 1217; 477-4220)  
**GMHC** (Gay Men's Health Crisis, Jean Cartomusto, 129 W 20 St, NYC 10011; 907-7517)  
**RB PRD** (Robin Byrd Prods, Box 305, NYC 10021; 988-2873)  
**WABC-TV** (77 W 63 St, NYC 10023; 456-7777)  
**WBAI-FM** (502 8th Ave, 10th Fl, NYC 10018; 279-0707)  
**WCBS-TV** (51 W 52 St, NYC 10019; 975-4321)  
**WNBC-TV** (30 Rockefeller Plaza, NYC 10112; 694-4444)  
**WNET-TV** (356 W 58 St, NYC 10019; 560-3000)  
**WOTW-TV** (Fox, 1211 Avenue A, NYC 10020; 556-2400)

**Editor's Notes**

➤ Refers to those shows which are affected by the new cable TV franchise agreement retransmitting Channel J23 on October 1. New arrangements for these shows, on Channel V35, had not yet been made at presstime.

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 1**

**8:30 PM** GBS *Out in the 90's*: community news, discussion, interviews; (tape of last Tuesday's MCTV/Paragon show) 90 Cable, CH 56 (1:00)  
 ➤ **10:30 PM** GCN *Be My Guest*: clips from films shown at the Lookout festival, video from Everett Quinton in *Camille*; Manhattan Cable, CH J23 (3:00)  
**10:45 PM** TNT *Art Quill* on the *Western Front* (1900); the Oscar winner is still Remarkable today, heartbreaking and beautiful, an early talkie that speaks of today (2:50)  
**11:30 PM** *Tomorrow/Tonight Live!*: entertainment; Manhattan and Paragon Cable, CH D17 (1:00)  
**midnight** CCTV *The Closer Case Show*: tribute to Trash, with Joe & Helly; Manhattan & Paragon Cable, CH C16 (3:00)  
**12:30 AM** WNBC-TV David Letterman: a 1988 show with Sandra Bernhard, pre-*OutWeek*; CH 4 (1:00)  
 ➤ **1:30 AM** Gay TV: gay male porn; Paragon Cable, CH J23 (3:00)  
**2:30 AM** WNBC-TV *Hope of the Damned* (1976); German Jews, unable to seek refuge in Roosevelt's "1000 America," by Heines listed, only to be returned to Hitler's solution (just like downed *banian* pigs & lesbians are refused refugee status in Bush's 1990 America -RG); CH 7 (2:00)

**TUESDAY, OCTOBER 2**

**noon** A&E *Blunt-The Fourth Man*: about the "relationship" between British traitors, Anthony Blunt and Guy Burgess (2:00) (repeats at 4:30 AM)  
**10:30 PM** WNET-TV *P.O.V.*: "Kamala and Raj" tells about women in Ahmedabad, India, and their fight for equal rights at home & work; CH 13 (1:00)  
**11:30 PM** GBS *Out in the 90's*: news, information and interviews; tonight, *Whelan Shapiro* hosts a live call-in roundtable; Manhattan and Paragon Cable, CH C16 (1:00)

**WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 3**

**8:30 AM** WBAI-FM *Ghosts in the Machine*: women in pop, with Victoria Starr; 99.5 FM (2:30)  
**8:30 PM** WPOX-TV *21 Jump Street*: the gang infiltrates a teenage modeling agency to get to the leaders of a high school porno ring; CH 11 (1:30)  
**7:30 PM** *Gay Raising in the East Village*: Community Board #3 hosts a special call-in show with Rick Carman as MC, John Magliano (Human Rights Crisis Intervention Unit), Matt Foreman (Lesbian & Gay Anti-Violence Project), Sam Ciccone (Gay Officers Action League), Vanessa Ferris (Lesbian & Gay police liaison); Manhattan and Paragon Cable, CH L25  
 ➤ **midnight** RB PRD *The Robin Byrd Show*: male and female strippers; Manhattan and Paragon Cable, CH J23 (1:00)

**THURSDAY, OCTOBER 4**

**10:30 AM** WABC-TV *Sally Jessy Raphael*: sexual misconduct and the clergy (just in time for the trial of the St. Pat's Sexton, who are trying to save children rather than

terrorize, doom or molest them -RG); CH 7 (1:00)  
**11:30 AM** WABC-TV *Home*: a panel for the NAMES Quilt, Ralph Nader on insurance; CH 7 (1:00)  
**1:30 PM** WBAI-FM *This Way Out*: the international gay/lesbian news magazine; 99.5 FM (3:00)  
**1:30 PM** ESPN *Women's and Mixed-Pairs Bodybuilding* (1:00)  
**1:30 PM** WBAI-FM *An Afternoon Outing*: local news and information about the gay/lesbian community; 99.5 FM (3:00)  
**5:00 PM** WPOX-TV *21 Jump Street*: Hanson (Johnny Dreyer) protects a teenager with AIDS from attacks by parents and students; CH 11 (1:00)  
 ➤ **7:30 PM** GBS *Way Out*: entertainment; Rich Volo, producer, 254-7665; Manhattan Cable, CH J23 (3:00)  
**7:30 PM** *Manhattan Report*: Borough Pres. Ruth Messinger with a neighborhood anti-crime panel, including Matt Collins of the Pink Panthers; Mtns & Paragon Cable, L25  
 ➤ **8:30 PM** GMHC *Living With AIDS*: health and politics; Manhattan Cable, CH J23 (3:00)  
**10:30 PM** WNBC-TV *Law & Order*: an AIDS and euthanasia case; GLAAD and ACT UP may want to watch; CH 4 (1:00)  
 ➤ **10:30 PM** GCN *Gay U.S.A.*: news and entertainment from around the country; Manhattan Cable, CH J23 (1:00) (For Paragon Cable, see SATURDAY)  
 ➤ **11:30 PM** RB PRD *Men For Men*: Robin Byrd presents gay male porno stars; Manhattan Cable, CH J23 (3:00)  
 ➤ **11:30 PM** GMHC *Living With AIDS*: health and politics; Paragon Cable, CH J23 (3:00)

**FRIDAY, OCTOBER 5**

**2:30 PM** WBAI-FM *Romplendo el Silencio*: todos los viernes, *Gonzalo Abarris* con temas y noticias para la comunidad latina gay y lesbiana; 99.5 FM (1:15)  
**7:30 PM** *The Gay Dating Game Show*, with Yummy Saeil and Lahoma Van Zandt; CH J23 (3:00)  
**8:00 PM** WABC-TV *Full House*: Jesse (John Stamos) becomes a bank model for a cologne ad, but he is asked to take off more than he can "bear"; CH 7 (3:00)  
**8:00 PM** WNBC-TV *Quantum Leap*: Sam (Scott Bakula) becomes a Navy SEAL in 1970 Vietnam; a good bet for wettable and/or seafood lovers; CH 4 (1:00)  
**9:00 PM** WWOR-TV *Amazing Stories*: created by Steven Spielberg, a Twilight-Zone-ish anthology; tonight's tales include "The Gremlin," about a creature with a taste for inanimate objects, and "Lans Change," about a woman who sees her past through her windshield; CH 9 (1:00)  
**10:30 PM** WABC-TV *20/20*: more on the atrocious condition of Romanian orphans, many of whom are HIV-infected and warehoused away as "unsalvageables"; CH 7 (1:00)  
**10:30 PM** WNET-TV *Edge*: Robert Krulwich hosts a new magazine; tonight looks at art censorship; also, Buck Henry tours the Nixon Library, and James Wolcott discusses the Andrew Dice Clay phenomenon; CH 13 (1:00)  
**11:30 PM** WNET-TV *Atomic Cafe* (1982): the campiest look at Atomic Bomb-tore ever created, complete with duck-and-cover cartoons, bomb shelter advice, and patriotic footage of the destruction of Bikini Atoll; CH 13 (1:30)  
 ➤ **11:30 PM** Gay TV: male porn; Manhattan Cable, CH J23 (3:00)  
 ➤ **1:30 AM** RB PRD *Robin Byrd Show*: male and female strippers; Manhattan and Paragon Cable, CH J23 (1:00)

**SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6**

**8:30 PM** GCN *Gay U.S.A.*: news and entertainment from around the country; 90, Unity, ADV Cable, CH 56 (1:00) (For Manhattan Cable, see THURSDAY)  
 ➤ **8:30 PM** GCN *Gay U.S.A.*: news and entertainment from around the country; Paragon Cable, CH J23 (1:00) (For Manhattan Cable, see THURSDAY)  
 ➤ **11:30 PM** RB PRD *The Early Byrd*: Robin Byrd presents male/female strippers; Manhattan Cable, CH J23 (1:00)

**SUNDAY, OCTOBER 7**

**7:30 PM** WBAI-FM *Outlook*: news, interviews and information about the lesbian and gay community; tonight: Andrew Velez on "Closest Creators," like Cole Porter, Loretta Hart, Bessie Smith, Mabel Mercer; 99.5 FM (1:00)  
 ➤ **11:30 PM** GCN *Men & Films*: male erotica, interviews with adult filmstars; Manhattan Cable, CH J23 (3:00)

Figure 0.4-0.5 Above, a faded ad for *Our Time* in *The New York Native* Issue 54, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1983, which provided the inspiration for the title of this dissertation. Bellow, *OutWeek* included a weekly listing of public access cable TV programs and radio shows for their readers. This iteration comes from the October 10, 1990 issue. Reprinted by permission from *OutWeek* magazine.



By weaving together eclectic sources, I demonstrate that closely analyzing local LGBTQ television is possible despite the structural absence of certain information about these programs. In some sense my own “archive fever” animated this research process. Building on the work of Jacques Derrida, Cvetkovich writes, “memoir has been a particularly rich genre for documenting the AIDS crisis, providing gay men with a forum to articulate what it means to live in the presence of death and record their lives before it is too late. AIDS and the specter of death produce a form of archive fever, an urgent effort toward preservation in order to grapple with loss.”<sup>113</sup> Like memoir, LGBTQ cable access television documents the trauma of living through the AIDS crisis and preserves the grief, anger, hope, and fear experienced by many of the guests, hosts, and producers on these shows, many of whom later died of complications due to AIDS. My determination to capture this history in writing was often driven by a sense that it was already “too late” to do so: many people I would have liked to interview had already died, often of AIDS-related illnesses; many TV shows were not recorded or preserved and therefore could not be analyzed. My interest in marshalling every possible resource to document this disappearing history—despite the at times daunting work this entailed—perhaps reflected my “emotional need for history” as a queer person searching for history amidst its structural erasure and grappling with the incalculable loss of hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ people a generation or two older than me.<sup>114</sup> By writing about this programming and the people who created it, I strived to do justice to their labor and their lives, hoping to bring dignity to their underappreciated efforts in television production and media activism. In March 2019, I even created my own public access archive of sorts on Instagram: I began posting images and clips

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<sup>113</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 210–11.

<sup>114</sup> Cvetkovich, 251.

from queer public access shows on an account called @Queers\_on\_Cable, hoping to spread awareness of their existence and significance amongst younger LGBTQ people. Sharing these clips on social media allowed me to connect with other folks interested in LGBTQ media and history, exchanges that lifted my spirits and affirmed my commitment to research and writing at difficult moments. These feelings and experiences motivated me to complete the dissertation, and yet sometimes made it difficult for me to question or critique the programming and producers I admired. Throughout my analysis, I try to preserve a mindfulness about my emotional relationship to this work, considering how my subject position impacts my research. I hope my work stimulates conversation about the affective experience of producing queer television history, both from the perspective of the television producers and my own reflections as a television historian.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

Each chapter in this dissertation explores the production, distribution, and content of television shows that sought to screen LGBTQ culture for New York's cable subscribers. Each case study differs significantly in their conceptualization of who and what constitutes LGBTQ community and culture over time. This dissertation moves chronologically through history, documenting significant LGBTQ cable access shows beginning in the 1970s. In Chapter One, I begin this history with analysis of *The Emerald City* (1977-1979), exploring how the show circulated and amplified prevailing queer feelings and experiences about the gay liberation movement during its waning years. I discuss the ways in which the show mediates experiences of pride, desire, and anxiety in relation to the politics of race, gender, and sexuality on screen. While *The Emerald City* primarily focuses its content on white gay men, a relatively narrow subset of the LGBTQ

community, its success demonstrated that cable access television could provide a platform for more expansive political and social projects, a gap filled by LGBTQ cable access shows in the following decade.

Chapter Two compares two shows that aired in the early-to-mid 1980s: *Our Time* (1983) and *Gay Morning America* (1983-1985). I trace emerging affective responses to the AIDS epidemic in the content of each program. I suggest that *Our Time* circulated feelings of fear and anger, making sense of the rising panic to channel these feelings towards collective action *Gay Morning America*, on the other hand, used humor and camp sensibility to defuse feelings of panic and to celebrate queer community culture in the face of a life-threatening illness. I argue that the content, aesthetics, and production histories of both television shows produce what I call *a televisual emotional pedagogy* about AIDS, implicitly instructing the audience on how to feel about the epidemic.

Chapter Three explores *Dyke TV* (1993-2006), the first nationally cablecast show dedicated to discussing lesbian feminism. I argue that *Dyke TV* embraces what I call *lesbian feminist love-politics*: a willful sensibility and political orientation committed to celebrating queer women's community culture. I discuss how the episodes televise lesbian feminist love-politics in relation to representations of gender, race, and sexuality. I discuss how the show evolved into the early 2000s, noting how its national distribution provided producers with the opportunity to incorporate a wider variety of stories into its episodes while declining resources and new media technologies caused the show to stop production entirely. Additionally, I explore how behind the scenes, *Dyke TV*'s inclusive politics were perhaps more aspirational than fully realized: a number of women of color and trans volunteers expressed feelings of isolation while working amongst the mostly white, cisgender leadership team. While *Dyke TV*'s commitment to

anti-racist and trans inclusive programming was uneven throughout its time on the air, it is the only show in my study to consistently cover the issues of marginalized LGBTQ people. The legacy of the show lies its investment in lesbian feminism: an embrace of love-politics enabled *Dyke TV* to imagine forms of “dyke” relationality marked by an orientation to an expansive queer community rather than exclusive and precise definitions of identity.

Chapter Four assesses the significance of the Gay Cable Network (GCN), a production company that aired a dozen shows on cable access made by and for LGBTQ New Yorkers. My analysis of GCN reveals how cable access programming became a forum through which to experiment with the viability of queer television news and entertainment. Via independent production and distribution, the GCN could feature LGBTQ political commentary and frank discussions of sexuality to circulate public feelings about queerness on television. However, these same frank discussions garnered disdain in the eyes of commercial funders and ultimately created a financial situation in which it was impossible for GCN to continue production. I examine the experiences of the hosts and producers of the GCN shows in the 1980s and 1990s—GCN founder Lou Maletta in particular—in relation to feelings of ambition, trauma, fear, grief, passion, and resentment that structured the experience of creating LGBTQ public access programming in this time period. Focusing on the *feel* of queer television production, I argue that this approach illuminates the joys and pleasures, as well as the disappointments and constraints, inherent to producing, marketing, and distributing local queer community television.

In the Epilogue of this dissertation, I reflect upon the ways contemporary queer community media are both analogous and dissimilar to LGBTQ cable access. Specifically looking at examples of LGBTQ media created online during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I explore how queer content creators, artists, and activists have relied upon corporate

social media networks, independent video platforms, and low-cost technology to connect with one another while physically isolated. I describe how the wide variety of this work—which includes drag, pornography, health education and information, discussion of current events, and art and performance—reflects the wide variety of material found historically in LGBTQ access television. Comparing the creativity, joy, trauma, and loss found in contemporary queer media made in a time of crisis to the historical examples discussed in my dissertation, I suggest that LGBTQ cable access programming is a significant yet under-researched antecedent to contemporary queer media, offering scholars, producers, artists, and activists a historical record of LGBTQ culture, news, arts, entertainment, and activism as well as a model for producing queer community media in the present.

### **A Note on Terminology**

I alternate between the terms “LGBTQ,” “gay,” “gay and lesbian,” “queer,” and “queer and transgender” as I discuss this programming. These terms are not equivalent and their usage marks different moments in historical time and the differing identity groups hailed by the programming in my research. When I refer to cable access programming as “gay,” it is typically in reference to programming created by and focusing on the contributions of cisgender gay men, as I discuss in Chapter One. In the 1970s, “gay” was commonly (though not universally) considered an umbrella term for the entire community—referring to cable access programming as “gay” in Chapter One reflects this historical usage. The term “gay and lesbian” is consistent with the terminology used from the 1980s through the early 1990s. “Gay and lesbian” is also the most common phrase used by the producers and hosts of LGBTQ cable access shows I study to describe their programming, community, and audience. I use “gay and lesbian” typically when

referring to how the people I interviewed and/or those who produced the shows understood their work. I believe it is an ethical scholarly practice to mirror the language of one's research subjects, particularly when representation and language are at stake, even if this terminology is now outdated.

However, I use “LGBTQ” to name the programming overall. In his analysis of gay and lesbian media activism of the 1970s, Matt Connolly uses the acronym “LGBT” to describe his research subjects because “its relative expansiveness signals the full range of identities and representational goals that often did exist in many activist communities at the time—even if all identities and goals within this range were not afforded equal influence or weight.”<sup>115</sup> Building on Connolly's explanation, I use “LGBTQ” because its expansive scope mirrors the wide range of content on these shows and the expansive range of identities of those who produced and consumed this programming. I use “LGBTQ” rather than “LGBT” because “queer” incorporates the most contemporary vernacular. I occasionally use “queer” and “queer and transgender” as umbrella terms, synonyms for LGBTQ that convey the vast range of identities within the community. I often use the term “LGBTQ community” to describe local and national alliances between lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer people. While I use the term as useful shorthand to gesture to wider groups of LGBTQ people, I recognize that “community” is an imagined ideal, and that social and political coalitions between all of these different groups have historically been fraught, especially across lines of class, gender, geography and race. Finally, I use “queer” in particular to signal a radical sensibility and politics expressed in this some of this programming. “Queer” also indicates the use of queer theoretical methods in my work. I most

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<sup>115</sup> Matt Connolly, “Liberating the Screen: Gay and Lesbian Protests of LGBT Cinematic Representation, 1969–1974,” *Cinema Journal* 57, no. 2 (2018): 66, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2018.0003>.

often use the term when referring to the affects, feelings, and emotions circulated by these TV shows, as is consistent with scholarship in the field.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **From Gay Liberation to Backlash: Cultivating LGBTQ Public Culture on The Emerald City**

I met Steve Bie at Julius', New York City's oldest continuously operating gay bar, in Greenwich Village on a warm and sunny fall Saturday in 2019. Added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2016, Julius' narrow walls are lined with newspaper articles and photos proudly displaying its history. Julius' is still a popular spot. At 2:30pm, the bar in front was already busy, so Bie and I grabbed cups of coffee and sat down in a pair of seats in the back area. This was my second time meeting Bie, a producer of *The Emerald City* (1977-1979), one of the oldest LGBTQ cable access shows. Now 64, Bie is the sole surviving producer of the show and considers himself responsible for maintaining its legacy, which he does by uploading digitized episodes to YouTube in order to share its archive with new audiences. Bie and I first met for a formal interview the previous week, during which he described his experience working on the show. He invited me to meet again the following week to talk more about New York City's gay history. At the bar, Bie offered me a pamphlet about Julius', recounted his own days working there in the 1980s, and generously offered me a gift: an original poster for *The Emerald City*, part of the marketing materials for the show that he distributed to gay bars in the city. We walked around the West Village after finishing our coffees and Bie talked about his life after the show, his thoughts about contemporary LGBTQ politics, his lasting friendships with his two co-producers, Eugene B. Stavis and Frank O'Dowd, and his memories of the passing city blocks and buildings, now boutique restaurants and shops that used to be gay bars and sex clubs. After we parted ways at the Whitney Museum, he emailed me newspaper articles about the famous guests who appeared on the show and shared his own archival records with me: photos, correspondence,



and news clippings. Throughout our conversations, I got the distinct impression that Bie wanted to make sure that I get the story of *The Emerald City* right: that I understand its historical context and its legacy as an early experiment in gay television.

When *The Emerald City* premiered in 1977, there was virtually nothing else like it on television. A newsmagazine show, *The Emerald City* commented on current events and LGBTQ politics. It consistently covered gay entertainment, nightlife, business, and travel in and around New York City. The show aired twice a week, on Mondays at 9pm and Thursdays at 8:30pm, on the leased access Channel J on both Manhattan and Teleprompter Cable, the two systems providing cable service to New York in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> The producers designed *The Emerald City* to be self-sustaining with support from its sponsors, which it promoted during the show. These sponsors included gay owned and oriented businesses, most notably gay bars, bathhouses, bookstores, restaurants, and discos in the city. The show received a full review in the *New York Times*, unprecedented coverage for a local cable access show, especially one focused on a stigmatized community: journalist John O'Connor called it "impressively accomplished."<sup>2</sup> *The Emerald City* was not the first LGBTQ cable access show, but because it was eventually syndicated in San Francisco and Los Angeles, it was likely the first LGBTQ cable show to reach a national audience.

*The Emerald City* provides a remarkable glimpse into gay culture in the late 1970s, before the AIDS crisis decimated the community. As a result of gay liberation era activism earlier in the decade, gay men and lesbians experienced a wave of social and political successes

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<sup>1</sup> Teleprompter Cable served the customers north of 79<sup>th</sup> Street on the West side and 86<sup>th</sup> Street on the East side, while Manhattan Cable provided service to the rest of Manhattan.

<sup>2</sup> John J O'Connor, "TV: Cable Focuses On Homosexuals," *The New York Times*, June 2, 1977.

in the 1970s: 20 states legalized sodomy,<sup>3</sup> 40 cities passed gay rights legislation,<sup>4</sup> the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality as a mental illness from its Diagnostic and Statistics Manual,<sup>5</sup> and for the first time a number of network television movies, sitcoms, and dramas began incorporating humanizing portrayals of gay and lesbian characters into their storylines. Gay liberation also sparked the growth of gay institutions, services, newspapers, businesses, social outlets, and advocacy groups across the nation, establishing and affirming new understandings of LGBTQ culture. As a consequence of gay liberation and the broader sexual revolution occurring in American culture, LGBTQ activism emerged as a powerful national movement that helped to shift social, political, and sexual norms both within and outside of the community. However, by 1977, backlash began to emerge. The rise of the New Right in the late 1970s, embodied in the figure of Anita Bryant, a former beauty queen turned antigay activist, was part of a larger wave of conservatism across the U.S. that threatened the progress achieved by LGBTQ activists.

This chapter explores how *The Emerald City* represented this evolving political and social context by circulating prevailing structures of feeling during the time period, including queer experiences of pride, desire, and anxiety. Combining analysis of the show's episodes with archival research and information from my interviews with Bie, I attend to the politics of race, gender, and sexuality on the show as I discuss these affective experiences. Pride, which emerged as the dominant affect of the gay liberation movement, is suffused through the show's interviews with gay cultural producers. By emphasizing the work of LGBTQ people in the arts, *The*

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<sup>3</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, *Unspeakable: The Rise of the Gay and Lesbian Press in America* (Boston: Faber & Faber, 1995), 211.

<sup>4</sup> Streitmatter, 211.

<sup>5</sup> Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 110.

*Emerald City* attached feelings of pride to evidence of gay cultural production, implicitly arguing that LGBTQ people were worthy of political inclusion and social acceptance based on their artistic contributions to American society. While *The Emerald City* typically centered the artistic accomplishments of white gay men on screen, its interviews with diverse subjects simultaneously depicted an expansive understanding of the 1970s “gay sensibility,” attaching feelings of pride to a variety of LGBTQ art, performance, and cultural production. Gay sexual culture is another focus of the show. *The Emerald City* avoids discussion and depiction of explicit sex, yet it highlights the importance of sexual desire as a part of community culture by incorporating homoerotica into its content. Via its on-screen advertisements for bars, bathhouses, and bookstores, *The Emerald City* circulated photographs and video footage depicting gay male sexual culture in the 1970s, images in which whiteness and masculinity are privileged. In these segments, *The Emerald City* contributes to a phenomenon in which whiteness became a valuable commodity in what Dwight D. McBride calls the “gay marketplace of desire.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, *The Emerald City* staged conversations about the reemergence of antigay religious and political conservatism. An underlying anxiety about the conservative shift in American politics can be seen throughout *The Emerald City*’s segments, particularly in its coverage of the Christopher Street Liberation Day parades in 1977 and 1978. Footage of the LGBTQ marchers in the parades, including interviews with individuals, protest signs, and crowd shots, depicts a wider survey of the community than typically seen on the show, suggesting that the shifting political landscape affected LGBTQ individuals across racial and gender boundaries.

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<sup>6</sup> Dwight A. McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: New York University, 2005), 88.

Examining how *The Emerald City* negotiated contemporary issues and debates circulating in LGBTQ communities demonstrates how public access cable television emerged in the 1970s as a new televisual forum that helped shape LGBTQ public culture. *The Emerald City* offered guests a welcoming platform to have in-depth conversations about their work without the homophobic framing often employed in the interviews and new segments of mainstream publications. At the same time, *The Emerald City*'s emphasis on white gay male artists and sexual culture at times amplified existing racial and gender hierarchies and divisions in the movement. Yet as a televisual "archive of feelings," the affective resonances of the show exceed its somewhat narrow framing.<sup>7</sup> In particular, segments about emerging anxieties regarding the religious right provide a glimpse at alternative, more coalitional LGBTQ social structures, hinting at the kinds of politics that would only become more necessary in the decade to come, as LGBTQ people confronted the AIDS crisis and President Reagan's conservative administration. *The Emerald City*'s relative success demonstrated that cable access television could provide a platform for expansive queer political and social projects, a project which various LGBTQ cable access shows would take up in the 1980s.

### **Pride: Exploring Gay Cultural Production on *The Emerald City***

The gay liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s encouraged LGBTQ Americans to come out: to accept, announce, and celebrate their sexualities. The experience of coming to accept one's homosexuality is a hallmark of the activism of the era, epitomized in the then-novel concept "gay pride." David Halperin and Valerie Traub describe gay pride as: "liberation, legitimacy, dignity, acceptance, and assimilation, as well as the right to be different: the goals of

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<sup>7</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 7.

gay pride require nothing less than the complete destigmatization of homosexuality, which means the elimination of both the personal and the social shame attached to same-sex eroticism.”<sup>8</sup> The gay liberation movement, which challenged compulsory heterosexuality and demanded greater social and political visibility for LGBTQ Americans, did indeed inspire generations of LGBTQ Americans to come out. This included previously closeted artists, literary figures, performers, and filmmakers. Whereas coming out could end the career of an artist in the 1950s and 1960s, gay liberation provided LGBTQ creatives with a bit more latitude to discuss their sexualities in public, particularly in the gay press.<sup>9</sup>

*The Emerald City* profiled a number of the artists, writers, and filmmakers who came out publicly during this time period. Like gay and lesbian narrative film and documentaries of the 1970s, *The Emerald City* embraced what Richard Dyer calls “the politics of affirmation” by “taking hitherto despised gay identities and embracing them as something positive.”<sup>10</sup> In its episodes, *The Emerald City* circulates a particular feeling and form of pride associated with cultural contributions of LGBTQ people in the arts. In order to counter stereotypes about LGBTQ people on television, Bie, Stavis, and O’Dowd invited eminent gay cultural producers to the show to display the cultural contributions of LGBTQ people to their audience. The majority of the interviewees were white gay men; however, *The Emerald City* showcased a fuller portrait of the community throughout its episodes, connecting discourses of pride to diverse and expansive LGBTQ identities and cultural forms. If *The Emerald City* implicitly argues that LGBTQ people are worthy of political inclusion, social acceptance, and affirmation based on their artistic contributions to American society, it complicates this impulse towards respectability

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<sup>8</sup> David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub, eds., *Gay Shame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>9</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 202.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies in Lesbian and Gay Film* (London; New York: Routledge, 1990), 229.

with its wide range of interview subjects, many of whom were invested in activism and transgressive art forms.

The gay liberation movement was catalyzed in part by a number of LGBTQ uprisings in the 1960s marked by increased frustration with ongoing legal discrimination and police harassment of LGBTQ people, including the Stonewall riots in 1969. LGBTQ activists were in part inspired to fight for equality and justice by witnessing and participating in existing social movements of the time—the civil rights and Black power movements, the Chicano civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the anti-war, youth, and hippie movements—that shifted social norms and legal rights for marginalized communities in the U.S.<sup>11</sup> The gay liberation movement was marked by a correspondingly rapid growth in gay cultural institutions. Journalists and activists founded dozens of gay and lesbian magazines, newspapers, and periodicals to give voice to different subcultural groups and taste cultures within the LGBTQ community.<sup>12</sup> Increasing numbers of bookstores, bars, and bathhouses serving gay customers became important community-owned institutions, fostering a sexual culture that celebrated and politicized gay sex and sexuality.<sup>13</sup> New LGBTQ social groups—sports teams, book clubs, coffeehouses—provided community and connection for many queer people interested in meeting others like them.<sup>14</sup> Finally, LGBTQ advocates, volunteers, and professionals created new social services, including health centers, shelters, and hotlines, to provide information and healthcare to those underserved by existing institutions.<sup>15</sup> Each of these organizations provided key forums in which to discuss

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<sup>11</sup> Lillian Faderman, *The Gay Revolution: The Story of the Struggle* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 115–27, 171–87.

<sup>12</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 116–17.

<sup>13</sup> Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The Forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (Basic Books, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Finn Enke, *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space, and Feminist Activism* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Katie Batza, *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

LGBTQ issues, form connection and relationships, and stage debates about contemporary issues in the new movement.

*The Emerald City* was one such cultural forum. The show was the brainchild of film professor Gene Stavis and former professional ice skater Frank O'Dowd, two friends who were both interested in the potential of cable as a new medium. Bie later joined the team as a producer after beginning a romantic relationship with O'Dowd, and the three formed a production company called Truth, Justice, and the American Way, Inc. Newcomers to film and television production, Bie, O'Dowd, and Stavis worked closely with the staff at Channel J at Manhattan Cable to develop the show. Their production process relied upon the resources of alternative media centers in New York, which provided filmmaking and editing equipment to cable access programs in the city. Stavis, O'Dowd, and Bie primarily worked with E.T.C. Studios, a privately owned live studio facility on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, that rented studio space to many of the cable access programs in the city.

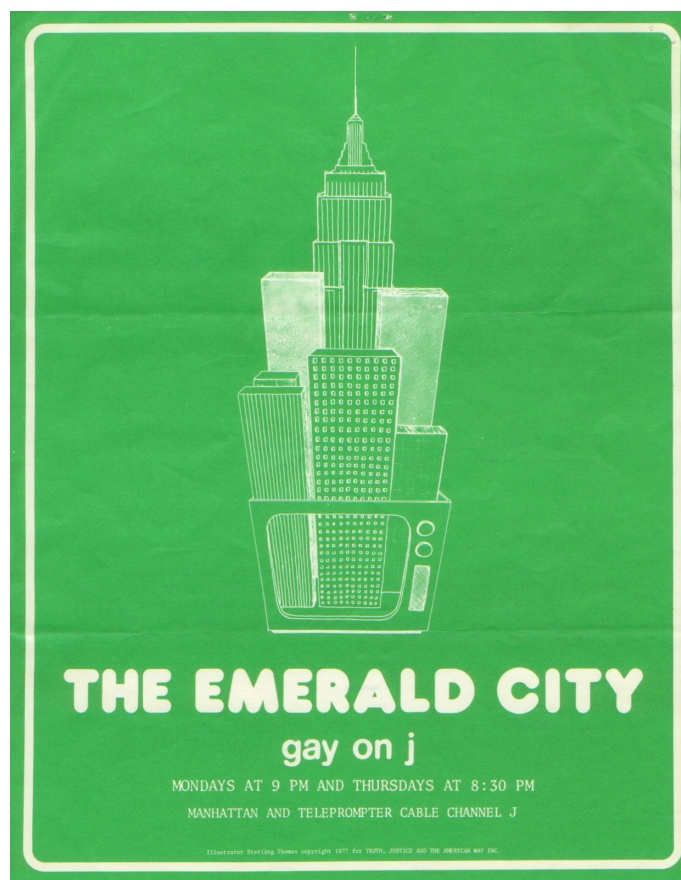


Figure 1.1 A promotional poster for *The Emerald City*. Image provided by Steve Bie.

*The Emerald City* began as a 60-minute show organized in a magazine format to cater to a variety of tastes. The title of the show evoked queer readings of *The Wizard of Oz* as well as Judy Garland’s status as an icon of gay culture: O’Dowd explained in one interview, “Dorothy and the characters she met along the way were going to Emerald City because they thought they could get something there that they could get nowhere else. Tens of thousands of people flock to New York City for the same reason. They’re in search of their dreams.”<sup>16</sup> The first episodes cover news, arts, and entertainment in the city. O’Dowd, the host of the show, opens every episode with a short monologue that previewed the content and interviewed many of the show’s

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<sup>16</sup> Charles Herschberg, “Gay Television: The Picture Brightens,” *Out! New Zealand’s Alternative Lifestyle Magazine*, December 1978, 14, Archives of Sexuality and Gender.



guests himself. Throughout production, Stavis and Bie remained largely behind the scenes, filming content and scouting advertisers. By the fall of 1977, after less than a year of production, the team decided to shorten the show's length to 30 minutes—it was too time consuming and expensive to produce the hour-long show on a regular basis. The revamped show had a narrower focus: it covered one or two stories, performances, and/or interviews per episode and cut out the news section entirely in order to focus on entertainment.

Gay television production represented a new frontier for media activism in the 1970s. By the mid-1970s, television portrayals of gay and lesbian characters had begun to shift as a result of protests by gay activists. After building working relationships with activists and lobbyists, the networks began to develop new lesbian and gay characters on primetime shows like *Soap* (ABC, 1977-1981) and *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979).<sup>17</sup> Because activists typically targeted network television representation, gay-oriented cable access television was a novel idea. Access to new video technologies provided LGBTQ people and other groups historically underrepresented on television the opportunity to create their own programming, including two gay cable access shows that preceded *The Emerald City* in the early 1970s: *The Lambda Club*, affiliated with the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), and *Homosexual Renaissance*, produced by a student activist group at New York University called Homosexuals Intransigent.<sup>18</sup> While no footage of either show remains, their existence points to the fact that marginalized communities were interested in using cable access for activist purposes from its very beginning.

Unlike these earlier shows, however, *The Emerald City* was not created by members of an activist organization and had no political affiliation. O'Dowd, Bie, and Stavis worried that

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<sup>17</sup> Kathryn C. Montgomery, *Target: Prime Time* (Oxford University Press, 1991), 75–100.

<sup>18</sup> Wurtzel, “The Electronic Neighbor: A Source and Content Analysis of Public Access Channel Programming on a New York City Cable Television System.,” 82–83.

embracing any particular political perspective would alienate audiences. According to one review of the show in the gay magazine *Where It's At*, “All three agree that they must remain free from any formal entanglement with any of the gay organizations to maintain an objectivity in their approach to program format. All groups are given an equal opportunity to air their views to the gay community at large.”<sup>19</sup> *The Emerald City* took a non-partisan approach, attempting to remain politically neutral while providing a platform for guests to share their opinions. This strategy perhaps reflected the politics of the era: by the mid 1970s, the heyday of gay liberation had passed. The influence of radical groups fighting for social revolution diminished with the creation of new national organizations focused on political lobbying and rights-based activism.<sup>20</sup> As Bie told me, the team wanted the show “to be acceptable and accepted”—in order to be acceptable and accepted by audiences, the producers limited the “radical” content of the show, focusing on entertainment rather than explicit sex or frequent discussions about LGBTQ activism.<sup>21</sup>

It's possible that the production team attempted to remain politically neutral in response to their felt sense of the burden of representation—the pressure on marginalized individuals in media production to create humanizing and/or respectable portrayals of their community members in order counter dominant and stigmatizing stereotypes. Unaware of previous gay cable access programs, Stavis, Bie, and O'Dowd believed they were the first team to produce such a show. In order “to be acceptable and accepted” by audiences, the team invited a variety of gay cultural producers to the show to convey the positive contributions of LGBTQ creatives to the wider culture. The majority of these guests were white gay male writers, artists, and performers

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<sup>19</sup> Ronn Mullen, “Emerald City,” *Where It's At*, February 27, 1978, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 115.

<sup>21</sup> Steve Bie, interview with the author, May 2020.

promoting their work and/or performing on camera. Episodes feature interviews with filmmakers John Waters and Arthur Bressan; painter David Hockney; drag queen Divine; theater producer Charles Ludlum of the Ridiculous Theater Company; writer and agitator Larry Kramer; journalists Arthur Bell and Vito Russo; British writer and actor Quentin Crisp; performer Wayland Flowers; art historian, critic, and curator Henry Geldzahler; gay porn star Casey Donovan; and porn producer Wakefield Poole. As Roger Streitmatter writes, the gay press in the 1970s was particularly interested in defining a gay male culture and sensibility: “To varying degrees, every publication of the era devoted space to exploring the motivations of artists and the meanings of their work, always in the context of gay liberation.”<sup>22</sup> *The Emerald City* participated in this project, circulating the work of emerging gay artists and gay cultural institutions in the service of televising a gay sensibility.

While Bie, O’Dowd, and Stavis hesitated to associate *The Emerald City* with any particular political group or viewpoint, the wide range of guests and topics the show espoused varying political and cultural commitments. Some, like Geldzahler and Hockney, worked with the “highbrow” and respectable cultural institutions of the day, while others, like Waters and Divine, delighted in creating transgressive, sexually explicit art and film that pushed boundaries of respectability. A number of activists appear on the show, including Jean O’Leary, the first lesbian co-director of the National Gay Task force, lawyer Enid Gerling, who regularly defended gay men entrapped by the NYPD in bar raids, and the founders of the Society to Make America Safe for Homosexuals (SMASH), a street patrol organization combatting hate crimes in Manhattan. The show also features performances by (ostensibly) straight, cisgender female performers, members of the “bathhouse circuit” who catered their acts to LGBTQ audiences,

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<sup>22</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 202.

including Barbara Cook, Juanita Flemming, Butterfly McQueen, and Eartha Kitt.<sup>23</sup> As O’Dowd shared in one episode, “One week we can be gay and political and the next week seem non-partisan and theatrical... The bottom line here is that we’re trying to make the program here as diversified as possible, catered to a variety of tastes, so if we get to hit upon your particular taste, please drop us a line.” *The Emerald City* profiled many different artists, performers, business, activists, and groups in order to care the show “to a variety of tastes,” hoping to attract diverse audiences to the show. As a result, the show depicted an expansive understanding of the “gay sensibility,” centered around but not exclusively defined by white gay male cultural production.

An episode featuring transgender actress and singer Holly Woodlawn provides a good example of the way *The Emerald City* centered white gay male perspectives and yet included more diverse experiences on the show. Woodlawn, who was born in Puerto Rico in 1946 and grew up in Miami, hitchhiked to New York when she was 15, where she became one of Andy Warhol’s Superstars. In the 1970s, Woodlawn parlayed her fame into a singing career and performed at nightclubs around the world. A 1978 episode of *The Emerald City* features multiple performances from her one-woman revue at Reno Sweeney’s nightclub in New York City. In one segment of the episode, Woodlawn sings in Spanish as her “bionic disco queen” persona Maria Flores; after a costume change, she performs the song “Doctor Jazz,” popularized by composer Jelly Roll Morton in the 1920s. Woodlawn shimmies, kicks, and struts across the stage, garnering cheers from the audience at the club.

A taped interview with Woodlawn plays between performance clips. Filmed at Reno Sweeney’s, the clips feature O’Dowd and Woodlawn, who sit at a booth decorated with drinks

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<sup>23</sup> Gerrit Henry, “Cabarets Are Staging a Comeback, 01’ Chum,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/08/24/archives/cabarets-are-staging-a-comeback-ol-chum-cabarets-are-staging-a.html>.

and a small vase of flowers. O'Dowd's palpable curiosity about Woodlawn's gender identity structures their interview. His line of questioning becomes increasingly personal, which seems to make Woodlawn uncomfortable. O'Dowd asks, "If you had to categorize yourself, would you call yourself, some people take offense to the term 'female impersonator.' Do you consider yourself a female impressionist?" O'Dowd's line of questioning references 1970s-era terminology used to discuss different types of drag performance. Comedians who performed imitations of female celebrities called themselves "female impressionists"; notably, these comedians often performed to mixed cisgender and straight and LGBTQ audiences. Lynne Carter, for example, became famous for his satirical imitations of female celebrities: he was one of the first drag queens to appear on television variety shows in the 1960s and the first drag queen to perform at Carnegie Hall in 1971.<sup>24</sup> "The fact that Lynne can 'headline' in a straight nightclub indicates the high status of his act. Most female impersonators are completely segregated and do not appear at all with straight acts," writes Ester Newton.<sup>25</sup> As Newton alludes to here, some female impressionists like Carter found widespread success. "Female impersonators," a category that encompassed lesser-known drag queens and trans women, were seen as "lower status" performers because they primarily appealed to LGBTQ audiences. According to the trans periodical *Drag* magazine, popular female impressionists like Carter publicly disassociated themselves from "transvestites" in order to "achieve upward mobility" by appealing instead to their cis and straight fan base.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> "Lynne Carter, Impersonator," *The New York Times*, January 14, 1985.

<sup>25</sup> Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 67.

<sup>26</sup> Brewster, Lee G. "Drag Special Supplement (1975)." Periodical. 1975. *Digital Transgender Archive*, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/files/pn89d662c> (accessed June 08, 2020).

By asking if Woodlawn considers herself an impersonator or an impressionist, O'Dowd asks Woodlawn to explain how she understands her gender identity. As O'Dowd speaks, Woodlawn leans away from him, seemingly uneasy with this line of questioning. When Woodlawn responds, she refuses the binary logic of O'Dowd's question: "I knew we would get to organs sooner or later...Categorize myself? No. It goes beyond that. 'Cause I don't really categorize myself. Because once I start thinking of categorizing myself, I really get stuck in a rut." Woodlawn explains that her understanding of herself "goes beyond" the binary O'Dowd has presented and poignantly states that she gets "stuck in a rut" when trying fit herself into these categories. While she doesn't further explain what she means, it is clear she does not want to answer, perhaps because the topic is too personal.

O'Dowd is not satisfied with this answer. He presses Woodlawn to explain her popularity: "Usually most female impressionists, or female impersonators, or people who work on stage in drag, that's an expression, depend on a gay following for a lot of their support. But you don't...you have a massive straight following...They accept you. They would accept you before they would accept somebody from the Jewel Box Revue." O'Dowd sets up another binary opposition, this time between Woodlawn and the Jewel Box Revue, a prolific traveling troupe of drag queens and trans performers. O'Dowd seems to suggest that Woodlawn's career resembles an impressionist because she appeals to a wide (i.e., cis and straight) audience, unlike the Jewel Box Revue performers, who primarily appealed to LGBTQ audiences. In other words, Woodlawn performs like an impressionist but looks like an impersonator, which confuses O'Dowd. As O'Dowd asks his question, he accentuates the word "drag," leaning towards Woodlawn as she once again leans away from him.



Figure 1.2 Holly Woodlawn leans away from *The Emerald City* host Frank O’Dowd as he asks questions about her gender identity on a 1978 episode of the show.

Woodlawn pushes back against the framing of the conversation. She replies, “Now wait a minute, the Jewel Box Revue has been around a long time. I’ve appeared in a lot of clubs where they would have preferred the Jewel Box Revue girls than me. I too have suffered. I too have paid the price.” Woodlawn disagrees with the distinction O’Dowd has made between herself and Jewel Box Revue. Unlike popular female impressionists, who distanced themselves from impersonators, Woodlawn uplifts the Jewel Box Revue as a legitimate theater troupe (it “has been around a long time”). She goes on to note that some clubs would have preferred to see the “the Jewel Box Revue girls” perform instead of her, and adds, “I too have suffered,” implying that she has faced transphobic discrimination while touring. Instead of aligning herself with the “high status” female impressionists, she explains that her “suffering” connects her to other drag queens and trans performers around the country. It’s worth noting that Woodlawn’s last two sentences—“I too have suffered. I too have paid the price”—are spoken in an arch tone. Woodlawn often imitated the affected tone of classical Hollywood actresses, exaggerating their

form of speech. In this interview, she employs the arch tone to lightly mock O’Dowd’s line of questioning. Woodlawn’s critical responses are successful: O’Dowd moves on to a different topic of conversation.

O’Dowd’s comments in this interview reflect a 1970s cis gay fascination with trans women. As Gregory and Vaccaro have discussed, in the 1960s and 1970s, artists like Warhol “capitalized on the popular zeitgeist of drag and glam-androgyny” by incorporating trans women into their artwork yet viewed “trans purely as an aesthetic.”<sup>27</sup> These aesthetic representations of trans women reinforced hierarchies between cis artists and trans subjects, reproducing gendered power imbalances. Woodlawn pushes back against this power dynamic as she discusses her relationship to the Jewel Box Revue. Rather than delegitimizing the work of other trans performers, Woodlawn destabilizes the hierarchy by aligning herself with the Revue girls. In doing so, she creates room in the conversation to express her own experience of performing, resisting the pressure to put down other trans performers to uplift herself.

*The Emerald City* centered cis (gay) understandings of trans culture, yet this episode demonstrates how trans guests on the show could complicate this framing. Woodlawn refuses to interpolate herself into O’Dowd’s schema of drag performance. She strategically leans away from O’Dowd, visually conveying her disagreement, and undermines O’Dowd’s questions, either declining to answer or explaining how his logic is wrong. With these strategic responses, Woodlawn enacts what C. Riley Snorton, building on the work of Édouard Glissant and L.H. Stallings, calls the “the right to opacity,” which describes a method of trans resistance that rejects dominant systems of knowing and understanding trans people in favor of unknowability and

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<sup>27</sup> Stamatina Gregory and Jeanne Vaccaro, “Canonical Undoings: Notes on Trans Art and Archives,” in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2017), 358.



unintelligibility.<sup>28</sup> Woodlawn practices her “right to opacity” by refusing to identify herself either as an impersonator or an impressionist. She preserves her right to keep her identity to herself under pressure to fit into the logics of binary categorization that reinforce cisheteropatriarchal gender norms. In doing so, she provides an example of the way trans artists have historically refused to conform to cis epistemologies of gender nonconformity.

Invested in televising a 1970s gay sensibility, *The Emerald City* episodes are structured by cis gay male understandings of LGBTQ culture, and yet simultaneously provide windows into alternatives to this narrow framework. Most segments on the show, including this one, applaud LGBTQ cultural achievement, showcasing the work of producers and artists beloved by both cis straight and LGBTQ audiences. In line with the politics of affirmation, these interviews embrace “hitherto despised gay identities” as something positive, offering a platform for LGBTQ and allied performers to share their stories on television. Via interviews with successful cultural producers, “pride and respectability became tightly linked to one another” in the series, playing into the idea that LGBTQ people had to be act according to particular norms and standards in order to achieve rights and acceptance.<sup>29</sup> In this episode, O’Dowd embraces Woodlawn’s career as something positive, or acceptable, by comparing her to other trans performers, perhaps unintentionally reproducing stigmatizing ideas about trans women who lacked Woodlawn’s cross-over appeal. Yet because Woodlawn rejects this transmisogynistic framing, she offers a different vision of the politics of affirmation on the show: one that embraces all LGBTQ subcultural performance and art, regardless of its acceptability to cis and straight audiences.

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<sup>28</sup> C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight against AIDS*, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 89.

As Halperin and Traub discuss, gay pride hinged upon “acceptance and assimilation, as well as the right to be different.” Interviews on *The Emerald City* display this polarity. Some, like those with white gay male cultural producers invested in appealing to the mainstream, embrace “acceptance and assimilation;” others, particularly those featuring the work of LGBTQ activists, experimental artists, and trans performers, pursue “the right to be different.” While the production team behind the show was careful not to espouse their own political viewpoints on screen, *The Emerald City*’s interviews and performance segments convey a sense of pride in the diversity of the community. Despite the way the show centers white gay cis masculinity, it exudes a sense of intracommunal pride in the expansiveness of the community as well as pride in its cultural achievements via its range of interviewees, including some who push back on the logics of the interview itself.

### **Desire: Embracing Sexual Freedom and Homoeroticism**

In addition to promoting the cultural work of LGBTQ artists and writers, *The Emerald City* circulates a particular formation of gay male sexual culture in the 1970s. Amidst the broader sexual revolution and in response to the repeal of anti-sodomy laws across the U.S., LGBTQ people embraced “sexual activities as political statements.”<sup>30</sup> For many gay men specifically, sexual freedom meant leaving behind the silence and stigma they internalized growing up in a sex-negative and homophobic culture; this shift entailed an exploration and embrace of non-monogamy, cruising and public sex, pornography, and promiscuity. Queer theorists continue to reminisce about the sexual freedom experienced by gay men in the 1970s. For example, Samuel Delany argues that gay sexual outlets in Manhattan facilitated what he calls “contact,” casual

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<sup>30</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 194.

encounters between people of different social classes, which has since disappeared with the gentrification of gay cruising areas.<sup>31</sup> After the onset of the AIDS epidemic, the New York City government began to criminalize particular sexual practices, leading to the closure of many bars, bathhouses, and pornographic movie theaters. While gay sexual culture in the 1970s is often remembered as a period of freedom preceding an era of regulation, historians Jim Downs and Katie Batza both caution against “a narrative of the 1970s as a period of unfettered sex”<sup>32</sup> and “the portrayal of the decade as a sexual free-for-all with no concerns for sexual health”<sup>33</sup> because these narratives tend to fuel homophobic and sex-negative discourses that blame promiscuity for the spread of HIV. With this caution in mind, exploring representations of sexuality on *The Emerald City* helps demonstrate how cable access became a forum that circulated gay sexual culture. In its depictions of gay sexual life, *The Emerald City* supported gay consumer culture by showcasing an emerging network of erotic businesses in the 1970s. The show simultaneously reproduced racialized hierarchies of desire that idealize whiteness and masculinity on screen, indicating the ways in which cable access catered to white audiences.

A feeling of sexual suggestiveness pervades *The Emerald City*. The show’s title sequence highlights images and video clips of New York’s gay neighborhoods and cruising spots, depicting gay male couples holding hands and dancing in Central Park and the West Village. The title sequence is accompanied by gay composer Cole Porter’s song “Anything Goes,” including the lyrics “In olden days, a glimpse of stocking / Was looked on as something shocking / But now, God knows / Anything goes,” which characterize the atmosphere of sexual freedom

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

<sup>32</sup> Downs, *Stand by Me*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Batza, *Before AIDS*, 6.

depicted on screen.<sup>34</sup> The show made room for discussion and debate about gay sexual practices as well. In one episode, journalist Vito Russo interviews Larry Kramer about his controversial book *Faggots* (1978), pressing him on his critiques of promiscuity, partying, and drug use among urban gay men in the 1970s. Interviews with gay professionals—bathhouse owners, gay porn producers, sex toy shop owners—explore how gay entrepreneurs relied upon sexual culture for business. Additionally, the production team filmed excursions to gay-friendly enclaves such as Miami and Atlantic City, promoting the local resorts, bars, and bathhouses on screen. Importantly, the show consistently avoided any depiction of explicit sex; as discussed in the previous section, maintaining a level of “acceptability” on the show was a key concern for its producers because they wanted the show to appeal to audiences with a variety of tastes. In an interview with one gay magazine, O’Dowd explained that despite a lack of government regulations of cable access, “We put regulations on the show ourselves to keep it tasteful.”<sup>35</sup> Sexual life and pornography were discussed on the show, but explicit sex was considered distasteful and thus was never shown on screen. Still, the show emphasizes the importance of sexual desire as a key part of gay community culture via its homoerotic content.

Advertisements on the show best indicate the way in which *The Emerald City* showcased a burgeoning network of gay erotic businesses. Because *The Emerald City* aired on leased access, the team needed to raise money to pay for their timeslot as well as other expenses involved in production. In order to cover those costs, Bie sought out sponsorships from local gay businesses to air 15, 30, or 60 second commercials on the show. Bie sent letters to community businesses in order to convince them to invest in the show. In one such letter, Bie highlights the

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<sup>34</sup> By the end of 1978, *The Emerald City* created a new title sequence because its use of “Anything Goes” violated copyright restrictions. The new title sequence featured clips from the show accompanied by instrumental music.

<sup>35</sup> Herschberg, “Gay Television: The Picture Brightens,” 15.

benefits of advertising on television. He writes, “In just five months we have taken major strides in proving that we are an exciting and effective advertising medium...Oh, in case you’re wondering: television is ready for you.” In reality, legacy television was not ready or willing to support gay businesses in the 1970s—gay-themed advertising was not featured on broadcast networks until the 1990s.<sup>36</sup> However, Bie’s letter attempts to convince gay businesses that cable access was one form of television open to supporting their advertising. Bie repeated similar rhetoric on an early episode of the show itself, encouraging sponsorship from local businesses. He explains, “Prior to *The Emerald City*, the world of television advertising has been closed to these businesses...For the first time, television, the most potent advertising medium, is available to specialized businesses.” Bie’s outreach efforts were relatively successful: a number of local gay businesses did indeed advertise on the show. These included bars, bathhouses, bookstores, print magazines, travel companies, restaurants, discos, and resorts looking to attract LGBTQ customers, readers, and visitors in and around New York City.

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<sup>36</sup> Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 38–49.

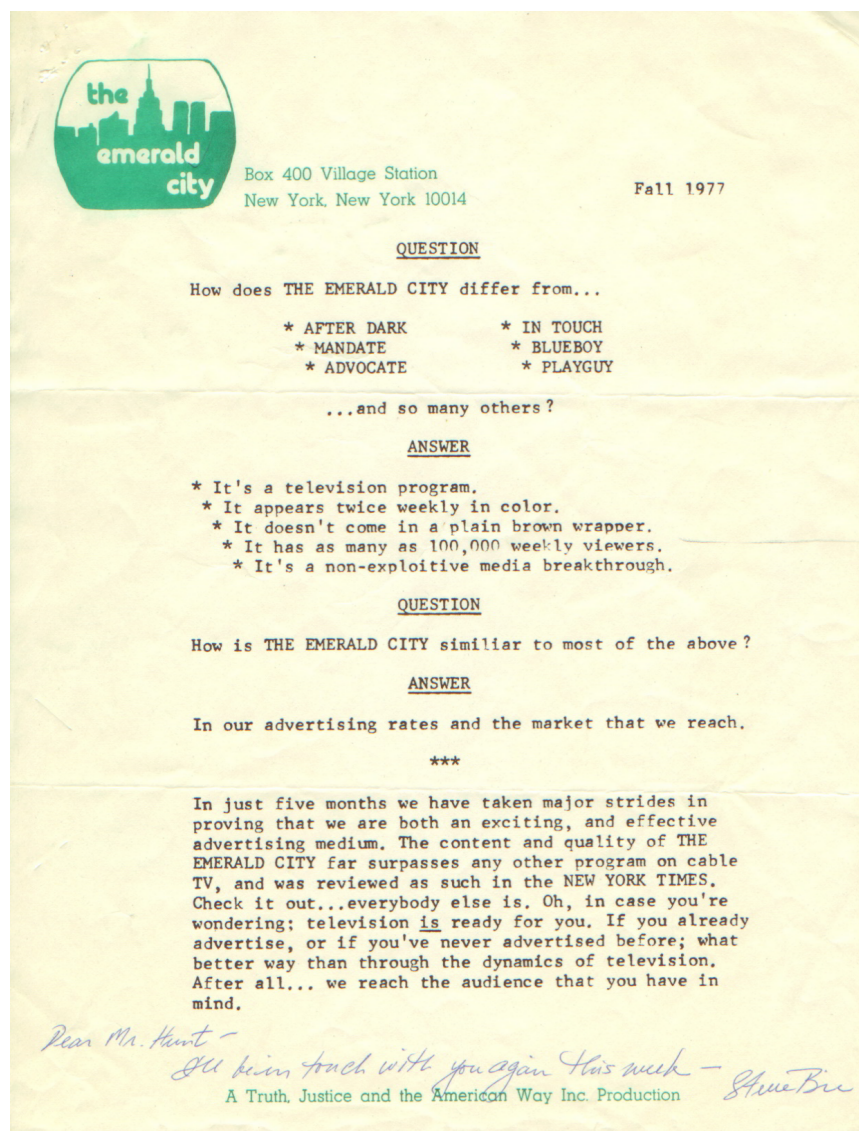


Figure 1.3 A sales letter sent by producer Steve Bie to a local business owner in New York. Image provided by Steve Bie.

Examining two recurring advertisements on the show—one for Man’s Country bathhouse and one for a pair of bookstores—demonstrates how these advertisements marketed their businesses to gay clients by referencing gay sexual culture. A 30-second commercial for Man’s Country, a popular bathhouse in lower Manhattan, previews the bathhouse experience for the viewing audience. Bathhouses were a key site of gay erotic encounters in the 1970s and early

1980s because they provided a private space for men to socialize and have sex with other men.<sup>37</sup>

This advertisement for Man's Country opens on an establishing shot outside of the bathhouse, prominently featuring its name on the awning of the building. The ad takes the viewer through the experience of visiting Man's Country: the camera follows one man—a proxy for the audience—as he enters the building and various other rooms, including a locker room, a room full of weightlifting equipment, and a private room, before exiting the building at the end of the commercial. Inside the bathhouse, a number of male guests are depicted on screen in partial undress: many are shirtless or just wearing towels, exposing their chests. Importantly, every man depicted on screen, including the visitor, is white and muscular. As the visitor moves through each room, a voiceover narrates:

Come to Man's Country. See what we're all about and what we have to offer. Man's Country is a full facility multilevel complex that was designed to feature something for everyone. Come to Man's Country to develop your body or a friendship with somebody else's. Visit us once and you'll come again and again. For the best workout in town, it's Man's Country.

The voiceover narration, spoken by someone with a deep and masculine voice, is full of sexual innuendo (such as “come again and again”). While no sexual contact is shown on screen, it is implied via visual cues and narration, particularly as the visitor enters the private room. A medium shot depicts the visitor closing the door to the room while he looks directly at the camera, suggesting the illicit aspect of what goes on inside; the camera even zooms into the

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<sup>37</sup> Gay bathhouses still operate and exist around the country, though in far fewer numbers than in the 1970s and 1980s because the HIV/AIDS crisis forced the closure of many of these businesses. While bathhouses vary in size, they often include multiple areas with swimming pools, steam rooms, exercise equipment, and private rooms for sexual encounters. Man's Country, which closed its New York location in 1983, was notable primarily for its size: a 10-floor building, each floor was designed to fit a specific erotic theme or fantasy.

image of the now-closed door, implying that something significant but unrepresentable is happening. As the visitor makes his way back through the locker room and exits the building, Salsoul Orchestra's disco song "Nice n Nasty" plays in the background, heightening the advertisement's sexual suggestiveness.



Figures 1.4-1.5 Stills from an advertisement for the Man's Country bathhouse that frequently aired on *The Emerald City*.

A commercial for two bookstores, 250 Book Center and G & A Books, similarly relies upon sexually suggestive images to attract customers (Figs. 8-11). In the 1970s, a growing



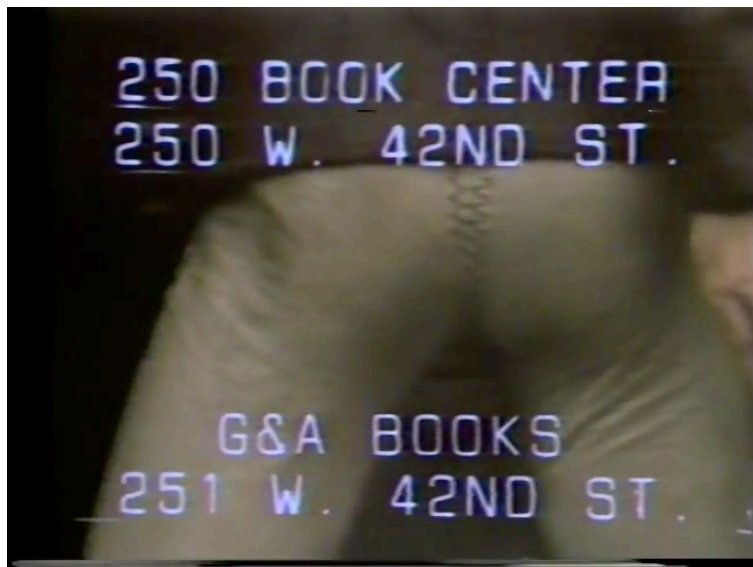
number of gay-oriented bookstores, like the ones depicted in this advertisement, offered LGBTQ customers a welcoming environment to peruse pornographic magazines, literature, and video.<sup>38</sup> The commercial highlights the availability of pornography at the stores as its major selling point. As the commercial begins, the camera follows a man as he walks through midtown Manhattan wearing a revealing outfit: his skin-tight, zipped-open jumpsuit accentuates a bulge in his pants and prominently displays his bare chest. The camera crosscuts to clips of the interior of the two bookstores, displaying the breadth of material inside the stores. One suggestive interior shot features a man's pelvis in the foreground: the individual reads an erotic magazine as he stands inside the well-stocked bookstore before proceeding to buy the magazine at the checkout counter. A voiceover narration plays over the video: "Now is the time to visit the world's largest emporium of erotica. Come experience New York's most extensive selection of adult magazines, films, and paperbacks...No matter what your scene, if it's the finest in visuals, we've got it all. Two locations in Manhattan...Come on over, you never know who you may bump into." In the closing moments of the ad, as the jumpsuit-wearing man arrives at the bookstore, the camera zooms into a close-up on his buttocks, over which the address of each store is superimposed.

Once again, every individual portrayed in this ad is white and conventionally masculine. The ad, designed to attract gay male customers, emphasizes physical beauty, defined by white norms, as its selling point. The emphasis on anatomy—chest, buttocks, penis size—draws a connection between the pornography available at the store and the physical attributes of the customers. Like the Man's Country ad, the suggestive visuals and narration (the phrase "you never know who you might bump into" and the repetition of the word "come") convey the erotic

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<sup>38</sup> Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 118, 128.

atmosphere at the bookstores. While no sex is shown on screen, it suggests that one could both buy erotica and “bump into” a potential sexual partner at one of the stores.



Figs 1.6-1.7 Still images from an advertisement for a set of bookstores on *The Emerald City*.

By supporting and promoting its sponsors, *The Emerald City* amplified the growth of gay consumer culture and sexual commerce. *The Emerald City* was not the only gay forum to do so: the gay press frequently promoted businesses associated with gay sexual culture in its articles

and advertisements, including bars, bathhouses, and gay travel destinations.<sup>39</sup> Much like the gay print press, which “served as a guide to a clandestine network of gay businesses,” viewers watching *The Emerald City* could learn about the businesses serving gay customers while watching the commercials between its segments.<sup>40</sup> This was particularly significant for businesses involved in sexual commerce, which relied upon uncensored advertisements in the gay press to reach their customer base because they were stigmatized in the wider culture and often subject to police surveillance. The promotion of gay entrepreneurship in the press demonstrated the “symbiotic relationship between gay liberation and gay business”<sup>41</sup>: participating in gay consumer culture was a political act that showed one’s support for local gay communities. *The Emerald City*’s symbiotic relationship with gay erotic businesses provided the show with the opportunity to support and promote these businesses, which in turn provided the show with the financing it needed to remain on the air.

Despite its embrace of sexual liberation, *The Emerald City*’s advertisements simultaneously contribute to “the gay marketplace of desire,” which describes the “dominant logics” that “construct and constitute what we come to accept, and in some cases to celebrate, as our value.”<sup>42</sup> These logics can be found by “visiting the places of fetish, pornography, gay personals ads, bath houses, and sex clubs”—places through which sex and desirability are negotiated, such as the advertisements on the show.<sup>43</sup> As McBride argues, “Because of the legacy of white supremacy and its persistence in the form of white American racism, the notions

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<sup>39</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 192–200.

<sup>40</sup> Downs, *Stand by Me*, 123.

<sup>41</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 208.

<sup>42</sup> McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch*, 88.

<sup>43</sup> McBride, 88.

we have evolved of what stands as beautiful and desirable are thoroughly racialized.”<sup>44</sup> McBride demonstrates how the “centrality of whiteness”<sup>45</sup> in the gay marketplace of desire—a principle by which whiteness increases one’s desirability to other men, white or otherwise—leads to the fetishization, hypersexualization, and dehumanization of Black gay men and other gay men of color.

*The Emerald City* contributes to the creation and reproduction of these power dynamics in the gay marketplace of desire by privileging white masculinity on screen. Very few men of color appear on the show, and none appear in the advertisements for commercial and sexual businesses. “The built body presents itself not as typical but as ideal,” writes Richard Dyer. Indeed, *The Emerald City*’s erotic on-screen advertisements idealize a white masculine body type.<sup>46</sup> The ideal body in these advertisements has short hair, a broad and hairy chest, defined biceps, and a large penis—an archetype in the 1970s that became known as the “macho clone.” This idealized type is “macho” because of his muscular physique and a “clone” because his image became ubiquitous in gay advertising and media. The Village People, the 1970s hit cross-over musical group, presents perhaps the best example: each band member represents a different version of the macho clone look, and their disco anthem “Macho Man” celebrates the clone archetype’s expression of masculinity.<sup>47</sup> Despite some variety across racial difference and costuming (the construction worker, the leather man, and the cowboy), the Village People stressed conformity in terms of muscularity.

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<sup>44</sup> McBride, 100.

<sup>45</sup> McBride, 125.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (Routledge, 1997), 151.

<sup>47</sup> Downs, *Stand by Me*, 178–79.

The macho clone was celebrated in part because he “embodied a version of masculinity often thought to be the sole province of heterosexual men.”<sup>48</sup> The clone archetype helped demonstrate that masculinity and homosexuality were not mutually exclusive. However, the idealization of the white clone archetype diminished the presence of people of color and lesbian, transgender, and gender non-conforming people in the movement. As Jim Downs writes, “The macho clone became the symbol of gay identity and eclipsed the otherwise increasing diversity that defined the gay community in the later part of the 1970s.”<sup>49</sup> Publications written by and for gay men in the 1970s often incorporated advertisements and images featuring the macho clone in their pages, “reflect[ing] the value gay men place on physical beauty,” itself predicated over and over on whiteness.<sup>50</sup> On *The Emerald City*, the absence of men of color on screen indicates that they are barred from the normative category of “desirable.” As the white macho clone became the idealized body type in the gay marketplace of desire, its ubiquity amplified racial hierarchies in the community.

By focusing solely on the sexual desirability of white muscular men, the advertisements on *The Emerald City* contribute to a tiered and racialized sexual hierarchy. The lack of racial and gender diversity throughout the show and within these advertisements specifically amplifies the ubiquity of the macho clone in gay male culture in the 1970s. As *The Emerald City* supported gay businesses, it reaffirmed a gay sexual culture that idealized cisgender, white, normative masculinity. By connecting a prevailing feeling of desire circulating as a result of the gay liberation and sexual liberation movements to a particular representation of whiteness and masculinity, *The Emerald City* elevates whiteness as a valuable commodity, reproducing the

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<sup>48</sup> Downs, 170.

<sup>49</sup> Downs, 172.

<sup>50</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 192.

uneven hierarchies in the gay marketplace of desire. The advertisements on the show, combined with its related sexual content, implicitly convey that the intended audience of the show was limited to that demographic category. By airing a series of sexual advertisements across its episodes, *The Emerald City* produces LGBTQ cable access television as a distinctly sexual space, foreshadowing how future series would continue to use cable access as a platform to televise gay sexual culture. Simultaneously, *The Emerald City* created a precedent for LGBTQ cable access predicated upon the whiteness of its on-screen subjects and audiences. This dynamic was replicated time and again as white producers would continue to dominate LGBTQ cable access production in the decades to come.

### **Anxiety and Solidarity: Reactions to the New Right**

*The Emerald City*'s relatively narrow focus on white gay men expands when the show covers broader social and political concerns. A number of different episodes acknowledge the shifting political context in the U.S., expressing concern about a growing movement of conservative and religious activists spouting anti-LGBTQ bigotry. As Jim Downs writes, "Gay liberation is often retrospectively characterized as a period of victories and celebration, but the tenor of the 1970s was in fact one of contingency and often fear. Many gay people didn't believe that gay liberation would last."<sup>51</sup> The New Right, a powerful coalition of economic, religious, and social conservatives, mobilized millions of Americans in the 1970s against the liberal reforms achieved by the social movements of the 1960s.<sup>52</sup> The New Right conservatives organized successful campaigns against the Equal Rights Amendment, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ rights and

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<sup>51</sup> Downs, *Stand by Me*, 140.

<sup>52</sup> Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 116.

helped elect Ronald Reagan to the presidency in 1980. Conservative advocates overturned anti-discrimination laws protecting LGBTQ people in Colorado, Florida, Kansas, and California and recriminalized sodomy in Idaho and Arkansas.<sup>53</sup> The Florida campaign in particular garnered national attention: Anita Bryant, chart-topping singer, former Miss USA runner up, and spokeswoman for the citrus industry, led a successful campaign to repeal Dade County's antidiscrimination ordinance by calling on Miami voters to "Save our Children."<sup>54</sup> Her campaign inspired anti-gay activism around the country, including a 1978 initiative proposed by California State Senator Jonathan Briggs to fire gay and lesbian public school teachers.<sup>55</sup> While the Briggs initiative was defeated, Oklahoma passed a similar law that same year.<sup>56</sup> These campaigns "contributed to an environment of hate and hostility": reports of hate crimes and arsons targeting LGBTQ people and businesses peaked in the late 1970s.<sup>57</sup>

Anxiety about the political power and cultural impact of the New Right permeates episodes of *The Emerald City*. While the show took a non-political stance, its references to the conservative and religious antigay campaigns complicated this position. Short news segments, which aired in a number of episodes in 1977, recount anti-gay legal campaigns across the country. Many interview guests across the episodes reference Anita Bryant by name; in fact, two episodes feature interviews with gay advocates opposing Bryant's campaign, including Leonard Matlovich, a member of the Dade County Coalition for Human Rights, and Lynn Frizzel, a songwriter who composed "Hurricane Anita," a song satirizing Bryant's homophobia. In another

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<sup>53</sup> Stein, 139.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Capsuto, *Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2000), 130.

<sup>55</sup> Capsuto, 132.

<sup>56</sup> Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 139.

<sup>57</sup> Stein, 140–41.

interview, filmmaker Arthur Bressan draws parallels between Nazi persecution of LGBTQ people during the Holocaust and the actions of the New Right in the 1970s. Bressan says, “A lot of gay people have a sort of fear, an inkling that this could happen again....There’s that fear that if these laws can be passed and people can have jobs taken away just because of who they love, that this could happen again.” Episodes also track the increase in homophobic violence that followed the conservative backlash: one mentions a recent fire at the Everard Baths, a bathhouse destroyed in a suspected arson. Together, these references across *The Emerald City* convey a wariness about the impacts on the community at large of Christian conservatism and publicly sanctioned homophobia as well as a willingness for the show to engage in discussions about it.

While the country’s political shift to the right threatened civil rights for LGBTQ Americans, it simultaneously galvanized a new wave of LGBTQ activism. Edward Alwood writes, “For all the progress gays and lesbians had made by the mid-1970s, gay rights did not become a national issue until Anita Bryant launched her campaign to rescind the newly adopted Dade County ordinance in 1977.”<sup>58</sup> Consistent coverage of Bryant’s campaign on the network news kept gay and lesbian issues present in the national discourse and energized activists enraged by the erosion of newly won civil rights. The wave of activism culminated in the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in fall of 1979, attended by more than 100,000 people. *The Emerald City*’s coverage of Pride parades in 1977 and 1978 offers a look at this new wave of activism on the show. Each event—then known as the Christopher Street Liberation Day parade—drew tens of thousands of people to Manhattan to march from Sheridan Square (across the street from the Stonewall Inn) to Central Park. During both Pride episodes, O’Dowd and a camera crew follow the progress of the march from morning through

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<sup>58</sup> Edward Alwood, *Straight News* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 167.



the evening. Each episode also features interviews with people observing or participating in the march and post-parade rally, including activists, gay business leaders, drag queens, police officers, and first-time visitors. As such, these Pride episodes provide a more expansive view of the LGBTQ community in New York than was typically available on the show: while most episodes were filmed indoors, and most segments focus on interviews with prominent community members, these episodes were filmed outdoors on the streets of the city and portray a much wider segment of the community.

Footage of protest signs and interviews with individual marchers during the 1977 and 1978 parades help convey the atmosphere of fear and anxiety about the New Right. For example, protest signs in the 1977 march frequently reference Anita Bryant's campaign. One marcher carries a bright orange, round sign bearing the phrase "Anita Sucks," referencing Bryant's work as a spokeswoman for the Florida citrus commission. The orange quickly became a symbol of Bryant's homophobia; gay activists organized an orange juice boycott in response to her campaign in 1977. Another marcher carries a larger prop: a cardboard cut-out painted to look like Adolf Hitler attached to a long stick, accompanied by a sign that reads, "Hitler is alive and well in Florida." Again, comparisons between the Nazi regime and the New Right, embodied in the figure of Bryant, were meant to underscore the stakes of the conservative shift in the country. A third marcher carries a simpler white and black sign that reads, "Stop Gay Oppression." These signs connect Anita Bryant and the New Right to the backlash against LGBTQ civil rights in the late 1970s. Highlighting individual signs in the march, this footage showcases the percolating anxiety and fear about the New Right in the late 1970s.



Figures 1.8-1.9 Shots of the protest signs at the 1977 Christopher Street Liberation parade.

Interviews with individual marchers have a similar effect. During one leg of the march, volunteer reporter Mary Ann Calega pulls aside a woman named Sandy Gold, a member of the Gay Teachers Association (GTA), to ask her about her cause. As marchers continue to stream by behind them, Calega asks Gold about the work of the GTA. Gold proceeds to recount their social and legal activism: the GTA is both a support group for lesbian and gay teachers as well as an advocacy group lobbying for legal protections for lesbian and gay teachers. While Gold doesn't

mention the Briggs Initiative or other campaigns to fire gay teachers in her interview, the implication is that new threats to their employment require this kind of advocacy. Indeed, Christian fundamentalists like Reverend Jerry Falwell inspired a moral panic about gay teachers in schools, preaching to their followers that gay teachers were likely to be pedophiles and/or would try to “recruit” children into the “gay lifestyle,” inspiring legal campaigns to fire out gay and lesbian teachers around the country.<sup>59</sup> By spotlighting Gold’s work with the GTA, *The Emerald City* highlights the experiences of gay and lesbian teachers in the 1970s, who were under the threat of pervasive employment discrimination—atypically for this show, a lesbian rather than a gay man emerges as the spokesperson for this important cause affecting the whole community. Interviews with other individual marchers in these episodes similarly help to demonstrate the stakes of the march for different people: for many, it was crucial to express the fear and stigma they experienced amidst the increasing influence of Christian Right.



Figure 1.10 An interview with a lesbian teacher at the 1977 Christopher Street Liberation parade.

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<sup>59</sup> Capsuto, *Alternate Channels: The Uncensored Story of Gay and Lesbian Images on Radio and Television*, 130–31.

While shots of individual signs and protesters conveyed an atmosphere of anxiety, crowd shots portrayed a united and diverse community ready to fight back. Footage from both the 1977 and 1978 marchers frequently highlights the vastness and diversity of the crowd participating in the parade. Shooting from a distance and from windows in apartment buildings above the crowd, *The Emerald City*'s cameras are able to capture the length of the march on 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue in Manhattan; in both episodes, it appears to stretch for many blocks. Reflecting back on the parade in voiceover commentary added after the fact in the 1977 episode, O'Dowd says, "When they started walking up 5th Avenue, it looked like the set of a Cecil B. DeMille film." DeMille, a classical Hollywood director, was known for directing thousands of extras in large-scale scenes in films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956). In the 1978 episode, O'Dowd makes a similar comment, introducing the show by saying, "Tonight on *Emerald City* we have over 100,000 guest stars." O'Dowd's commentary emphasizes the size of the crowd—he's so impressed with the turnout that it is as if the participants were hired to be there. Like network coverage of the 1968 March on Washington, *The Emerald City*'s pride coverage "emphasized the sheer spectacle of the huge crowd" to highlight both the diversity and number of participants.<sup>60</sup> The crowd shots in these episodes create a sense of solidarity amongst marchers, whether real or imaged. This sense of solidarity is heightened by the audio in these clips: the crowd chants phrases like "gay rights now!" in unison as marchers make their way uptown. The images of vast numbers of people making their way through Manhattan, chanting together, helps convey both the range and the strength of the movement.

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<sup>60</sup> Aniko Bodroghkozy, *Equal Time: Television and the Civil Rights Movement*, 1st edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 95.



Figures 1.11-1.12 Large shots of the crowds at the 1977 and 1978 Christopher Street Liberation Day Parades, respectively.

On *The Emerald City*, crowd shots provide a vision of a queer utopia in which people of all genders and sexualities are united against the New Right. Interestingly, the shot pattern in these episodes is repeated in the 1978 film *Gay USA* directed by Arthur Bressan, which depicts footage from Pride marches around the country. In an interview on *The Emerald City*, Bressan says, “The major concept of the film was to show the mass of gay people and then individuate

that mass with close-ups, interviews. So we cut from aerial crowd shots, showing 100,000 people marching, to a direct close-up...to show the movement and also the individuals in the movement.” This pattern was also used in coverage of the 1968 March on Washington: television networks cut between shots of the size of the crowd and portraits of individual marchers. Aniko Bodroghkozy argues that coverage of the 1968 March on Washington “provided a vision of racial utopia” by cutting between images of Black and white marchers—this “black and white together” framing allowed networks to celebrate the Civil Rights movement as a consensus event, minimizing both its more radical anti-racist perspectives *and* the white supremacist and segregationist views of many Americans.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, writing on documentaries like *Gay USA*, Richard Dyer argues, “Identity is achieved by bringing these many voices together under the aegis of a lesbian/gay film.”<sup>62</sup> He further elaborates that “conflict, contradiction and difficulty are erased” in order to create a representation of LGBTQ communities that stresses unity. In *The Emerald City*, cameras capture a wide variety of groups participating in the march, including Lesbian Feminist Liberation, the Eulenspiegel Society (a BDSM group), Dykes and Tikes, the Gay Teachers Association, Gay Youth, and Dignity (a group for Gay Catholics), among others. Shots of the parade include numerous women and people of color—groups typically absent on the show. One memorable shot from the 1977 march features Marsha P. Johnson, co-founder of the influential trans activist group Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries. While she appears for only a brief moment, she is one of the few trans woman on screen in the series. The pride parade episodes are among the only episodes in which this range of people and positionalities are showcased. As Dyer suggests, “The stress on diversity

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<sup>61</sup> Bodroghkozy, 101–7.

<sup>62</sup> Dyer, *Now You See It*, 244.

is there principally to reinforce the sense that, despite all the differences, homosexuality represents a unifying identity.”<sup>63</sup> By depicting masses of people marching together, spotlighting these groups in the parade, and yet ignoring the differences among them, *The Emerald City* conveys an imagined unity amongst LGBTQ people.



Figure 1.13 A shot of activist Marsha P. Johnson at the 1977 Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade.

Regrettably, despite the diverse array of organizations and people presented from shot to shot, no unity existed between these groups. Tensions among many of them, often along the lines of race and gender, continued to produce divergent factions in the movement: lesbian feminist and separatist groups often critiqued sexist patterns of behavior in the broader gay rights movement; LGBTQ people of color protested the racism they experienced in gay and lesbian community spaces; and radical community groups pushed back against the reformist bent of newly formed national organizations.<sup>64</sup> *The Emerald City* neglects to discuss these social and

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<sup>63</sup> Dyer, 244.

<sup>64</sup> Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 115–19.

political differences, constructing a version of Pride that imagines LGBTQ community groups aligned rather than divided by politics. As Dyer and Bodroghkozy suggest, the imagined unity created by footage of protest marches fails to “grasp the nettle of divisions” amongst the diversity of groups participating in these movements.<sup>65</sup>

While *The Emerald City*'s portrayal of Pride marches ignores internal conflict, it suggests that solidarity is necessary in order to combat oppression. Like the footage of the Pride marches in *Gay USA*, the footage here has “a propagandist purpose, to put truth in the place of media distortions and thereby change attitudes and treatment.”<sup>66</sup> These episodes respond to the homophobic rhetoric and propaganda of Christian conservatives like Bryant, who were determined to undermine the political progress of LGBTQ people. *The Emerald City* opposes the growing power of the New Right by emphasizing solidarity, unity, diversity, and strength amongst LGBTQ people—its own form of righteous propaganda. These episodes provide an indication that cable access television could be used to that effect. It's worth noting that such large-scale filming projects were relatively rare on early cable access television shows, as they were primarily shot inside studios with low-cost props and equipment. That *The Emerald City* team could capture and edit together such a variety of individual and crowd shots amidst a parade of thousands walking across Manhattan speaks to the team's technical prowess, dedication, and innovative work. Akin to the aesthetic and technological capacities of network journalism of the era, *The Emerald City*'s Pride episodes demonstrate the aesthetic innovation found in a number of LGBTQ cable access shows. Together, these episodes indicate the remarkable technological capabilities of a number of cable access producers, and in the process

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<sup>65</sup> Dyer, *Now You See It*, 267.

<sup>66</sup> Dyer, 260.



construct an expansive vision of LGBTQ politics and community in order to confront conservative homophobia.

### **1979 and Beyond: *The Emerald City's* Afterlife**

*The Emerald City* stopped production in January of 1979. In an interview with *Gaysweek* magazine, Frank O'Dowd admitted, "We simply got too big for our britches."<sup>67</sup> The show, which the team claimed at the time was the most expensive production in the history of cable access television, never achieved its goal of being self-sustaining. While it was well-reviewed in both the gay press and *The New York Times*, there was no way to measure the size of the audience or its demographics—important data that advertisers rely upon to measure their reach. Before folding, the producers tried a number of cost-saving strategies. O'Dowd and Bie's friend John Snell, an audiovisual technician who worked at ABC, offered to help with production. The team had been relying on technical expertise of staff at alternative media centers, whom they had to pay, for editing and equipment; to cut costs, *The Emerald City* eventually filmed many episodes at Snell's apartment using his own cameras and lighting. The team also organized a fundraising event: they threw a party to celebrate the first anniversary of the show, held after a screening of *Sebastiane* (Derek Jarman, 1976) at a local disco club in Manhattan. According to columnist Brandon Judell, the party was attended by a number of gay subcultural celebrities—Divine, porn star Cal Culver, and *Sebastiane* star Neil Kennedy. According to *Gaysweek*, "everyone was smiling from their heart and congratulating Frank O'Dowd and Steven Bie (the Gable and Lombard of gay media)."<sup>68</sup> Despite creative cost-cutting measures and popular events, the team

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<sup>67</sup> Scott Edwards and Steve Peduto, "'Emerald City' Is Leaving Air," *Gaysweek*, 1979, 14, Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

<sup>68</sup> Brandon Judell, "There and Back," *Gaysweek*, 1978, 22, Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

began to lose money. Bie left the show in mid-1978: “It was too stressful not having any money at all,” he shared with me.<sup>69</sup> After spending his days producing segments and scouting sponsors, Bie had no time left to pursue a career of his own, and eventually ended both his professional and romantic relationship with O’Dowd. While O’Dowd and Stavis continued without Bie’s help for some months, advertising revenue could not match the cost of production and they had no choice but to end the show. *The Emerald City*’s final program aired a “best of” compilation of segments from previous episodes.

Bie believes *The Emerald City* was ahead of its time. As he told me, “Ten years later, it would've been the biggest thing to go around.”<sup>70</sup> In the late 1970s, cable television was still a relatively new medium with a small, but growing, subscriber base. By 1978, 10.8 million out of the nation’s 72 million households had access to cable.<sup>71</sup> That’s less than 15% of population, a fraction compared to the 97% of American households with televisions sets at the time.<sup>72</sup> In New York City, Teleprompter and Manhattan cable had 100,000 subscribers each, or about 13% of Manhattan’s 1.5 million residents.<sup>73</sup> Yet after RCA launched its first satellites in 1975, which provided long distance transmission of programming for new cable networks like HBO and Showtime, interest in cable from both audiences and corporations grew rapidly. In the early 1980s, cable companies “waged ‘franchise wars’ to expand their territories into new market regions.”<sup>74</sup> Teleprompter Corporation, which was the largest cable operation in the country,

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<sup>69</sup> Steve Bie, interview with the author, September 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Bie, interview. Further quotes in this section from the same interview.

<sup>71</sup> Edwin McDowell, “For Cable TV Industry, Picture Is Bright,” *New York Times*, May 4, 1978.

<sup>72</sup> Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting, 3rd Edition*, 3rd edition (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 864.

<sup>73</sup> Rena Friedlander and Michael Botein, *The Process of Cable Television Franchising: A New York City Case Study* (New York Law School, 1980).

<sup>74</sup> Leah Churner, “The Poor Soul of Television,” Museum of the Moving Image: Moving Image Source, June 25, 2009, <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/the-poor-soul-of-television-20090625>.

merged with Westinghouse Electric, forming a new cable operator in Manhattan called Group W.<sup>75</sup> While it was increasingly clear that cable television would become a billion-dollar industry in the 1980s, financial interests did not trickle down to cable access, which remained on the margins of programming. Despite Bie's suggestion that *The Emerald City* might have been more successful if it premiered a decade later, LGBTQ cable access programming continued to struggle financially into the 1980s and 1990s, as I discuss in the following chapters.

After leaving *The Emerald City*, Bie left television production altogether; he began a successful career in hotel management but remained close friends with Stavis and O'Dowd. The latter pair continued to work together—they even produced another cable access show called *Movie Week*. While *The Emerald City* was no longer on the air, it endured in living rooms: O'Dowd screened it occasionally for friends during dinner parties, which Bie remembers fondly—the nightclub acts were particularly popular. Sadly, O'Dowd died of AIDS-related complications in 1988. In the last years of his life, O'Dowd became an AIDS activist and a prominent member of the civil disobedience group ACT UP.

After O'Dowd died, Stavis took *The Emerald City* tapes from O'Dowd's apartment in Gramercy Park and donated them to the LGBT Community Center in New York. "Gene and I always felt it was very important that this material be preserved somehow," Bie explained, "and the deal was they [the Center] would preserve it, but nobody had that much knowledge of how to do it." The equipment needed to watch, record, and transfer ¾ inch tape quickly became hard to find. Bie eventually bought a machine and donated it to the Center archive himself. The Center staff later made DVD copies of the episodes, but Bie was not satisfied with the quality. "They

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<sup>75</sup> Tony Shwartz, "Westinghouse, Teleprompter Agree To \$646 Million Cable TV Merger," *New York Times*, October 16, 1980.

were not doing any sort of technical justice, they're just slapping in the tapes in and just shooting them off into a DVD player," he complained. This became a larger concern for Bie after Stavis died at the age of 70 in 2014, making Bie the last remaining member of the show's production team. With an increasing desire to preserve the show, Bie decided to make his own digital copies of *The Emerald City* tapes and uploaded them to his YouTube channel for public consumption in 2018.

As we spoke about his old friends O'Dowd and Stavis, Bie grew reflective about his decades in New York. After living in the Village for 40 years, he says he feels "sweetly haunted" by memories—especially those of his friends who died of AIDS. "I've always felt that my presence was something that was to be offered, the wonderful people that I knew and died far too young," he shares. While Bie cares about the historical significance of the show, something else motivates his efforts to preserve it. As a gay man who survived the 1980s and 1990s in New York without seroconverting, Bie feels a duty to honor the legacy of his friends who died of AIDS because he, by some luck, is still alive. Bie's efforts to preserve the show exemplify what AIDS activist and scholar Alexandra Juhasz has described as "queer archive activism," or "a practice that adds love and hope to time and technology."<sup>76</sup> She explains, "Because we lost but lived, we wish to spare others this pain while we take pleasure in sharing this memory. We can use archival media to remember, feel anew, analyze, and educate, ungluing the past from its melancholic grip, and instead living it as a gift with others in the here and now."<sup>77</sup> Bie, sweetly haunted by memories of his friends and lovers who have passed away, many as a result of the institutional neglect of people with AIDS, does not want them to be forgotten. As a queer archive

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<sup>76</sup> Alexandra Juhasz, "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 326, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-12-2-319>.

<sup>77</sup> Juhasz, 326.

activist, Bie honors his friends by advocating for the preservation of *The Emerald City* and sharing it with contemporary audiences, creating the possibility for viewers to discover and connect with the LGBTQ cultural history archived on the show.

Bie's efforts to digitize the show and expand its audience have proven successful. A number of recent documentaries about LGBTQ figures—such as *I Am Divine* (2013) and *I Always Said Yes* (2013), about Divine and Wakefield Poole, respectively—include footage from their *Emerald City* interviews. Over the past few years, episodes have accumulated thousands of views on YouTube, with those featuring Divine, Holly Woodlawn, John Waters, Larry Kramer, and Wakefield Poole ranking among the highest viewed. Contemporary viewers are typically both surprised and grateful to watch the show: one YouTuber commented, “A wonderful time capsule. Thanks for sharing.”<sup>78</sup> The ads for bars and bathhouses generate a significant number of comments alone. As one person shared, “The ads add to the essence of the time. Much appreciated for the inclusion”<sup>79</sup>; another comments, “these ads for all these gay clubs are so good lol. Funny and creative.”<sup>80</sup> Bie is proud that his efforts are paying off: “I get a list of how many people looked this up. And I'm like, wow, that's getting up to the thousands of people looking at different things! The comments, they can't believe that there's footage like this around anywhere. We all knew it was really good stuff. Even back when it was first on.” Bie's felt sense of pride in his historical preservation efforts resonates with the feelings of pride circulated by the show itself: just as the gay liberation movement made a case for the dignity and legitimacy of LGBTQ

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<sup>78</sup> John Gruber, *Emerald City TV 1977 #52 John Waters*, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrQekcT7NH4>.

<sup>79</sup> Jason Gibson, *DIVINE (John Water's) on Emerald City TV 1978*, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3b1u9ETkhl>.

<sup>80</sup> SJ, *Emerald City TV 1978 #55 Boys in the Band*, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkECovp2Zl4&lc=Ugz0ZQIPnsNNGehk59J4AaABAg>.

identities, Bie consistently argues for the cultural importance of his own show in the face of institutional devaluation of public access TV.

While a wider public now has access to digital episodes of *The Emerald City*, Bie is passionate about continuing his preservation efforts. “It’s incredibly important that they [the Center] make sure that some type of financing comes to take those original three quarter inch cassettes and go back to them rather than just the stuff that was put up on YouTube right now, which is basically just a poor copy,” he explained. A number of the episodes on YouTube have poor sound quality and some episodes are missing. Bie is actively seeking out professional companies to help him with the preservation process. He hopes someone with the financial resources and necessary technical skills will be able to restore the tapes to their original quality. When we spoke, he repeated that he wants “to make sure that the really important stuff gets preserved. It’s stuff I think is irreplaceable.”

From our conversations, I inferred that “stuff” Bie thinks is irreplaceable are largely the interviews with gay cultural producers: the artists, writers, filmmakers, and theater producers that contemporary audiences continue to seek out. As he titles the episodes on YouTube, Bie makes sure to highlight who is who: one episode is called “Emerald City 1978 #46 TV- THE GREAT Lynne Carter P1,” and another “Emerald City TV 1977 #52 John Waters.” Bie typically chooses thumbnails featuring these guests as well. By placing the prominent guests in the titles and thumbnails of the episodes—a smart tactic for attracting clicks—Bie makes central their contributions to the show. Like the show itself, these titles celebrate gay artistry and entertainment. For Bie, the “quality” aspects of the show are those that uplift “highbrow” and “sophisticated” gay contributions to American art and media. Emphasizing this “really important stuff” helps justify the resources necessary to fund the show’s preservation. In other words,

making an argument for the show's cultural importance based on its "quality" components is a shrewd financial strategy, particularly when public access television is so often discounted as culturally insignificant. Still, I wondered what might happen to the segments and interviews Bie deems less important. Will the entire show be preserved, or just a few select interviews and performances?

While Bie himself is most proud of the interviews featured on the show, *The Emerald City*'s imagination of the LGBTQ community life and culture is more expansive than those particular segments. As the show documented gay subcultural life in New York in the 1970s, it explored a relatively rare diverse array of marginal experiences: those of transgender women of color such as Holly Woodlawn and Marsha P. Johnson, lesbian activists like Jean O'Leary, Black actresses like Butterfly McQueen, and transgressive artists like Divine. If *The Emerald City* centers white, gay, cisgender masculinity in the plethora of renowned cultural producers profiled in the show, in its sexually suggestive advertisements, and in the framing of content and interviews, this framing does not represent the totality of the show. The show's widest view of the community comes into the picture when it gestures to LGBTQ political concerns in the late 1970s, and the rightward shift of the country in particular. In its exploration and circulation of anxiety and solidarity in reaction to the New Right, *The Emerald City* embraces diverse subcultures within the community—both as groups vulnerable to persecution and as agents capable of coalitional advocacy.

A study of *The Emerald City* reveals how independent production on cable access allowed producers to experiment with gay television at a moment in which LGBTQ culture was the subject of national backlash. Journalist Ronn Mullen writes, "On *Emerald City* everyone is

gay, and that is an unstated springboard from which a genuine discussion of ideas can take off.”<sup>81</sup>

Cable access could provide a unique platform for these discussions by offering guests the opportunity to have in-depth conversations about their work without the stigma and ignorance often espoused by network talk show hosts and television news anchors. If *The Emerald City* typically avoided affiliation with gay political organizations, its production alone made a political statement: that gay New Yorkers deserved a forum on television to discuss their lives and experiences. *The Emerald City* captured and circulated queer affects and experiences in the 1970s—pride, desire, anxiety, and solidarity—exploring and celebrating LGBTQ community life during a time of increasing crisis. Bie’s preservation of the show, itself a project of commemoration, allows contemporary viewers, scholars, artists, and activists to begin to understand how LGBTQ people used television to confront religious and conservative homophobia as well as to celebrate gay sexual and artistic culture. In the years to come, gay and lesbian producers would recall *The Emerald City*’s early efforts and adapt its structure to begin to address the AIDS crisis as it hit New York in the 1980s, the subject of my next chapter.

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<sup>81</sup> Mullen, “Emerald City,” 56.



## CHAPTER TWO

### Televisual Emotional Pedagogy: AIDS, Affect, and Activism on *Our Time* and *Gay Morning America*

On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1983, *Our Time*, an LGBTQ-focused public access show produced by WNYC-TV and Manhattan Cable, aired an episode focused on the burgeoning HIV/AIDS crisis.<sup>1</sup> Gay activist and co-host Vito Russo opens the show; looking directly into the camera, he recites the following statement: “Good evening. The gay community is facing a terrifying health problem right now.” With the aid of his notes, Russo offers up-to-the-minute data about the number of AIDS-related deaths around the country and in New York City. Russo looks to his left and the camera cuts to his co-host, lesbian writer Marcia Pally, who proceeds to explain that AIDS is a dangerous epidemic targeting the immune systems of its patients, leaving them vulnerable to a variety of infections. The camera then cuts back to Russo as he says, “Tonight we’re gonna be taking a look at how the gay community is coping with the most serious crisis in its history.”

*Our Time* was one of the first television series created by and for LGBTQ people to address the AIDS epidemic. In this chapter I look to two LGBTQ cable access shows—*Our Time* and its successor, *Gay Morning America* (1983-1985)—to investigate the role of LGBTQ public access programming in circulating emerging community affects and experiences of the AIDS crisis. In the opening of *Our Time*’s “AIDS” episode, Russo and Pally soberly characterize AIDS as a deadly and mysterious disease spreading rapidly among gay men nationwide. The use of direct address in the first minutes of the episode establishes a sense of urgency around the epidemic, creating what I am calling a *televisual emotional pedagogy* about AIDS. I deploy the

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter previously appeared in the article “Televisual Emotional Pedagogy: AIDS, Affect, and Activism on Vito Russo’s *Our Time*” in *Television and New Media*, vol. 21, issue 1.

term *televisual emotional pedagogy* to characterize the process through which televisual aesthetics clarify for the audience how to feel about a given topic. On both *Our Time* and *Gay Morning America*, televisual aesthetics implicitly instruct the audience on what and how to feel about AIDS. *Our Time* encourages feelings of urgency, fear, and anger via its aesthetics, engendering new modes of encountering the epidemic for its audience members. *Gay Morning America*, on the other hand, uses humor and camp sensibility to defuse feelings of panic and to celebrate queer community culture in the face of the life-threatening illness.

*Our Time* spanned thirteen episodes and aired on Manhattan Cable's Channel L on Sunday and Tuesday nights in 1983.<sup>2</sup> Designed as a magazine-format program, *Our Time*'s segments covered a variety of topics specific to New York gay and lesbian community culture, including local politics and entertainment news as well as broader subject areas like the HIV/AIDS epidemic, activist history, gay literature, coming out, drag, transphobia, alcoholism, and racism. *Our Time*'s segments were structured in a range of formats—pre-recorded reports, people-on-the-street interviews in Manhattan, comedic and artistic performances, on-set interviews, and announcements for local gay and lesbian events and meetings—interspersed with footage of the co-hosts introducing the material and appearing in the segments themselves. On air guests included celebrities, activists, and scholars, such as Harvey Fierstein, Lily Tomlin, Larry Kramer, Harry Hay, Cherríe Moraga, and Barbara Smith. The diversity of content on *Our Time* sets it apart from earlier gay cable access shows; whereas series like *The Emerald City* (1978-1979) focused primarily on white gay male cultural production, as I discussed in Chapter

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<sup>2</sup> According to Associate Producer Jay Blotcher, whom I interviewed in October 2019, the name of the show referenced the closing number in Stephen Sondheim's then-contemporary Broadway show *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981).

1, *Our Time* highlighted the voices of those marginalized within New York's queer community spaces.

*Our Time* producer and co-host Vito Russo was already well known in LGBTQ community circles before he began his work on the show: his advocacy on behalf of the LGBTQ community spanned the gay liberation era of the 1960s and 1970s through the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s. In the 1970s, Russo joined the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), a group known for its television activism: GAA “zapped” corporate media companies with targeted protests designed to influence television coverage of gay and lesbian issues.<sup>3</sup> A cultural critic and public intellectual, Russo wrote opinion pieces and reviews for gay publications in New York and appeared in local and national LGBTQ media outlets, including interviewing a number of guests for *The Emerald City*. Russo's personal connections in the community shaped the direction of the show: as Producer Barbara Kerr told me, “The thing that really drove *Our Time* was his [Vito's] personal address book. He knew everybody...To put a show together, you know, we'd say, okay, what's the theme of the next few shows. Well, we're gonna do one around dance or family or racism or whatever. And he'd look into his address book and say who can we talk to.”<sup>4</sup> Russo is perhaps most famous for publishing *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* in 1981, an encyclopedic study documenting representations of homosexuality in film. In the mid-1980s, Russo was a founding member of GLAAD, the prominent LGBTQ media advocacy non-profit, as well as ACT UP, the grassroots organization famous for its use of civil disobedience, video art, and direct action to end the AIDS crisis. Russo continued his activism until his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1990. While *The Celluloid Closet* became a

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<sup>3</sup> Vincent Doyle, *Making Out in the Mainstream: GLAAD and the Politics of Respectability* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Kerr, interview with the author, October 2019.

foundational text for gay film studies, Russo's participation as co-host and producer of *Our Time* has yet to be considered as a prominent aspect of his legacy.

After *Our Time* ended its run in the spring of 1983, another gay cable access program, *Gay Morning America*, premiered in the fall of the same year. A weekly variety show that ran for three seasons on Channel J on Manhattan Cable, *Gay Morning America* focused its content on the downtown cabaret and gay bar scene. The show's volunteer staff worked in New York's LGBTQ nightlife venues: co-hosts and producers Johnny Savoy and George Sardi both frequently performed at Waverly Waverly, a piano bar in Greenwich Village co-owned by Johnny Pool, who hosted weekly cocktail mixing segments on the show. A parody of *Good Morning America*, other regular segments on the show included sports with Jerry Fitzpatrick, fitness with Lord Byron Falk, theater reviews with Leslie Irons, and musical performances by Lynn Lavner. *Gay Morning America* was one of the few LGBTQ cable access shows to air in the morning: the one-hour show was filmed live from 7:30-8:30am on Fridays at the E.T.C./Metro Access Studio (the same studio that supported *The Emerald City*) and aired directly after *The Robin Byrd Show*, on which a bikini-clad Byrd infamously interviewed sex workers and strippers. The *Gay Morning America* team often invited other members of the local cabaret and bar scene—singers, comedians, drag queens—to perform on the show, typically friends and colleagues who worked with them in the bars. *Gay Morning America* also hosted a number of episodes with phone-in segments, inviting viewers to call into the show on the air to discuss current events and major issues in LGBTQ community life and politics. In its third and final season, the show was reduced to a half hour and aired Saturday mornings from 11:30am-12pm.

While each episode of *Our Time* was meticulously planned around a theme or subject area, *Gay Morning America*'s episodes were largely improvised. As lesbian musician and

comedian Lynn Lavner shared with me, “Well, there was no rehearsal. People basically knew how long they had on screen on the camera and they did what they were going to do. I don't think I ever saw a running order.”<sup>5</sup> No cast member or productional personnel were paid to work on *Gay Morning America*; all volunteered their time and made use of the resources provided by Metro Access. Leslie Irons discussed the feel of production in a column for the gay periodical *The Connection*: “Since we all were bar and theatre people, we all stayed up all night the night before and God we looked charming in the morning.”<sup>6</sup> The improvised, low-budget nature of the show is reflected in technical difficulties, on air mistakes, and laughter from behind the camera that can be viewed and heard while watching recorded episodes. The show's low production value lends it a sense of casual intimacy and silly entertainment: with its focus on comedy and satire, a camp sensibility pervades the segments of the show. Despite or perhaps because of its low production value, the show received praise in the gay press: one reviewer wrote, “the cast had no rehearsal and had to wing it. The end result was better than even they expected... The whole crew has a great time and are working hard to bring fun to you early morning risers or those who are just going to bed. Watch them, write to them and support them.”<sup>7</sup> The show received acclaim from the wider community as well: in 1984, *Gay Morning America* won an award for outstanding service from the Christopher Street Liberation Day committee.

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn Lavner, interview with the author, July 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Leslie Irons, “Cabaret,” *The Connection*, April 11, 1984, Archives of Sexuality and Gender.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ryan, “Television,” *The Connection*, February 8, 1984, Archives of Sexuality and Gender.



Figure 2.1 This advertisement for *Gay Morning America* portrays the production team wearing awards given to them by the Christopher Street Liberation Day committee, in *The Connection*, vol. 4, no. 3, January 17-31 1984, pg. 8. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/PAMLBM066656173/AHSI?u=northwestern&sid=AHSI&xid=301e31ae>. Accessed 1 July 2020.

While each show had a limited run on Manhattan Cable, both are now accessible for viewing online. Filmmaker Jeffrey Schwarz, who directed the documentary *Vito* (2012), launched a crowdfunding campaign on the platform Kickstarter in 2013 to raise funds to digitize *Our Time*. After his successful campaign, Schwarz uploaded 11 out of the 13 *Our Time* episodes to YouTube; the remaining two episodes are available for viewing in Vito Russo's archival collection at the New York Public Library. Similarly, in 2019, students at Pratt Institute School of Information began working with New York's LGBTQ Community Center, which houses the

*Gay Morning America* archives, to digitize episodes of the show. The students created a website dedicated to preserving the Center's various audiovisual collections, on which a number of the *Gay Morning America* episodes are now available to stream. Thanks to their availability online, I was able to watch and research both of these shows remotely.

Both shows focused on LGBTQ politics and cultural life from a variety of perspectives. I am particularly interested in *Our Time* and *Gay Morning America*'s coverage of queer sexual health and wellness, perhaps the most urgent LGBTQ issue of the time period. I investigate how each show addresses the early years of the AIDS epidemic, arguing that they produce a televisual emotional pedagogy about AIDS via textual aesthetics and production processes. My formulation builds on Deborah Gould's concept of "emotional pedagogy," which describes how social movements make sense of affective states to channel them towards activist work. She notes, "Social movement contexts provide a language for people's affective states as well as a pedagogy of sorts regarding what and how to feel and what to do in light of those feelings."<sup>8</sup> On *Our Time*, the direct address segments, on-set interviews, and people-on-the-street interviews in its "AIDS" episode are infused with feelings of panic, urgency, anger, and fear that perform a didactic function. On *Gay Morning America*, its performance segments, usage of home video footage, and live call-in episodes embrace camp humor, entertainment, and a familial sense of togetherness. The pedagogy of feeling performed on *Our Time* makes sense of the rising panic about the AIDS crisis to channel these feelings towards collective action, whereas *Gay Morning America* encourages celebration of queer community by fostering an affect of togetherness in the face of the epidemic.

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<sup>8</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 28.

### **Legitimizing urgency on *Our Time* via the direct address mode**

Through its coverage of urgent LGBTQ issues, *Our Time* provided a counterpublic space for the recognition of queer feelings about AIDS on television. This is apparent during first minutes of the “AIDS” episode. In the opening segment, co-hosts Vito Russo and Marcia Pally borrow from the television nightly news format to relay dense information to their audience via direct address. Throughout television history, news broadcasters have employed the direct address speaking position to imbue their speech with a sense of legitimacy. In this format, an anchor addresses the camera while reading a prepared text “as if it were the spontaneous utterance of a speaker in conversation.”<sup>9</sup> Roger Hallas argues that direct address is common within television news reporting in part because it “produces a sense of the broadcast’s liveness and an impression of the anchor’s discursive authority.”<sup>10</sup> Via direct address, an anchor has the opportunity to shape public perception of a news story via word choice, mannerisms, enunciations, and emphasis. Charismatic anchors, such as celebrated American radio and television news broadcaster Edward R. Murrow in his program *See It Now* (CBS, 1951-1958), have influenced public opinion of current events with particular rhetorical and emotional appeals. On *Our Time*, Russo and Pally’s authoritative position as co-hosts grants the pair the power to construct a pedagogy of feeling about AIDS: Russo and Pally relate facts and statistics about AIDS with a sense of urgency and sobriety, conveying the growing fear circulating through gay communities during the beginning of the AIDS crisis.

Mainstream news media outlets were reluctant to report on the epidemic in the early 1980s. In July of 1981, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published the first

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<sup>9</sup> Roger Hallas, *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 80.

<sup>10</sup> Hallas, 80.



report about the virus, a small piece in its weekly digest alerting health officials to a spate of opportunistic infections affecting gay men. Scientists did not isolate the virus that causes AIDS, what we now call HIV, until 1984; at the time this episode aired, modes of transmission via blood and sexual contact were suspected but not yet confirmed. Broadcast television news coverage in this time period largely increased hysteria and misinformation about AIDS—it was only celebrity Rock Hudson’s death in 1985 that granted the AIDS epidemic “legitimacy as a newsworthy issue.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, lesbian and gay journalists and activists made use of the alternative press to spread awareness of their concerns about AIDS. The week after this *Our Time* episode aired, Larry Kramer published his now-classic polemic “1,112 and Counting” in the gay newspaper *The New York Native*, in which he condemned journalists, politicians, and doctors for not acting swiftly in the face of mounting death rates. Gay and lesbian activists realized that, as Larry Gross argues, “The most effective form of resistance to the hegemonic force of dominant media is to speak for oneself.”<sup>12</sup> This *Our Time* episode provides a compelling example of a moment in which gay and lesbian individuals “spoke” for themselves, spreading any known information about AIDS to other LGBTQ people in New York via cable television.

A close look at the aesthetics of the opening segment of this episode provides an example of the way in which *Our Time* created content by and for gay and lesbian New Yorkers by appropriating the format of broadcast television news. As the episode opens, the camera steadily focuses on the solemn faces of Russo and Pally, who are each seated in front of a simple blue set piece. The co-hosts address the camera, reading their material—statistics, medical research, death counts, and other scientific data about the spread of AIDS—off of pre-written cards.

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<sup>11</sup> Hallas, 83.

<sup>12</sup> Larry Gross, “Out of the Mainstream:: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 21, no. 1–2 (May 13, 1991): 40, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v21n01\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v21n01_04).

Similarly to a nightly news broadcast, the direct address mode on *Our Time* facilitates the simple and rapid communication of information to the audience. In addition to providing factual information, this opening segment simultaneously performs an affective function. The static camera focuses the attention of the segment on the co-hosts' solemn facial expressions and the grave information they impart to the audience, conveying a sense of urgency about the epidemic. This segment constructs a televisual mode of emotional pedagogy about AIDS: the aesthetics of the segment characterize AIDS as a mounting crisis, implicitly instructing viewers to fear its deadly effects.



Figure 2.2 Vito Russo opens the “AIDS” episode of *Our Time* with a direct address to the audience.

In borrowing the direct address format from other television formats, *Our Time* grants authority to marginalized individuals in the studio, challenging the structures of power often seen in commercial news. Examining broadcast news media, Hallas associates the direct address position with an uneven “structure of power” that affords authority to the newscaster over “the

subjects of news.”<sup>13</sup> Hallas writes that the “subjects of news” are sometimes disempowered because their speech is mediated through the discursive elements of the newsroom, including the studio, the news correspondents, and the *mise-en-scène* of the newsroom.<sup>14</sup> As Hallas suggests, some mainstream news programs discursively stigmatize their subjects, particularly those with marginalized identities. Alternatively, some commercial television news anchors have historically employed the direct address mode to generate understanding and empathy for subjects typically neglected by television news, spotlighting social justice issues and political activism. The direct address mode on *Our Time* differs from either of these models because it is self-reflexive: it allows gay men and lesbians to respond to their exclusion from the mainstream news media in a speaking position from which they were traditionally excluded. Eric Freedman argues that the radical potential of early public access programs lay in their self-referentiality; community-based access programs, especially those made by and for gay and lesbian communities, enabled “people to speak about the ability to speak.”<sup>15</sup> In this episode, the direct address mode performs this self-reflexive function by allowing gay men and lesbians access to an authoritative speaking position through which they can articulate their marginalization. As the hosts of the show, Russo and Pally are visually and discursively constructed as televisual experts, able to rebut the claims of mainstream media and express their commitment to sharing accurate information about the AIDS crisis.

The co-hosts align themselves with the imagined queer community of their audience in this opening segment. Russo and Pally refer to AIDS as a “terrifying health problem” affecting

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<sup>13</sup> Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 81.

<sup>14</sup> Hallas, 81.

<sup>15</sup> Eric Freedman, “Public Access/Private Confession: Home Video as (Queer) Community Television,” *Television & New Media* 1, no. 2 (2000): 187.

“the gay community.” By referring to “the gay community” outside the confines of the set and including themselves within it, Russo and Pally perform what Hallas calls “pseudointimacy,” simulating a personal relationship between themselves and their audience.<sup>16</sup> This assumed affective relationship between host and audience gestures towards the way in which *Our Time* strived to create a community space on television for gay and lesbian New Yorkers. Writing on SiriusXM’s LGBTQ-focused radio network OutQ, Alfred Martin argues that OutQ created a national “queer listening public” by discursively centering queer community news, issues, and current events in content designed for queer listeners.<sup>17</sup> Because OutQ was broadcast nationally via satellite radio, Martin argues that it “carved out a queer space that attempted to make queerness quotidian” within the confines of the commercial radio industry.<sup>18</sup> *Our Time* similarly catered to local LGBTQ television audiences underserved by broadcast networks; it crafted what I would call a queer counterpublic space on cable television. The use of “counterpublic” rather than “public” evokes Nancy Fraser’s definition of subaltern counterpublics: “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn, permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.”<sup>19</sup> *Our Time* can be categorized as a queer counterpublic television program because it aired on the alternative “parallel discursive arena” of noncommercial television and foregrounded LGBTQ issues, concerns, and current events.

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<sup>16</sup> Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 80.

<sup>17</sup> Alfred L. Martin, “Queer (in)Frequencies: SiriusXM’s OutQ and the Limits of Queer Listening Publics,” *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 2 (March 4, 2018): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2017.1315735>.

<sup>18</sup> Martin, 3.

<sup>19</sup> Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

From their relative position of power as hosts of this show, Russo and Pally serve as models for how queer counterpublic programming could respond to the AIDS crisis. Martin suggests that a mediated queer public “recognizes and fosters a space for queer feeling(s) and makes such feelings resonate as both national and local feelings.”<sup>20</sup> The co-hosts’ direct address monologues foster a mediated queer counterpublic space for the exploration of feelings about AIDS, emphasizing its deadly potential by conveying a sense of urgency and alarm when discussing the epidemic’s effect on gay and lesbian communities. The focus on fear as an affective mode of addressing the epidemic paves the way for *Our Time* to stage a call to action, or what I refer to as a call to affect, in the following segment.

#### **A call to affect: a pedagogy of anger in on-set interviews with activists**

Following this opening segment, Russo conducts a lengthy interview with AIDS activist luminaries Larry Kramer and Virginia Apuzzo. By mid-1983, Kramer, co-founder of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), and Apuzzo, Executive Director of the National Gay Task Force, were quickly becoming two of the most outspoken AIDS activists in the country. Kramer took to the gay press to indict the media and government for ignoring the AIDS crisis; Apuzzo helped organize candlelight vigils and protests in Washington D.C., condemning the federal government for its negligence of people with AIDS.<sup>21</sup> Gould credits Apuzzo and Kramer with “shift[ing] the political horizon in lesbian and gay communities” towards the confrontational activism that would emerge later in the mid-1980s through organizations like ACT UP.<sup>22</sup> While in 1983 these individuals were community activists with varying degrees of renown, Larry Kramer in

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<sup>20</sup> Martin, “Queer (in)Frequencies,” 3.

<sup>21</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*.

<sup>22</sup> Gould, 91.

particular is now known as a (controversial) hero of the AIDS activist movement, credited in part with jumpstarting radical organizing on behalf of people with AIDS. This early interview on *Our Time* showcases these two influential activists, providing an opportunity for them to stage a call for collective queer anger. The rhetoric of Kramer, Apuzzo, and Russo as well as the sparse *mise-en-scène* of the set and interview format of the segment construct a televisual pedagogy of anger as a response to AIDS.

Russo interviews Kramer and Apuzzo together in a twelve-minute segment in the beginning half of the episode. Throughout the interview, Kramer and Apuzzo repeatedly rhetorically frame AIDS as a disastrous crisis producing little response from the government, medical institutions, and media. Russo introduces Kramer and Apuzzo and directs the first question to his interviewees: “I’d like to ask them first how the community is beginning to cope with this particular epidemic at this time and how rough it’s been to organize people behind this issue and get people out there fighting against this disease. What’s going on right now, and how tough has it been for you to organize around it?” Kramer answers first: “How we’re coping and how we should be coping? Who knows, it’s just a terrible, terrible, terrible situation. Very little has been done to help us on any level, city level, federal level, state level seems to be getting a little better, and the community level as well.”

After Russo and Kramer discuss the extent to which government officials have avoided granting resources to people with AIDS, Russo asks Apuzzo to discuss the decision by the Hemophilia Foundation to discourage gay people from giving blood. Apuzzo responds,

I think that the problem is not unlike what Larry is explaining. Look at the vulnerable position the gay community is in. On one hand, we’re victims of an unidentified epidemic. The necessity to research is clear to anyone. There’s no question we need the

research money. The gay community has been talking about this for two years, and two years later there is still foot dragging in terms of research. There is speculation that the issue of blood may provide the transmissive agent. If that's the case, doesn't it make sense to one, test the blood, and two, escalate that imperative with regard to research?

Neither of those two things are being done. What's being done is that we're blaming the victim.

As Apuzzo discusses the complicated relationship between hemophiliacs and gay communities, she situates it in the context of victimization. Both gay men and hemophiliacs are victims of an unidentified disease, and yet Apuzzo affirms it is gay men who are blamed for the spread of AIDS. This framing helps Apuzzo claim that gay people are an oppressed group, doubly victimized as they are blamed for the spread of the disease that is killing them. Apuzzo's use of the rhetorical question ("Doesn't it make sense...?") emphasizes her point: instead of blaming the victim, the Hemophilia Foundation should allocate more funding toward research and testing. Kramer seems to agree with Apuzzo; he adds, "If this epidemic is going to hit more and more straight people, they're screwing themselves by not doing the research now. As in hepatitis, we're doing everybody's suffering for them." Kramer and Apuzzo repeatedly reinforce the stigmatization of gay people and people with AIDS, who desperately need help that the government refuses to give. Towards the end of the interview, Kramer speaks with increased intensity: "We have never been in such a terribly threatening position in the whole history of being gay. In the whole history of homosexuality. This is life or death. We are dying. We are going to have to unite. We are going to have to be angry. We are going to have to be perceived as being a threat...It is up to us, right now."

I quote this interview at length to demonstrate the rhetorical force of the activists on screen in this episode. This is not a calm and measured discussion about the relationship between the spread of AIDS, hemophilia, blood donations, institutional responses, and gay community life. Apuzzo and Kramer take this interview as an opportunity to stage a call to action. They both passionately explain the state of devastation currently caused by AIDS and the deeply disappointing lack of institutional response. Kramer in particular addresses the gay and lesbian community, speaking from a “we” position to include himself within the audience of the show. Kramer’s short declarative sentences, such as “We are dying,” assert the gravity of this situation. Kramer repeatedly affirms the desperate need for gay and lesbian community action around AIDS.

Russo, visibly affected by Kramer’s impromptu speech, wraps up the interview: “Well, I wanna thank you both. I don’t blame you for being angry and I’d like to get a lot of people in this community angry. The rest of this show may help you to get angry, because we’re gonna be telling you some things that may scare the shit out of you. And that’s exactly what we’re trying to do, because you need to be scared in order to get angry.” This is a significant moment in the episode and in the series, in which Russo addresses the viewer and makes transparent his authorial intent: he asserts that he wants to activate gay and lesbian people around AIDS. While this is a mediated conversation—tensions are heightened by reaction shots, glances between Russo and the interviewees, and Kramer and Apuzzo’s performative gestures—it is significant that Russo frames the conversation as a call to fear, anger, and community action. Speaking to his viewer once again in the direct address mode, Russo reveals his positionality. Russo is not a neutral or removed television host, but someone it seems who is scared and angry himself. While Russo and Pally use direct address throughout the episode, this is the only moment in which he



makes a specific call to action, or what I propose functions here as a call to affect. After establishing a climate of fear in the opening segment of the episode, this interview stresses the need for collective anger in response to AIDS.

This interview provides contemporary viewers with a televisual archive of queer frustration and anger in response to the AIDS epidemic. This may be the first televised debate of its kind about the impact of AIDS on the gay and lesbian community. There were only a handful of groups organizing around AIDS at this time and few opportunities for these activists to appear on news media programs. In the absence of commercial media discourse, *Our Time* served as one outlet for the expression of feelings about AIDS. While Kramer and Apuzzo's repeated calls to action would not inspire mass mobilization until the mid-1980s, the existence of this discussion on television points to the percolating fear and anger amongst gay and lesbian people before the era of militant organizing against AIDS. A historically significant discussion, this episode showcases two prophets of the epidemic using public access as a forum through which to encourage emerging affective modes of experiencing the AIDS crisis.

The bare-bones set and basic video equipment used in this episode enhance the pedagogy of anger presented by Russo and his interviewees: the *mise-en-scène* gives *Our Time* a "grassroots" feel that increases its sense of fidelity to queer community activism. The set for this interview is sparse. Russo, Apuzzo, and Kramer sit on beige chairs arranged in a half-circle on top of a red carpet and in front of an off-white wall. The camera cuts between static head shots of each speaker, pulling away to show the group when Russo asks them a question. No graphics, props, or other footage appear during this interview; the focus is on this conversation alone. These aesthetic choices—simple *mise-en-scène* filmed with basic camerawork—are common to public access programs created on a meager budget. Lynn Spigel writes that the low-budget

aesthetics of early access shows gave them “an aura of authenticity, spontaneity, and intimacy.”<sup>23</sup>

For *Our Time*, its simple set design and camerawork grants the show an aura of sincerity.



Figure 2.3 Russo interviews activists Virginia Apuzzo and Larry Kramer on the set of *Our Time*.

It’s worth noting that *Our Time* was produced on a “shoestring” budget, according to WNYC-TV director John Beck.<sup>24</sup> WNYC-TV provided funding for the first season of the show but was unwilling to provide funding for a second season. In my interview with *Our Time*’s Executive Director Rick Siggelkow, he explained that this decision was largely political. As Siggelkow shared, Beck, a gay man, pushed WNYC-TV to fund *Our Time* after friends encouraged him to use his position of power at the station to support the community in a time of crisis. Beck was successful in securing funding for the show, which included use of the WNYC-TV studio and editing equipment, the labor of the staff and crew of the station, and small salaries for the production staff, including Russo and Pally. However, Beck was let go later that year, and

<sup>23</sup> Lynn Spigel, “Talk TV and the Video Countercultures,” *Televisionario* Exhibition Catalog, Fondazione Prada (May 2017): 52.

<sup>24</sup> John Wallace, “Our Time: TV on Our Terms,” *The New York Native* 3, no. 58 (1983): 13.

there was no one at the station left to support the show. “The board of WNYC would not give money to the show. I mean they would not fund it... We didn't need much. We only needed like \$30,000. I mean, it was peanuts, you know, for producing a television show. We needed the money and we needed the support of the head of the station. And once John left, that was really the end of it,” Siggelkow remembered.<sup>25</sup> *Our Time*'s cancellation reveals the limits of queer programming in the early 1980s. Without direct pressure from a gay man in a leadership position, WNYC-TV refused to fund television series made by and for gay and lesbian people. Like all of the shows I discuss, when the journalists, artists, and activists creating the shows lost funding and could no longer afford to volunteer their time or to work for little pay, the production of such programming became unsustainable.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, *Our Time*'s lack of financial resources, the show's sparse set foregrounds the conversation between Russo, Apuzzo, and Kramer by lending a sense of earnestness to its messages of advocacy. Unlike some of its contemporary access programs, which employed experimental aesthetics to challenge the status of television as a communications medium and commercial institution, *Our Time*'s use of television conventions like the on-set interview simulates a “discursive exchange” within a local community.<sup>26</sup> Alternative media often employ traditional narrative conventions “to do the political work of entering new opinions, new selves, or newly understood selves into the public discourse.”<sup>27</sup> Using conventional televisual codes and a simple *mise-en-scène* allowed *Our Time* to stage a powerful call for collective queer anger. While *Our Time* may have lacked a substantial budget,

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<sup>25</sup> Rick Siggelkow, interview with the author, October 2019. Further quotes from same interview.

<sup>26</sup> Margaret Morse, “Talk, Talk, Talk: The Space of Discourse in Television News, Sportscasts, Talk Shows and Advertising,” *Screen* 26, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 2.

<sup>27</sup> Juhasz, *AIDS TV*, 22.

it made use of the resources at hand—the basic interview format and the static camera talking head shot—to set the focus of this conversation on the content of the interview. These aesthetic choices emphasize Russo, Kramer, and Apuzzo’s call for a communal affect, creating a televisual emotional pedagogy oriented toward anger in response to AIDS.

### **A crisis of feeling: archiving queer communal affects in people-on-the-street interviews**

Following the interview with Kramer and Apuzzo, *Our Time* airs interviews with five gay men of various ages and racial backgrounds in a people-on-the-street segment. Every episode of *Our Time* intercuts such segments into the show on topics related to the theme of the episode. In the “AIDS” episode, this segment highlights percolating feelings of shame, fatalism, and fear amongst gay community members in New York, portraying the AIDS crisis in terms of its effect on communal attitudes about sexual health and promiscuity. These interviews produce an archive of feelings about AIDS that demonstrates the broad reach of the crisis throughout New York’s gay communities. Via sequence and editing, the people-on-the-street interviews build upon the pedagogies of fear and anger on the episode by implicitly critiquing intracommunal fatalism and encouraging righteous anger in its place.

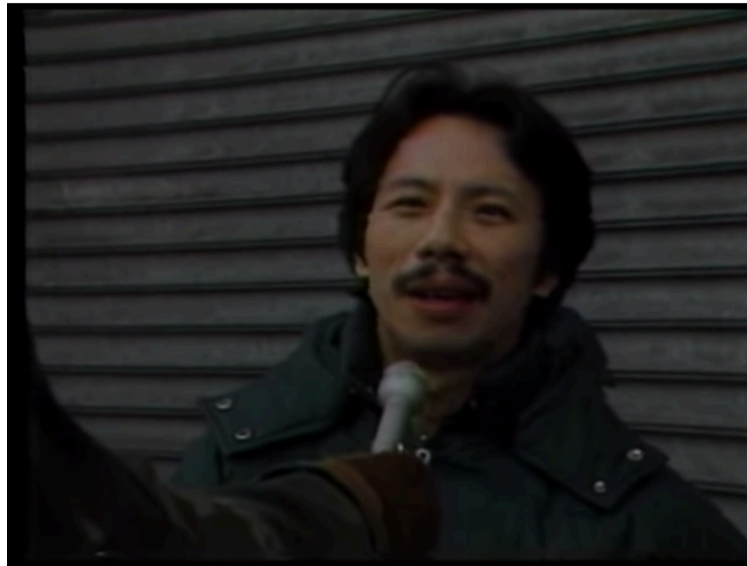


Figure 2.4 *Our Time* interviews a man on the street in Manhattan about his understanding of AIDS and sexual health.

People-on-the-street segments offer a glimpse into the complex range of affective experiences of gay New Yorkers in the early period of the AIDS epidemic. Russo asks men on the street if they have changed their sexual lifestyle practices in response to news about the spread of the disease. Gay sexual practices came under harsh scrutiny by the mainstream media in the early years of the epidemic; newscasters blamed the “gay lifestyle” for the rapid spread of the disease amongst gay and bisexual men, reinforcing homophobic rhetoric that linked homosexuality to promiscuity and disease. This sparked an intra-communal debate about sexual health within gay communities: some wondered whether the hard-earned sexual freedoms of the gay liberation Movement in the 1970s might in fact be making them sick, and others refused to compromise these freedoms. *Our Time*’s interviews about this subject, the majority of which are shared during an extended sequence in the middle of the episode, reflect a range of responses to this set of debates. Here is a sample of the responses:

- “I know one person who is still as active as possible, and among my circle of friends, we now call him The Carrier.”
- “I have a friend who has the AIDS disease and I would say that I have seen a lot of change...I know people that no longer go to the baths because they’re afraid of multiple contacts. So I’m surprised, to tell you the truth, and I think there’s a problem with this...there seems to be a lot of puritanism and self-hate and there’s a real backlash.”
- “I don’t think it’s going to change many people as far as their sexual activity. You know, it’s like smoking cigarettes. People who smoke cigarettes, you know, they’ve been told for years that its gonna cause cancer. They say, well that’s fine, if I get cancer I get cancer. I think it’s the same thing about sexual activity. I don’t think they’re gonna change much.”
- “My friend’s friend, he had two friends who got the gay disease. They all got the gay cancer. They got so upset about it. In fact, me and all my friends, we don’t go to either [the] bathhouse or bar as often as we did before.”

This selection of responses identifies a range of reactions to the presence of AIDS in the local community. Some men describe their own and/or their friends’ shifting tendencies toward monogamy and decisions to avoid the bathhouses; others express a lack of concern for the ways in which AIDS may be spreading through sexual networks. A few imagine AIDS as analogous to other deadly diseases or accidents; this fatalistic attitude suggests illness may be unavoidable, so why prevent it? Others mention the rise of “puritanism” and “backlash” against sexual liberation, which seems to be hurting the bottom line of local gay businesses. While the men interviewed in *Our Time* are certainly not a fully representative sample of gay New Yorkers, these interviews do

suggest the existence of a variety of affects and experiences related to the AIDS epidemic in 1983.

Not much has been written about the mediated experiences of LGBTQ people in the early years of the AIDS crisis. While there is a robust body of literature exploring the psychological impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, scholars who write about AIDS media produced by LGBTQ people tend to write about work created after the emergence of ACT UP in 1987.<sup>28</sup> Gould's work provides insight into an earlier time period: focusing on newspapers like *The New York Native* and *The Advocate*, she extensively discusses responses to the epidemic in the gay press between 1981-1985, writing that discussions of AIDS in the early 1980s "were saturated with ambivalent language" as they oscillated between a sense of communal pride in the rapid response service provision undertaken by gay communities alongside a perpetual sense of shame about the relationship between gay sexual practices and the spread of the disease.<sup>29</sup> This shame-related discourse echoes throughout *Our Time*'s interviewees: the men interviewed in this episode rarely reflect on their own sex lives, instead referring to the actions of friends or "people" in general, perhaps in an effort to distance themselves from the stigma associated with promiscuity. While this lens is useful, what might account for the various responses present in this episode beyond the existing literature on pride, ambivalence, and shame?

Scholars may be able to look to *Our Time* as a mediated archive that offer clues to understanding the broader range of queer affective responses to the beginning of the AIDS

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<sup>28</sup> See Roger Hallas's book *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (Duke University Press, 2009); Lucas Hilderbrand's article "Retroactivism" (*GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 12, no.2, 313-317); Alexandra Juhasz's book *AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Activist Video* (Duke University Press, 1995); and Chris Robé's book *Breaking the Spell: A History of Anarchist Filmmakers, Videotape Guerrillas, and Digital Ninjas* (PM Press, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 62.

epidemic. Writing about experimental AIDS documentaries, Cvetkovich argues that these films “use the power of visual media to put the archive on display,” often incorporating a wide range of visual materials to record the experience of living through the AIDS crisis.<sup>30</sup> Cable access programs like *Our Time* similarly use the aesthetics of televisual media to “put the archive on display”: in this case, people-on-the-street interviews offer glimpses into an archive of feelings that records a range of reactions to the spread of AIDS. Fear and anxiety are present in these interviews, alongside a strikingly fatalistic attitude about the inevitability of death and disease. What might explain these differing experiences? It is important to underscore the widespread lack of information about AIDS available at the time, as well as the fact that no one could have known how devastating the epidemic would become. While more than 16,000 people would be diagnosed with AIDS by the end of 1985, the 1,000 or so people diagnosed by 1983 might not have caused alarm in gay communities at a comparable scale.<sup>31</sup> Racial difference may be a crucial site of exploration in this segment as well, as it includes a number of interviews with men of color. How might the experiences of Black, Asian, and Latinx men in this time period have differed from their white peers? More specifically, how might racism in the medical and political institutions, interpersonal racism in gay community spaces, and class and race-based segregation in New York have affected the experiences of gay men of color at this time? While this episode does not necessarily provide answers to these questions, the inclusion of men of color on screen perhaps calls for a renewed exploration into the relationship between race, sexuality, and communal affects during this time period. Indeed, two of *Our Time*’s later episodes—one

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<sup>30</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 244.

<sup>31</sup> Boyce Rensberger, “AIDS Cases in 1985 Exceed Total of All Previous Years,” *Washington Post*, January 17, 1986, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1986/01/17/aids-cases-in-1985-exceed-total-of-all-previous-years/38c933d7-260c-414b-80f7-0dd282415cc6/>.



focused on racism in the community and another on the experiences of “Third World” gay and lesbian people—host roundtables during which LGBTQ people of color share experiences of marginalization with one another. While an analysis of these episodes is outside the scope of this chapter, future research might explore how *Our Time* mediated queer of color responses to and reflections on LGBTQ life in the early 1980s. Via roundtable conversations and on-the-street interviews with diverse New Yorkers, *Our Time* provides glimpses into “the unusual emotional archive” of LGBTQ history preserved in cable across programming.<sup>32</sup>

Although a variety of feelings are present in this emotional archive, the people-on-the-street interviews emphasize the pedagogies of fear and anger proposed by the direct address opening segment and the on-set interview. The editing of people-on-the-street segments in montage sequences stages each interview as an addition to or an alternative response to conversation around the theme of the episode. While the people-on-the-street interviews are presented without comment from the *Our Time* hosts, the editing of the interview sequence in this episode implicitly critiques the fatalistic attitude demonstrated by some of the interviewees. The majority of these interviews air during the middle of the episode, but the episode ends with a standalone interview of a man who says, “Everyone I know is scared shitless.” *Our Time*’s framing is evident here. The team incorporates a diversity of reactions to the spread of AIDS throughout the episode yet ends the episode with an interview that expresses fear as a prevailing structure of feeling of the time period. This interview recalls Russo’s own admission earlier in the episode that the show “may scare the shit out of you” because “you need to be scared in order to get angry.”

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<sup>32</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 244.

The viewer is left with the phrase “scared shitless” as the episode transitions to its credit sequence. The people-on-the-street interviews, the final one in particular, urge the audience to recognize the unfolding AIDS epidemic as a crisis. Not only a crisis of sexual and physical health, it is a crisis of feeling: *Our Time* conveys that the AIDS crisis has transformed multiplicitous queer communal affects into structures of feeling dominated by fear, paranoia, and stigma. The editing of the people-on-the-street interviews, combined with the earlier on-set interviews and direct address talking head segments, indirectly critiques the defeatism of some community members. Implying that LGBTQ New Yorkers must shift their perspectives—from defeatism towards the instrumentalization of fear as agency—the episode encourages its audience to turn varied percolating affects into a collective response oriented towards activism to confront the AIDS crisis.

### **Camp TV and the Variety Show: Humor on *Gay Morning America***

While *Our Time* focuses its “AIDS” episode segments on fear, anger, and activism as a response to AIDS, *Gay Morning America* shifts feelings of panic about the epidemic towards a celebration of queer community culture via camp humor and entertainment. This is evident from its opening title sequence: *Gay Morning America*’s campy theme song sets the tone for the show. A jingle-like song composed by Lynn Lavner, it is comprised of a peppy and catchy melody played on the piano with simple, clever lyrics sung by co-host Jonny Savoy: “‘G’, it’s a beautiful day, ‘A’ well it’s a-okay, ‘Y,’ why not start the day with Gay Morning America!” The theme song has an endearing, silly, tongue-in-cheek quality, inviting audiences to view the show as light-hearted entertainment. As David Román writes, camp “[incorporates] the survivalist strategies of the earlier, pre-Stonewall gay model of responding to oppression, violence and discrimination with

post-Stonewall outrage, irony, and wit.”<sup>33</sup> As a type of in-community humor and entertainment, camp can comment on current events and LGBTQ politics while simultaneously poking fun at them. Indeed, Lavner told me that she liked to write music and lyrics that contain “inside jokes to gay people for what everybody was talking about.”<sup>34</sup> In this case, the theme song queers the title sequence of a morning variety show, declaring homosexuality “beautiful” and “a-okay.”

Christian Lassen writes that AIDS-era LGBTQ media, performance, and aesthetics embraced camp as a genre because it “aims at both social change, seeing that it helps AIDS victims and AIDS activists raise hell, and personal healing, seeing that, in no less significant or acute a role, it helps them keep their sanity.”<sup>35</sup> *Gay Morning America* embraces these strategies, employing a camp sensibility about LGBTQ politics and community culture, helping its producers and audience members to keep their sanity amidst growing panic about the AIDS epidemic. Unlike *Our Time*, *Gay Morning America* has no one specific episode that focuses on AIDS; instead, I look to segments across episodes of the show to examine how it addresses queer community culture via camp performance.

The variety show model is central to the camp aesthetics of *Gay Morning America*. Televised variety shows, popular since the 1940s, typically feature a number of musical performances, comedy sketches, and entertaining acts moderated by a host or master of ceremonies and performed in front of a live studio audience. From the 1950s-1970s, programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show* (CBS, 1948-1971) infused television with a vaudeville sensibility, blending together comedy, performance, and popular entertainment. These programs included

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<sup>33</sup> David Román, “‘It’s My Party and I’ll Die If I Want to!’: Gay Men, AIDS, and the Circulation of Camp in U.S. Theatre,” *Theatre Journal* 44, no. 3 (October 1992): 305, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3208551>.

<sup>34</sup> Lavner, interview. Further quotes from same interview.

<sup>35</sup> Christian Lassen, *Camp Comforts: Reparative Gay Literature in Times of AIDS* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 13.

camp performances; as Quinlan Miller writes, “camp was ubiquitous in the 1950s.”<sup>36</sup> While popular historical narratives note the absence of queer and trans representation in television programming of the 1950s and 1960s, Miller’s work explores the queerness of early television programming. Miller explains, “in the early years of incorporating radio, film, literature, comics, game shows, and vaudeville and stand-up comedy for commercial TV formats, much of the medium’s central power came from trans gender queer camp, in situational humor about social norms and taste distinctions and in seemingly throwaway punch lines and bit performances.”<sup>37</sup> For Miller, the concept trans gender queer “refers to the possibility of reading gender cues that are more specific than male and female, masculine and feminine...[it] positions *gender* as a multiplicitous switch point between *trans* and *queer*, [accounting] for prototrans subject positions and for nonbinary orientation missed and misidentified.”<sup>38</sup> Miller explores how sitcom humor in particular embraced, ridiculed, and reflected non-normative formations of sexuality and gender, mining 1950s television for performances of what he calls trans gender queer camp.

Into the 1960s and 1970s, a more self-conscious camp style permeated television programming. In response to the sexual revolution in the 1970s, sexual innuendo and pop and camp cultural awareness became a central aspect of televisual humor, as seen shows like the colorful comic strip series *Batman* (ABC, 1966-1968), the sketch comedy-variety show *Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In* (NBC 1968-1973), and game shows like *Match Game* (CBS, 1973-1979).<sup>39</sup> This type of self-conscious play with gender, sexuality, and genre is central to *Gay Morning America*’s comedic tone. While many LGBTQ cable access shows, including *Our*

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<sup>36</sup> Quinlan Miller, *Camp TV: Trans Gender Queer Sitcom History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>37</sup> Miller, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Miller, 3–4.

<sup>39</sup> Levine, *Wallowing in Sex*, 169–207.

*Time*, made use of the newsmagazine format to share topical information from a variety of perspectives, *Gay Morning America* satirizes the morning variety show, imbuing its segments and sketches with campy queer humor. For example, co-host Georgi Sardi's speech is marked by sexual innuendo and gay cultural references: on one episode, after a fan calls in to praise the show, Sardi quips, "thank you darling, spread the word, not your legs, the word!" As Lavner remembers, Sardi "was the biggest camp that you could ever need. And he never took himself seriously...he was an emcee and a guy about town, but he was very effeminate. He dressed in outrageous clothes and he just screamed 'gay-ola!' whenever it was appropriate and sometimes when it wasn't." Sardi, already in his 60s during the production of the show, cultivated a flamboyant aesthetic and effeminate speech pattern that revealed his rejection of normative masculinity and embrace of queer sexuality. Many segments of the show reflect Sardi's outrageous and flamboyant style. In each episode, bartender Johnny Pool mixes drinks live on air and, absurdly, involves a rubber chicken as a key tool or ingredient in every recipe. Wearing a chef's hat and an apron and standing in front of a backdrop of a kitchen, Pool creates different cocktails with ingredients he brings to the studio from his bar, often stirring his drinks with the head or feet of the rubber chicken before passing them out to the volunteer staff and crew. Pool, who sometimes performs in costume or in drag, seems to greatly enjoy serving his *Gay Morning America* team members alcoholic beverages bright and early on Friday mornings. This bizarre twist on traditional cooking and baking segments often seen in morning variety shows provides many moments of silliness on screen.



Figure 2.5 Bartender Johnny Pool mixes cocktails on the set of *Gay Morning America* with the help of a rubber chicken.

Lavner's performances similarly exemplify the camp feel of the show. Lavner hosted a weekly segment called "Girl Talk," during which she performed cabaret songs on the piano and monologued about current events, often but not exclusively focusing on lesbian and feminist news and concerns. Lavner's humor on the show enacts what Pamela Robertson calls "feminist camp." While camp has historically been associated with gay male performances, Robertson writes, "Camp has an affinity with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment."<sup>40</sup> Camp performance allows women "to express their discomfort with and alienation from the normative gender and sex roles assigned to them by straight culture."<sup>41</sup> In this way, feminist camp "commonly foregrounds the artifice of gender and sexual roles" to provide opportunities for women to negotiate "their feelings of alienation from the normative gender and sex roles assigned to them by straight culture."<sup>42</sup> Lavner embodies this type of feminist camp: a

<sup>40</sup> Pamela Robertson, "What Makes the Feminist Camp?," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 268–69.

<sup>41</sup> Robertson, 271.

<sup>42</sup> Robertson, 275, 280.

short, butch, frequently leather-clad woman, Lavner's humor centers around gender and sexuality. On the show, she frequently discusses local and national LGBTQ politics and news from a lesbian and feminist perspective, injecting her comments with campy humor. In the second episode of the second season, Lavner comments on a 1984 New York Supreme Court ruling that denied an adult gay adoption. In the 1970s and 1980s, a number of LGBTQ activists argued that, if denied the right to marry their partners, they should be able to adopt one another in order to legally secure some of the economic benefits of a marital partnership. On this topic, Lavner shares: "I agree absolutely with the Supreme Court. I do not believe that lovers gay or straight should be able to adopt one another... I think the simple solution is to permit gay people to get married, like anybody else! That way we don't have to confuse who goes to open school night, god knows." Lavner's ironic support of the Supreme Court ruling exposes the prejudice behind the ruling. Her proposal for a more encompassing solution than adult adoption—marriage equality—reflects the way she combined humor with political commentary on LGBTQ rights to create a feminist camp performance.

The campy humor and entertainment on the show provides an escape from the growing severity of the AIDS crisis off screen. As the numbers of AIDS cases rose into the thousands and tens of thousands in the mid 1980s, LGBTQ daily life around the country changed drastically. Increasing numbers of anti-gay hate crimes and discrimination cases, conservative and religious backlash to the epidemic, and homophobic media coverage of the disease compounded the effects of the increasing death tolls, leaving many people sick and dying without social and institutional support.<sup>43</sup> The topic becomes increasingly present throughout *Gay Morning America* as a number of segments begin to address the epidemic: Sardi gives an obituary for Lynne

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<sup>43</sup> Stein, *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, 144–47.

Carter, a female impressionist who died of complications due to AIDS; Leslie Irons conducts an interview with actor Geoff Edhom, who starred in *Buddies* (Arthur Bressan, 1985), the first feature length film to deal with AIDS; and Savoy reads a number of public service announcements for AIDS services and hotlines during each episode.

*Gay Morning America*'s entertainment segments provide a reprieve from the devastating effects of the epidemic. As Lynn Lavner suggested, "it [the show] fostered community and that certainly was a thing...people needed the support and we hung together." As increasing numbers of their friends and colleagues in the club and gay nightlife scene became sick, *Gay Morning America* helped remind audiences and perhaps the team members themselves of the vitality of the community. This strategy was replicated in other types of LGBTQ media, theater, art, and activism in the later 1980s and 1990s: as Lassen argues, camp became "a subcultural glue indispensable to community formation and community survival" in queer theater productions as a response to the AIDS crisis.<sup>44</sup> Román adds, camp was "a means to entertain those on the front lines of war."<sup>45</sup> For activists in the direct action group ACT UP, "campy humor was a creative response that offered much-needed psychic relief and release."<sup>46</sup> *Gay Morning America* presents an early example of this strategy, providing temporary relief for viewers deeply affected by the AIDS epidemic. Rather than just a distraction from the epidemic, the show provided moments for joy, silliness, and celebration—a much-needed "subcultural glue" that likely helped viewers maintain their sanity in the midst of devastation.

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<sup>44</sup> Lassen, *Camp Comforts*, 28.

<sup>45</sup> Román, "'It's My Party and I'll Die If I Want To!,'" 318.

<sup>46</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 197.



### **Queer Families on Screen: Home Video and the Affect of Togetherness**

*Gay Morning America* exemplifies this form of celebration in a segment showcasing the team's preparation for and participation in the 1984 Pride festival in New York. At the end of the first episode of the second season, the team play a videotape on the air that depicts Sardi, Lavner, Lavner's partner, and Savoy building a Pride float to represent the show in the annual parade. The float, a giant model of a television screen set to Channel J, is attached to a white truck filled with balloons and a banner that reads "Gay Morning America!" This segment, presented like a home video, which Sardi and Savoy narrate over the footage, emphasizes the familial relationships of the team. From the visual depiction of the team's interpersonal relationships to the segment's home video aesthetics, it presents *Gay Morning America* as a queer family, establishing what, building on Wald's work, I call an affect of togetherness.



Figure 2.6-2.8 For Pride 1984, the *Gay Morning America* team created a giant model of a television, set to Channel J, to represent the show.

The videotape shows the team spending time together on the day of Pride, joking and laughing as they prepare to join the parade, as well as footage of the parade itself as the float makes its way down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. The Pride parade took place in June 1984, and this episode airs in October, so it is clear that the footage on screen is pre-recorded. Savoy and Sardi introduce the Pride segment live from the studio, providing narration for the video, while Lavner plays accompanying music on set on the piano. The tape shows various *Gay Morning America* members preparing their float at the Waverly Waverly bar, which serves as a home base for float decoration, blowing up balloons and tying them together. Outside the bar, Savoy poses with the large model of the television set as the team attaches dozens of balloons to it. The camera cuts to later in the day, featuring shots of the crowd during the parade as the float makes its way down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. On the tape, Lavner hugs women on the street and Sardi and Savoy sit atop the truck, dressed in red, white, and blue attire, waving to fans in the crowd.

As Savoy and Sardi narrate the events of the day on the tape, they crack jokes about each other and the team. Sardi watches himself saying something to the camera—he comments in voiceover, “I got a mouth that never shuts up! Save some of that hot air for the balloons!” The team on set laughs in response to his self-deprecating joke. A few minutes later, the camera zooms in on an advertisement at the bar displaying the bare chest of a male model, and someone quips, “is that Byron?” Later, the video shows Lavner playfully placing two balloons on her chest, and as she watches herself on screen, she comments from the studio, “Oh I’ve got big ones!” At the end of the segment, the team claps and cheers for each other as the credits roll. In some ways this segment is like many others on the show; throughout its episodes, *Gay Morning America* staff on set can frequently be heard reacting to their colleagues’ jokes and antics. These on and off-camera reactions convey a sense of the close friendships and relationships among

participants on the set. The informal atmosphere on *Gay Morning America* sets it apart from other shows focusing on news, entertainment, and/or political discourse. In more traditional or mainstream news and variety shows, production personnel and other staff are usually instructed to be silent while hosts or anchors speak on camera. The on-set hijinks on *Gay Morning America* lend it a casual and even familial tone—it is clear that the team is uninterested in upholding the professional respectability of a commercial program. Indeed, the team behind *Gay Morning America* were close friends. As Johnny Pool told me, “it was all family... I was with my best friends and my partners and so it was fun, it was fabulous. I enjoyed every part of it.”<sup>47</sup> It is easy to imagine that Pool, Savoy, Sardi, and Lavner act together on set of *Gay Morning America* as they might have done at the cabaret bars: joking, teasing, and laughing together during long nights working together. The closeness of the *Gay Morning America* team is reflected both on and off camera in the participatory nature of the show.

The low production value of the show adds to its scrappy, familial feel. Many segments are marked with technical difficulties: microphones not turned on, unfocused cameras, hosts missing their cues, and sound unsynchronized. Lavner remembers, “it was such an unprofessional show...one day the camera man did not come. And Ardis [her partner] did the camera work.” The scrappy feel is particularly evident in this Pride segment. The footage possesses the quality of a home video: a shaky, hand-held camera pans from person to person on screen, indiscriminately zooming in and out without precision, accompanied by an audio track that is difficult to discern. This Pride segment exhibits what Lucas Hilderbrand calls the “handmade aesthetic” of much amateur video; it features “both the informal aesthetic and the

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<sup>47</sup> Johnny Pool, interview with the author, April 2020.

intense personal, emotional investment in the project.”<sup>48</sup> *Gay Morning America* had no budget for professional staff or equipment: the show relied entirely upon the resources provided by the Metro Access studio. Unlike *Our Time*, nobody on *Gay Morning America* was paid for their work. While both shows had low budgets, particularly compared to broadcast public television and commercial programming, *Our Time*’s small budget did allow it some professional affordances, most notably the labor of the WNYC-TV production staff. *Gay Morning America*’s low production value lends it a unique sense of earnestness and intimacy, particularly when the show depicts the friendships on set.

The handmade aesthetic, combined with relationships presented on screen, generates a certain affect of togetherness on the show. Writing about the Black public affairs program *Soul!*, Wald discusses how the show is marked by a commitment to exploring diverse views among Black artists, activists, and radical thinkers. She suggests, “The agency of misfit energy and affect on the *Soul!* set underscores the value of the *Soul!* archive to our understanding of the intimacies and camaraderie possible despite or within difference—indeed, of the ways such difference might have itself been constitutive of a certain affect of togetherness.”<sup>49</sup> Guests on *Soul!* often espoused politically opposing viewpoints, yet the respect and intimacy displayed amongst these individuals on screen helped constitute an “affect of togetherness.” Similarly, *Gay Morning America* is marked by an aesthetics of intimacy amongst the on screen cast that generate an affect of togetherness. This feeling is palpable in relationships on screen, which depict a group of committed friends dedicated to producing a community-oriented television show with virtually no financial resources. While the affect of togetherness on *Soul!* represents a

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<sup>48</sup> Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2009), 199.

<sup>49</sup> Wald, *It’s Been Beautiful: Soul! And Black Power Television*, 179.

type of unity amid political difference, the affect of togetherness on *Gay Morning America* offers us an example of unity in the face of community crisis.

The televisual satire of the show is key to its affect of togetherness. As a parody of *Good Morning America*, *Gay Morning America* plays off of dominant tropes of broadcast television to make them resonate specifically for LGBTQ audiences. Jane Feuer dissects the components of the live television morning show, writing, “Television, in its liveness, its immediacy, its reality, can create families where none exist.”<sup>50</sup> As Feuer argues, the anchor of the show acts as the traditional family patriarch who “mediates all discourse” while the supporting hosts complete the nuclear family structure presented on screen.<sup>51</sup> *Gay Morning America* mirrors this structure: Savoy and Sardi set the tone of the show as its anchors, with accompanying segments hosted by the other team members. Feuer argues that commercial television news programs reinforce the “ideological problematic of national and family unit” through this structure; however, *Gay Morning America* offers viewers an alternate family structure on screen.<sup>52</sup> A queer group of friends and lovers camping it up on set, the hosts of *Gay Morning America* mediate discourse through a LGBTQ lens. *Gay Morning America* takes the dominant mode of television morning variety shows and uses it to offer viewers a queer kinship model invested in community sensibility, offering viewers a model of togetherness in the midst of the community devastation of the AIDS crisis.

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<sup>50</sup> Jane Feuer, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches - An Anthology*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983), 20.

<sup>51</sup> Feuer, 18.

<sup>52</sup> Feuer, 19.

### **Live Call-In Shows: Communal Affects of Togetherness**

During the third and final season of *Gay Morning America*, the show made a number of shifts in production to relieve some of the pressures of creating new programming on a weekly basis. The show was shortened to half an hour, filming moved from Friday to Saturday mornings at 11:30am, and the team added live call-in segments to every fourth episode, during which viewers phoned the studio to discuss particular LGBTQ issues on the air. The call-in segments provided 10-15 minutes of planning-free content, allowing viewers to help dictate the direction of the show. Topics varied, but often directly or indirectly related to the spread of HIV/AIDS in New York City. These call-in segments produced interactive audience members: the conversations between viewers and the team in the studio helped facilitate interpersonal relationships amongst community members. On these segments, *Gay Morning America* models a communal affect of togetherness, including both its on screen team and its audience in its example of community celebration and care.

In the first episode of season three, which aired in October 1985, Johnny Savoy encourages viewers to call into the show to discuss a New York State ruling that allowed health officials to close any establishment that permitted “high-risk sexual activities” within its walls.<sup>53</sup> The state’s decision to close down bathhouses was controversial amongst LGBTQ community members: while some supported the decision as a public health measure designed to slow the spread of disease, others, like Savoy, worried that the ruling would reproduce homophobic and sex-negative legal regulations and would force many gay-owned businesses to shut down. Savoy comments: “This is all leading to a battle royale from the courts and make no mistake these

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<sup>53</sup> Maurice Carroll, “State Permits Closing of Bathhouses to Cut AIDS,” *The New York Times*, October 26, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/10/26/nyregion/state-permits-closing-of-bathhouses-to-cut-aids.html>.

businesses will be closed as dangerous health hazards...I get a feeling that this whole thing is a travesty to the gay community. I just feel that something is being done wrong here.” As a phone number flashes on screen, Savoy encourages viewers to call in to discuss this topic during the second half of the show.

About 15 minutes into the episode, Savoy and Sardi facilitate the calls live on the air. The pair sit on chairs placed on either side of a small round table and in front of a curtain that serves as their backdrop; a black phone is placed on the table between them. Sardi answers the first call: “Gay morning, you’re on!” The caller, a man named Frank, expresses frustration about the public health professionals who implemented the ruling. In line with Savoy’s earlier comments, Frank says, “they made it a political football. They’re fueling the fires of homophobia, discrimination, fear, hysteria, and hate.” Sardi thanks him for calling and moves on to the next call. Another unnamed caller wonders whether or not the public health ruling affects straight sex clubs (“they have just as much to lose as anyone else, I’d imagine”). Sardi responds, noting that public conversation about the effect of the ruling on straight sex clubs is just beginning.



Figure 2.9 Johnny Savoy and George Sardi take phone calls live on the air on the set of *Gay Morning America*.



*Gay Morning America* experiments with the live call-in format in order to create community conversation about the public health ruling and HIV/AIDS in general. As Sardi says on the air, “We’d really love to hear from you...we get these opinions from you, and that’s who we’re interested in, because you make this program possible.” Like *Our Time*, *Gay Morning America* attempted to create a queer counterpublic space on cable TV where LGBTQ people could discuss their views about the impact of HIV/AIDS on their lives. Savoy, Sardi, and the two callers who discuss the ruling express a sense of frustration, fear, and disillusionment about how professional legal and public health experts have responded to the epidemic by attempting to control gay sexual practices. Much like *Our Time*’s people-on-the-street interviews, these call-in segments construct a queer archive of feeling, a glimpse into early queer responses to the AIDS epidemic, and in particular, affective reactions to public health rulings meant to restrict the spread of HIV.

Curiously, over the course of the rest of this segment, five more individuals phone in, but no one else comments on the topic at hand. The majority of the callers are friends of the team, calling in to praise the show. One woman says, “It’s Filly, I’d like to welcome you all back!” and the team on set cries out, “oh, Filly!”, clapping excitedly at the sound of her voice. Another friend of the show named Peter jokes, “Good morning George! I wanted to call and welcome you to this segment at a time that’s reasonable to watch,” referencing the show’s much earlier airtime in the previous seasons. Later, a caller named Jim, who claims to be a friend of a friend of Sardi’s, calls in to say, “Welcome back, keep up the good work!” And finally, Debbie, who Sardi recognizes as a local astrologer, phones in to the show, claiming “I predict a great future for all of you...I’m sure everyone is going to tune in.” At the end of the segment, Sardi exclaims, “All our faithful, loyal friends are calling today!”

Because only a couple individuals call into this segment to discuss the public health ruling, it seems like *Gay Morning America*'s audience is perhaps less invested in having conversations about current events than its team members. More than participating in political discussions, viewers call in to express their support and excitement about the show. Individuals from the team's extended social network seem thrilled to welcome *Gay Morning America* back to television and to participate in the show's production. These segments extend *Gay Morning America*'s affect of togetherness outward, from an insulated group of people on and behind the camera to an imagined community of LGBTQ friends, lovers, and supporters in the audience. The callers, whose voices can be heard but who cannot be seen on screen, represent a broader depiction of the *Gay Morning America* community. While the call-in segments perhaps do not fulfill the goals of the producers interested in having discussions about LGBTQ current events, they provide an opportunity to viewers to express their appreciation of the show. In this way, the affect of togetherness on *Gay Morning America* embraces the imagined and sometimes heard LGBTQ audience members and allies who tuned in to watch the show live on Saturday mornings.

*Gay Morning America*'s affect of togetherness offers a particular, if unintentional, model of responding to community crisis. This pervasive familial feeling on the show points to its pedagogy of togetherness: a model of community connection and familial support established by humor and intimacy. The appreciation for community togetherness on *Gay Morning America* represents a slightly different version of community than that presented on *Our Time*, in which Russo and team envision a community united in anger. *Gay Morning America*'s pedagogy of togetherness centers existing and emerging queer social relations that would be necessary to confront the AIDS crisis in the decade to come as LGBTQ people increasingly relied upon each

other for medical care, social support, and political engagement. Live call-in episodes provide the opportunity for *Gay Morning America* to engage community members directly, offering an example of how cable access programming made possible discussion and celebration of LGBTQ community on television in the midst of the AIDS crisis.

### **Conclusion: Pedagogies of Care on Cable Access**

*Gay Morning America* stopped filming in 1985 and *Our Time* only lasted one season. While *Our Time* ended because it could not secure funding from W-NYC for a second season, neither Lavner nor Pool could remember the exact reason why *Gay Morning America* stopped production. Lavner reflected, “I’m sure it just petered out and they just decided that it wasn’t fun anymore and they want to do something else. Or they got sick.” Pool also wondered if illness had something to do with the ending of the show: “Johnny Savoy, my partner at the time came down with AIDS and my lover, Byron, he came down with AIDS. They both died in the 80s, and I think...that was like the end of it.” The lives of the producers of both *Our Time* and *Gay Morning America* would continue to be shaped by the AIDS crisis in the coming years. Russo would go on to become an influential AIDS activist in both GLAAD and ACT UP before his death from the disease in 1990; Savoy, Sardi, Byron Falk, and John Fitzpatrick all died from complications due to AIDS as well (according to Lavner, Les Irons died of heart disease). Pool and Lavner, the only surviving members of *Gay Morning America*, remain in contact to this day: “Pool and I celebrate our birthdays, and we’ll send each other a message, you know, like it’s just us, baby,” Lavner shared. This chapter perhaps relies less upon information gathered in interviews than my other chapters for this reason: there were fewer surviving producers to interview from either show.

Still, the producers I did speak with have fond memories of their experiences working on these sets. *Our Time*'s Rick Siggelkow reflected, "The whole thing just became, as it does in the best kinds of TV shows, as sort of a family, you know, where everyone is familiar...there was a real sense that we were doing something nobody had ever seen before. And that made it exciting." Siggelkow, who has had a successful career in public television and children's media production since his tenure on *Our Time*, later added that the show "became like a graduate course in television...it was kind of a foundational building block in my career." Writer, publicist, and AIDS activist Jay Blotcher, who served as *Our Time*'s Associate Producer, also remembers his time on the show as deeply affecting: "the amount of information, the amount of perspective, the people that I met, the political awareness that I was being inculcated by on a daily basis 'cause I was there five days a week, just was so priceless and really helped shape the activist who I became." Like Lavner and Pool, Sigglekow and Blotcher express profound appreciation for their professional and personal experiences producing these shows, particularly for the way the shows influenced their political perspectives on LGBTQ community life and their relationships and friendships with other queer people.

The familial relationships on both the *Our Time* and *Gay Morning America* sets point to the pedagogies of care that arose of gay cable access television content and production in the 1980s. Both *Our Time* and *Gay Morning America* mediated queer counterpublic spaces that made possible discussion and debate about AIDS and LGBTQ sexual health long before such topics were covered in commercial media. The "AIDS" episode on *Our Time* and various segments throughout *Gay Morning America* are significant examples of this: they offered space for the expression of queer experiences of the AIDS crisis by the producers, hosts, and guests on the shows at a moment in which the issue was largely ignored by the mainstream press. The

formal aesthetics, editing, and production processes of each show construct a televisual mode of emotional pedagogy, making sense of the circulating affects and experiences of the AIDS epidemic in order to guide the audience towards particular modes of response. The circulation of queer feelings about the AIDS epidemic on both shows demonstrate the “radical archive of emotion” made visible by public access television.<sup>54</sup> The fear and anger showcased on *Our Time*, as well as the sense of camp humor, familial intimacy, and togetherness on *Gay Morning America*, model a particular form of community care in reaction to the epidemic: one invested in saving and uplifting the lives LGBTQ people. In the face of institutional harm and neglect, both shows encourage viewers to transform their relationships with one another to create the material conditions for personal and communal survival. These calls for unity, community togetherness, and survival prefigure emerging queer affective experiences that would inspire producers to create LGBTQ cable access shows oriented toward activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as I discuss in the next two chapters.

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<sup>54</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 241.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Televising Lesbian Feminist Love-Politics on Dyke TV

In 1993, *New York Magazine*'s May issue declared the arrival of "lesbian chic." Featuring interviews with lesbian celebrities Martina Navratilova and K.D. Lang, as well as bisexual comedian Sandra Bernhard, the article claimed that lesbians in the 1990s could finally be "stylish" and "corporate" as well as "political" and "proud."<sup>1</sup> This article was quickly followed by *Newsweek*'s June issue, which claimed lesbians were "coming out strong" at the same time as it questioned, "what are the limits of tolerance?", as well as *Vanity Fair*'s now-famous August issue, in which Lang posed with supermodel Cindy Crawford in a sexualized butch-femme barbershop fantasy photoshoot for the magazine's cover.

The lesbian chic phenomenon seemed to indicate an increase in the cultural capital of lesbian women in the U.S. For perhaps the first time, lesbian celebrities and executives could have successful careers while being open about their sexualities. Yet the phenomenon was marked with much skepticism from lesbian activists and academics, who were uncertain about the impact of this new media attention. Journalist and activist Ann Northrop argued that these articles did not do justice to the myriad political concerns of lesbian activists and in fact exploited lesbians for commercial gain.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Ann M. Ciasullo concluded that the 1990s lesbian chic representations made queer women into objects of desire for a heterosexual majority: "the lesbian body is marked and made 'tasteful' for the viewing public—made, in essence, palatable for mainstream consumers to consume."<sup>3</sup> Lesbian chic stories typically

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanie Russell Kasindorf, "Lesbian Chic," *New York Magazine*, May 10, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> "Episode 1," *Dyke TV*, June 8, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Ann M. Ciasullo, "Making Her (In)Visible: Cultural Representations of Lesbianism and the Lesbian Body in the 1990s," *Feminist Studies* 27, no. 3 (2001): 579, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178806>.

portrayed lesbians as homogenously white, wealthy, and normatively feminine, a characterization that many felt misrepresented the diversity of their communities. Lesbian activists had bemoaned the lack of attention given to their concerns, especially as compared to those of gay men during the gay liberation era of the 1970s and the early AIDS crisis years in the 1980s; however, the “lesbian chic” articles did not satisfy desires for news coverage of queer women’s cultural issues.



Figures 3.1-3.3 In 1993, *New York Magazine*, *Newsweek*, and *Vanity Fair* announced the arrival of “lesbian chic.” *New York Magazine* cover, “LESBIAN CHIC,” May 10, 1993. *Newsweek* cover: “LESBIANS: Coming Out Strong,” June 21, 1993. *Vanity Fair* cover, “k.d. lang’s Edge,” August 1, 1993.

*Dyke TV* (1993-2006), a half-hour cable access television program focused on feminist and lesbian public cultures and community issues, premiered during the same summer of “lesbian chic.” Created by three lesbian artist-activists—Cuban playwright Ana Maria Simo, theater director and producer Linda Chapman, and independent filmmaker Mary Patierno—*Dyke TV* intervened in the “lesbian chic” phenomenon by creating television by and for lesbians. Designed as a magazine-format program, *Dyke TV* covered a wide range of topics, including community news and events, health issues, activism, art and film, and sports, with a focus on stories affecting lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. *Dyke TV* aired on one of the two Manhattan Neighborhood Network access channels from 1993-2006, as well as on Free Speech TV, a national, independent news network that amplifies underrepresented voices, from 2000 onward. In 1994, *Dyke TV* expanded its distribution outside of Manhattan to 14 other cities; at its widest distribution, the show aired on public access channels in 78 cities around the country.<sup>4</sup> *Dyke TV* brought the diversity of lesbian communities into living rooms across the U.S. for perhaps the first time.

*Dyke TV* was critically acclaimed in mainstream, arts, and LGBTQ news publications. In a survey of Manhattan Cable’s programs, *The New York Times* called the show “its own best advertisement.”<sup>5</sup> A *Village Voice* review praised *Dyke TV*’s “guerilla irony, its earnestness, its postmod quality”<sup>6</sup> and *Cineaste* magazine claimed, “*Dyke TV* buzzes with a new energy and levity that comes with a surplus of talent and an absence of big budget backers (throwing caution to the wind has no ramifications from an angry funder).”<sup>7</sup> In the gay press, *The Bay Area*

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<sup>4</sup> “Dyke TV · Herstories: Audio/Visual Collections of the LHA,” accessed September 6, 2019, <http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/exhibits/show/dyke-tv>.

<sup>5</sup> Witchel, “Vox Pop Video: A Public Access TV Guide,” 14.

<sup>6</sup> Stacey D’Erasmus, “Bridget Loves Bernice,” *Village Voice*, September 7, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Alisa Lebow, “Make Movies,” *Cineaste*, 1993.



Reporter lauded the show's production quality: "All the segments are well produced, balanced, and feature interesting narratives that flow smoothly."<sup>8</sup> The lesbian-specific *Deneuve* magazine (later renamed *Curve*) called the show "often irreverent" and "on the cutting edge, politically and culturally."<sup>9</sup> In the lesbian newspaper *Sappho's Isle*, a review titled "Lesbians Want Our Dyke TV!" praised the show as "topical and often humorous" and "amusing—and arousing."<sup>10</sup> *Dyke TV*'s robust national distribution perhaps facilitated reviewers' access to the show, and its lesbian-specific content drew acclaim from lesbian periodicals and magazines in particular.



Figure 3.4 A review of *Dyke TV* in April 1994 issue of *DykeSpeak*, pg. 1, a lesbian periodical from San Francisco. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/YUUEIX358741405/AHSI?u=northwestern&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=28298ac4](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/YUUEIX358741405/AHSI?u=northwestern&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=28298ac4). Accessed 30 June 2021.

This chapter explores *Dyke TV*'s historical and political significance as the first nationally cablecast show dedicated to discussing lesbian feminist community and culture. I define the term "lesbian community" loosely here, referring to individuals with a variety of gender and sexual

<sup>8</sup> Laura Post, "Dyke TV: New York Television for Lesbians," *Bay Area Reporter*, February 24, 1994.

<sup>9</sup> Victoria Brownworth, "We're Here, We're Queer, and We're Taking Over the Airwaves," *Deneuve*, October 1994, 28, 30.

<sup>10</sup> KJ Talley, "Lesbians Want Our Dyke TV!," *Sappho's Isle*, March 12, 1994.

identities. *Dyke TV* profiled a wide range of issues, including segments that discussed women living with AIDS, lesbians in prison, domestic violence, Black lesbian literature, trans activism, drag kings, as well as spirituality, nightlife, and hate crimes. *Dyke TV* also explored butch and transgender masculinity, trans femininity, and what would today be called genderqueer, gender non-conforming, and non-binary identities in many of its segments (what was on the show sometimes described as transgenderism, transsexuality, androgyny, or genderfuck).<sup>11</sup> Identity terms are frequently the subject of debate amongst generations of LGBTQ community members, activists, and scholars, and the meaning of these terms evolve over time. Regardless of the terms used to describe these communities, the capacious understanding of “dyke” in *Dyke TV* is worth exploring. I alternate between the terms “lesbian” and “queer women” in this chapter, using both as an umbrella term for these communities, with the recognition that people who appeared on and produced the show held identities that exceeded these terms.

Analyzing the show’s production, distribution, and textual aesthetics, I argue that *Dyke TV*’s development and content embraces what I call *lesbian feminist love-politics*: a willful sensibility and political orientation committed to celebrating queer women’s community culture. Drawing upon Jennifer Nash’s conception of love-politics and lesbian feminist theory, I establish love—the love for one’s self, love for one’s partners, and love for one’s community—as the political and affective orientation of *Dyke TV*’s segments. I explore how *Dyke TV* responded to the lack of “love” for lesbian communities on the broader social and political level, opposing the

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<sup>11</sup> I do not mean to imply that trans men and transmasculine individuals are somehow “closer” to women than to men, as transphobic understandings of transmasculinity tend to suggest. Rather, I mean to explore how and why the producers of *Dyke TV* eventually understood trans issues as relevant to the mission of the show. Because the *Dyke TV* team included trans people as guests on the show and covered issues affecting trans people, and discussed political alliances with trans people in their interviews with me, it seems to me that their purview included all LGBTQ folks marginalized by heteropatriarchal systems, rather than just cis women who identified as dykes.

homophobic and sexist ideologies that rendered lesbian sexuality deviant, abnormal, and/or fetishized, by mobilizing lesbian feminist love-politics towards cultural and political commentary and activism. Towards the end of the chapter, I discuss how the show evolved in the 1990s and early 2000s. *Dyke TV* became an unsustainable “labor of love” despite creative methods to fund production: declining resources, new media technologies, and shifting community norms in the new millennium affected the show’s ability to produce episodes on a regular basis and eventually caused the show to stop production entirely. Additionally, I explore how behind the scenes, *Dyke TV*’s inclusive politics were perhaps more aspirational than fully realized: a number of women of color and trans volunteers expressed feelings of isolation while working amongst the mostly white, cisgender leadership team. Drawing on interviews with *Dyke TV*’s volunteers and staff, I explore how tensions about race and gender at times informed the production process. While *Dyke TV*’s commitment to anti-racist and trans inclusive programming was uneven throughout its time on the air, it remains the only show in my study to consistently cover the issues of marginalized LGBTQ people. The legacy of the show remains its aspirational investment in a capacious lesbian feminism on screen: an embrace of love-politics enabled *Dyke TV* to imagine forms of “dyke” relationality marked by an orientation to an expansive queer community.

### **The Origins of *Dyke TV***

Feminist independent film, video, and television has a rich history that predates the creation of *Dyke TV* in the 1990s. During the 1960s-1980s, feminist film “flourished” in response to and in dialogue with the emergence of second wave feminist activism and theory.<sup>12</sup> Feminist

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<sup>12</sup> Juhasz, *Women of Vision*, 23.

filmmakers explored and challenged norms of gender and sexuality through experimental film and video. These filmmakers typically incorporated a range of representational and textual innovations into their work, including heterosexual and lesbian sex on screen, vaginal iconography, references to nature and non-Western spirituality, and unconventional uses of color, texture, and sound, in order to critique the commercial cinematic conventions of depicting women on screen.<sup>13</sup> Interested in imagining “the personal is political,” feminist filmmakers incorporated their own bodies, sex partners, friends, families, and communities into their work.<sup>14</sup> Examples include Carolee Schneeman’s *Fuses* (1967), an experimental documentary portraying Schneeman and her then-boyfriend having sex; Barbara Hammer’s *Dyketactics* (1974), a short film exploring lesbian sensuality; and Michele Citron’s *Daughter Rite* (1978), an experimental film about relationships between mothers and daughters. If feminist theory and activism of the era encouraged women to provide testimony to the phenomena that shaped their lives, film, television, and video provided new opportunities to share this testimony. While this group of filmmakers was certainly not homogenous in style or politics, they shared a desire to “critique the many inequitable power relations that limit women” through their creative work.<sup>15</sup>

While feminist media historians have written extensively about the impact of feminist independent film and video, the history of feminist independent television production is less well-known. The legacies of groundbreaking commercial television producers like Lucille Ball and Mary Tyler Moore have been documented and much scholarly attention is paid to the

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Dyer, *Now You See It: Studies on Lesbian and Gay Film* (Routledge, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> “The personal is political” is a feminist slogan often considered a rallying cry of the second-wave feminist movement. The slogan emphasizes how the lived experiences of women are connected to and influenced by larger social and political structures and inequities.

<sup>15</sup> Juhasz, *Women of Vision*, 1.

contemporary success of producers like Shonda Rhimes and Joey Soloway.<sup>16</sup> However, the significance of feminist public television and cable access programming has yet to be addressed. While a full history of this programming is beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is useful to point to the work of a few of the feminist producers of cable access who preceded *Dyke TV* in order to place the show in context.

Feminist activists began to use cable access programming to spread awareness of their political views once it became available for public use. As early as 1971, the National Organization for Women produced a show on Manhattan Cable called “N.O.W. Is the Time” that broadcast news and information about the group’s activities.<sup>17</sup> Later in the decade, television personality, activist, and “flower child” Coca Crystal hosted a weekly cable show called *The Coca Crystal Show: If I Can't Dance, You Can Keep Your Revolution* (1977-1995), a “mix of politics, culture, music, audience call-ins and spontaneous nonsense.”<sup>18</sup> Crystal, who borrowed feminist anarchist Emma Goldman’s slogan for the title of the show, frequently invited activists, artists, local celebrities, members of the New York avant-garde to her show to discuss the

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<sup>16</sup> For work on Lucille Ball, see Alexander Doty’s “The Cabinet of Lucy Ricardo: Lucille Ball’s Star Image” in *Cinema Journal* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Summer 1990), Susan Horowitz’s *Queerns of Comedy: Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Carol Burnett, Joan Rivers, and the New Generation of Funny Women* (Routledge, 1997), and Stefan Kanfer’s *Ball of Fire: The Tumultuous and Comic Art of Lucille Ball* (Vintage, 2007). For work on Mary Tyler Moore, see Bonnie J. Dow’s “Hegemony, feminist criticism, and the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*” in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* Vol. 7 (1990), Kirsten Marthe Lentz’s “Quality versus Relevance: Feminism, Race, and the Politics of the Sign in 1970s Television” in *Camera Obscura* 43, Vol. 15, No. 1 (2000), and Susan Crozler’s “Making it after all: a reparative reading of The *Mary Tyler Moore Show*” in the *International Journal of Cultural Studies* Vol. 11, Issue 1 (March 2008). On Shonda Rhimes, see Kristen Warner’s *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (Routledge, 2015) and Ralina Joseph’s *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Use of Strategic Ambiguity* (NYU Press, 2018). For work on Joey Soloway, see Amy Villarejo’s “Jewish, Queer-ish, Trans, and Completely Revolutionary: Jill Soloway’s *Transparent* and the New Television” in *Film Quarterly* Vol 69, No. 4 (Summer 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Wurtzel, “The Electronic Neighbor: A Source and Content Analysis of Public Access Channel Programming on a New York City Cable Television System.,” 117.

<sup>18</sup> “Coca Crystal, Avatar of Counterculture and Provocateur, Dies at 68 - The New York Times,” April 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/03/nyregion/coca-crystal-avatar-of-counterculture-dies-at-68.html>.

feminist and anti-war movements.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Black feminist lawyer and activist Florynce “Flo” Kennedy hosted *The Flo Kennedy Show* from the late 1970s-mid 1990s on Manhattan Cable.<sup>20</sup> Kennedy created the show as an alternative to existing commercial media that ignored or misrepresented marginalized individuals.<sup>21</sup> On her show, Kennedy offered airtime to immigrants, LGBTQ people, people of color, as well as to other activists and lawyers who would not otherwise have had a platform to discuss their political views.<sup>22</sup>

Feminist sex workers Robin Byrd and Carol Leigh were two of the many creators who used cable access as a platform to host frank discussions about sexual politics. Manhattan Cable, which was largely uncensored in the 1970s and 1980s, grew infamous for televising sexually explicit programming during its late-night timeslots.<sup>23</sup> On *The Robin Byrd Show* (1977-1999), Byrd interviewed strippers, sex workers, and local celebrities on topics related to sexual health and sexuality. An out bisexual woman, Byrd associated herself and her show with New York’s LGBTQ community, frequently interviewing LGBTQ guests and commenting on the importance of safer sex practices amidst the AIDS crisis. Byrd was also a free speech activist: in the 1990s, she participated and ultimately won a long-running law suit against Time Warner when the company tried to scramble access to programs it deemed sexually explicit.<sup>24</sup> Carol Leigh, also known as the Scarlet Harlot, got her start as a filmmaker at a public access station in Tucson, Arizona.<sup>25</sup> Leigh, who is credited with coining the term “sex work” in the 1970s, began creating

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<sup>19</sup> Spigel, “Talk TV and the Video Countercultures,” 53.

<sup>20</sup> A Place For Film, “Florynce ‘Flo’ Kennedy Show,” Indiana University Cinema, April 17, 2019, <https://blogs.iu.edu/aplaceforfilm/2019/04/17/year-of-the-woman-and-florynce-flo-kennedy/>.

<sup>21</sup> Film.

<sup>22</sup> Film.

<sup>23</sup> Stadel, “Cable, Pornography, and the Reinvention of Television, 1982–1989,” 57.

<sup>24</sup> Stephanie Buck, “The Wholesomely Pornographic Robin Byrd Sued Time Warner to Keep Her Show on the Air,” Medium, March 20, 2017, <https://timeline.com/robin-byrd-show-ed92d1e790e1>.

<sup>25</sup> Juhasz, *Women of Vision*, 197.

public access television as a vehicle to distribute her work as well as a platform to discuss feminism, politics, and sex worker rights.<sup>26</sup> One such show was called *Whores in the Gulf* (1991), a newsmagazine program on which Leigh offered counternarratives about the Gulf War through a feminist lens.<sup>27</sup> Also an out bisexual woman, Leigh has frequently discussed LGBTQ sexual health issues in her work and continues to produce feminist independent film and video.

The work of media activist DeeDee Halleck is perhaps the most well-known of these pioneers. In 1981, Halleck, an independent filmmaker, founded Paper Tiger Television (PTTV), a volunteer-run media collective and cable access program on Manhattan cable. The collective has a “collaborative, non-authoritarian structure,” mirroring the principle that cable access should be grounded in the democratic ideals of free speech and publish service.<sup>28</sup> PTTV was known for its “handmade, irreverent aesthetic” that combined video art, politics, documentary, and performance on screen.<sup>29</sup> While not an exclusively feminist program, PTTV focuses on progressive causes of all kinds, including education, the environment, news and politics, capitalism, as well as issues related to race, gender, and sexuality. PTTV remains active as a non-profit video collective devoted to critiquing corporate media and uplifting grassroots television. In addition to her involvement with PTTV, Halleck has spearheaded a number of other media activist efforts. She is the co-founder of Deep Dish Satellite Network, the first grassroots community television network; she also helped create the first Independent Media Center and develop the television program *Democracy Now!*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Juhasz, 201.

<sup>27</sup> Juhasz, 201.

<sup>28</sup> Halleck, “Paper Tiger Television: Smashing the Myths of the Information Industry Every Week on Public Access Cable,” 2002, 120.

<sup>29</sup> “Paper Tiger TV Website,” *PAPER TIGER* (blog), accessed August 29, 2019, <http://papertiger.org/about-us/history/>.

<sup>30</sup> “Discover the Networks | Dee Dee Halleck,” accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.discoverthenetworks.org/individuals/dee-dee-halleck/>.

In a reflective essay on feminist media production, Halleck postulated that female producers found work in cable access because “women are in relatively equal positions of power” on these shows.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, she noted, “many women are directing local access centers, making community programs, and teaching young and old how to create media.”<sup>32</sup> While women directors, producers, and executives remain marginalized in commercial news and entertainment industries, local and community media production has offered avenues through which women can gain leadership and experience in the field. This was certainly the case for the producers of *Dyke TV*, who strived to create lesbian feminist television programming once they realized no one else would do it for them.

### **Lesbian Feminist Love-Politics on *Dyke TV***

The development and on-screen content of *Dyke TV* are marked by what I call lesbian feminist love-politics. In “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” Jennifer Nash argues that Black feminist theory generates a theory of justice based in the care of self and community. While Black feminist thought has been “reduced”<sup>33</sup> to intersectionality theory in ways that limit its political potential, Nash asserts that this writing evokes “a broad activist conception of love” that reimagines one’s relationship to the self and to broader political formation.<sup>34</sup> Nash claims that love is “a call for a labor of the self, an appeal for transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the public sphere, a plea to unleash the radical imagination, and a

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<sup>31</sup> DeeDee Halleck, “Paper Tiger Television: Smashing the Myths of the Information Industry Every Week on Public Access Cable,” in *Hand-Held Visions: The Impossible Possibilities of Community Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 196.

<sup>32</sup> Halleck, 196.

<sup>33</sup> Jennifer C. Nash, “Practicing Love: Black Feminism, Love-Politics, and Post-Intersectionality,” *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 11, no. 2 (2013): 5.

<sup>34</sup> Nash, 4.



critique of the state's blindness to the violence it inflicts and enables."<sup>35</sup> Black feminist love-politics calls for a utopian future free from the oppressive conditions of the present and built upon connection and collectivity. Rather than imagining community based on shared identity, love-politics, Nash argues, imagines connection based on communal sentiment. As a nonidentitarian project, Black feminist love-politics "offers a powerful reconception of the public sphere" oriented around collectivity rather than identity and difference.<sup>36</sup>

Lesbian feminist theory has similarly been marginalized in academic texts; it is frequently relegated to the past, considered a necessary but outdated precursor to queer theory. As Sara Ahmed writes, "the lesbian appears as an abject figure we were all surely happy to have left behind" in much of queer theoretical writing.<sup>37</sup> Lesbian feminism is often rewritten as an essentialist project limited to simplified understandings of identity, womanhood, gender, and power, where queer theory emerges as a project invested in deconstructing and rethinking the terms of these debates. Yet Ahmed intervenes in this scholarly conversation by rereading lesbian feminism as a liberatory ideology for all those marginalized by heteropatriarchal systems. Ahmed describes lesbian feminism as a "willfulness archive," where willfulness denotes the willingness to turn away from an oppressive culture in order to move people to action against it.<sup>38</sup> As a willfulness archive, the history of lesbian feminism reveals and contains many instances in which in which women have refused to accept the status quo in the name of feminist world-making.

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<sup>35</sup> Nash, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Nash, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 222.

<sup>38</sup> Ahmed, 222.

I consider *Dyke TV* as a part of the willfulness archive of lesbian feminism. Looking closely at *Dyke TV* offers glimpses of lesbian feminist art and activism, making possible new collectivities, new community, and new worlds on TV. What I call a lesbian feminist conception of love-politics emerges from the canon of lesbian feminist theory. Lesbian feminist love-politics adds to Nash's conception of the term by exploring the radical potential of erotic connection between women. From these theories, a version of love-politics emerges that imagines the utopian possibilities of lesbian relationality. For example, in their 1970 essay manifesto, the collective the Radicalesbians asserts the need for women to realize the "primacy of women relating to women."<sup>39</sup> According to the Radicalesbians, women must free themselves from patriarchal definitions of womanhood and embrace a new sense of self, or a new "consciousness," based on solidarity with other women. The Radicalesbians suggest that this new consciousness sparked by relationships between women will ignite a revolutionary movement towards women's autonomy.<sup>40</sup> In another foundational essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Adrienne Rich critiques the way in which heterosexuality is produced as a social expectation for women, rendering lesbian sexuality a deviant aberration. Rich theorizes the possibilities of what she calls "the lesbian continuum" as an alternate social form to compulsory heterosexuality. Rich describes the lesbian continuum as a variety of experiences "of primary intensity shared between and among women," ranging from breastfeeding and childrearing to friendship, community, political alliance, and sexual intimacy.<sup>41</sup> In Rich's formation, the existence of the lesbian continuum destabilizes compulsory

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<sup>39</sup> The Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), 157.

<sup>40</sup> The Radicalesbians, 156.

<sup>41</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 648.

heterosexuality; it can “undo the power men everywhere wield over women” by placing a primacy on relationships among women rather than relationships between women and men.<sup>42</sup>

Cheryl Clarke’s “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” originally published in the 1981 feminist anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, similarly explores the personal and political power of lesbian relationships. Clarke sharply critiques heterosexuality as an oppressive norm that contributes to the marginalization of women.<sup>43</sup> Clarke passionately believes in the power of lesbianism to oppose these systems of oppression: lesbianism is “an ideological, political, and philosophical means of liberation of all women.”<sup>44</sup>

These theories envision relationship as a key site through which women can reimagine the public sphere as a space free from patriarchal oppression. For the Radicalesbians, Rich, and Clarke, love and intimacy between women hold transformative possibilities. Interestingly, each of these writers embraces a non-identitarian love-politics in their respective pieces. As Nash writes, love-politics crafts a “future-oriented community held together by affiliation and ‘public feeling’ rather than an imagined—or enforced—sameness.”<sup>45</sup> While Rich, the Radicalesbians, and Clarke discuss the significance of lesbianism and lesbian relationships, each defines the term “lesbian” in expansive ways. The Radicalesbians imagine lesbianism as the psychological state of women under patriarchal oppression; Rich argues that lesbianism is not an aberration but a continuum of behaviors which many experience; and Clarke considers lesbianism as an anti-oppressive ideology as much as a sexual preference. By including but not limiting lesbianism to

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<sup>42</sup> Rich, 660.

<sup>43</sup> Cheryl Clarke, “Lesbianism: An Act of Resistance,” in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 2nd ed.. (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983), 130.

<sup>44</sup> Clarke, 129.

<sup>45</sup> Nash, “Practicing Love,” 19.

erotic connection, these definitions expand the meaning of the term so that it applies to a greater number of women.

*Dyke TV* televises lesbian feminist love-politics through its commitment to covering queer women's community in New York and around the country. The show emerged as a part of the resurgence of radical queer activism in New York in the 1980s and early 1990s. As I discussed in the previous two chapters, following years of climbing death tolls and government inaction on the AIDS crisis, many in LGBTQ communities joined grassroots activist groups, such as ACT UP and Queer Nation, to work together to end the AIDS crisis. ACT UP in particular brought a renewed militancy to LGBTQ activism by prioritizing civil disobedience, direct action, street theater, and art and video activism. Public demonstrations and targeted political protest brought increased media attention to the needs of people with AIDS and shifted public perceptions about the epidemic. Activists in the late 1980s-early 1990s used this spotlight to demand more accountability from politicians and medical gatekeepers who were initially slow to lend their support to the communities affected by the epidemic. ACT UP's more confrontational tactics shifted the political possibilities of LGBTQ activism, leading to many crucial victories for people with AIDS.<sup>46</sup>

While women participated in these groups as allies, activists, as well as people living with AIDS, lesbian ACT UP members like prolific writer and public intellectual Sarah Schulman criticized the fact that ACT UP never made central lesbian issues. "The time has come for a new lesbian activism—in or out of ACT UP," Schulman wrote in 1991, "We have to fully participate

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<sup>46</sup> For more information about the history of ACT UP and how it influenced LGBTQ activism, see Deborah Gould's *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*.

in activism to create a country that *we* want to live in.”<sup>47</sup> In 1992, Schulman, along with five other lesbian activists in New York, created the feminist visual collective the Lesbian Avengers, a group that Schulman called “a post-ACT UP lesbian movement.”<sup>48</sup> A group “focused on issues vital to lesbian survival and visibility,” the Lesbian Avengers coordinated both local and national protests and demonstrations, using public intervention as a tactic to bring media attention to the intersections of homophobia and sexism.<sup>49</sup> As Schulman wrote at the time, “The Avengers represent a turning point in lesbian politics, a belief in grass-roots, a commitment to direct action and creative organizing.”<sup>50</sup> While the New York chapter of the Lesbian Avengers disbanded in the mid-1990s, annual Dyke Marches are their most visible legacy: the group organized the first Dyke March in 1993 to highlight lesbian activism during the 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation.<sup>51</sup> The Dyke March tradition has continued annually during Pride Month celebrations in many cities across the U.S.<sup>52</sup>

*Dyke TV* both chronicled and helped shape this historical moment. It is not a coincidence that one of its executive producers, Ana Maria Simo, was also a prominent Lesbian Avenger—the two projects were deeply related. Simo, a 76-year-old Cuban novelist and playwright who now lives in France, was part of the group’s “Ministry of Propaganda,” tasked with writing press releases and reaching out to media contacts to spread awareness of the Avengers’ actions and advocacy efforts.<sup>53</sup> Simo quickly found that mainstream news outlets were uninterested in

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<sup>47</sup> Sarah Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years*, 2nd Edition (New York: Routledge, 2018), 216.

<sup>48</sup> Schulman, 282.

<sup>49</sup> Kelly J. Cogswell, *Eating Fire: My Life as a Lesbian Avenger* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2014), 9.

<sup>50</sup> Schulman, *My American History: Lesbian and Gay Life During the Reagan/Bush Years*, 286.

<sup>51</sup> “Lesbian Avengers | A Brief History,” accessed October 24, 2019, <http://www.lesbianavengers.com/about/history.shtml>.

<sup>52</sup> While the New York chapter splintered into various smaller groups, throughout the decade, dozens of Lesbian Avengers chapters formed in cities across the U.S.

<sup>53</sup> Ana Maria Simo, email interview the author, August 2019. Further quotes from same interview.

covering lesbian issues and activism, no matter how provocative the demonstration. After a year in the Ministry of Propaganda, she concluded, “the Avengers urgently needed to set up our own alternative media” in order to “report on our work and, crucially, to expand our reach beyond the initial dyke activist community.” Simo pitched the idea of a lesbian cable access show to theater producer Linda Chapman and filmmaker Mary Patierno in the autumn of 1992. Simo hoped the show would become a “stealthy agitprop instrument” on television editorially independent from, but politically aligned with, the Lesbian Avengers. This activist impulse is palpable on the show: as each episode opens, the host of the show announces, “You’re watching *Dyke TV*: television to incite, subvert, provoke, and organize.”



Figure 3.5 In the opening scene of the first *Dyke TV* episode, volunteer co-hosts Mary Edwards and Laurie Weeks recite the show’s slogan: “You’re watching *Dyke TV*: television to incite, subvert, provoke, and organize.”

After joining the team, Patierno and Chapman quickly added to Simo’s vision: whereas Simo was primarily interested in reporting on the news and covering political demonstrations around the city, Chapman and Patierno used their connections in the professional arts world to expand the purview of the show. They both suggested using a magazine format on the show,

which would allow it to cover a wide variety of issues, vary the content from episode to episode, and incorporate video made by and with volunteers from across the city and the country.<sup>54</sup> Working with a large team of volunteers was crucial to *Dyke TV*'s success: Simo, Patierno, and Chapman largely volunteered their own time and energy to produce weekly half-hour episodes, an overwhelming amount of work for three people. While the three split responsibilities amongst themselves—Simo produced the show's five-minute opening new segment; Chapman produced the Arts segment, profiling lesbian artists from around the city, and served as the show's administrative and financial manager; and Patierno produced the other segments and edited the show together—they relied on the work of a large network of volunteers to help create the show's content. In early stages of development, the team held a meeting at Simo's apartment and invited "40 or 50 women"—feminist filmmakers and artists in New York—who committed to producing segments for *Dyke TV*.<sup>55</sup> Throughout the first years of production, the team would send out calls for volunteers on a regular basis to renew the pool. Over the course of its 13 years on television, hundreds of people participated in its production.

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<sup>54</sup> Linda Chapman, interview with the author, September 2019. Further quotes from same interview.

<sup>55</sup> Mary Patierno, interview with the author, September 2019. Further quotes from same interview.



Figure 3.6 A flyer calling for volunteers for *Dyke TV*. MS Organization Files from the Lesbian Herstory Archives ORGFIL0374. Lesbian Herstory Archives. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/BNJOKD830101438/AHSI?u=northwestern&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=b5166006&pg=10](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/BNJOKD830101438/AHSI?u=northwestern&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=b5166006&pg=10). Accessed 30 June 2021.

The name of the show, decided at an early planning meeting in 1993, was purposefully provocative.<sup>56</sup> “We felt like it really encapsulated the times, which was a little bit in your face,” Patierno said. The word “dyke” is an historically pejorative term levelled against women whose gender expression and/or sexuality falls outside of heterosexual norms. Chapman shared that the *Dyke TV* founders wanted to “take back that title” and turn it into something “affirmative”—reclaiming the word “dyke” as something positive was part of the mission of the show because it helped the team “confront lesbian invisibility.” The *Dyke TV* founders’ interest in “confronting lesbian invisibility” exemplified what Ann Cvetkovich calls a “countercultural politics of

<sup>56</sup> A number of other name suggestions were offered by meeting attendees, including Downtown Dykes, Primetime Dyke, Dykometer, Infodykes, Disruptive Dyke, and In the Eye of the Dyke.



visibility” in lesbian media, a form of representation invested in making lesbians, and alternative lesbian cultures, visible to each other.<sup>57</sup> If the term “politics of visibility” usually refers to analysis of how underrepresented groups are portrayed in commercial media, a “countercultural politics of visibility” examines how marginalized groups create images themselves for one another in the service of non-hegemonic representation. Using the word “dyke” in the title simultaneously got viewers’ attention and demonstrated lesbian activists’ desire for their own forum to create cultural and activist work. In an interview with *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*, Chapman expressed frustration that other LGBTQ television programs lacked coverage of lesbian topics: “Gay Cable Network just didn’t satisfy us. *In the Life* wasn’t really addressing the needs of the lesbian community. Nothing we were aware of was talking about our issues.”<sup>58</sup>

*Dyke TV*’s provocative tone is reflected in early logos for the show, in which the phrase “Dyke TV” is styled to resemble the logo of a superhero. Black and white capital letters spell out the word “dyke” and the letter “T” is placed vertically one on top of the letter “V,” forming the shape of a triangle. Perhaps inspired by the irreverent demonstrations of the Lesbian Avengers, a group whose name calls to mind an image of vigilante caped crusaders fighting for justice, the style of the *Dyke TV* logo references popular culture understandings of heroism. The logo embraces the provocative sensibility of the show, as well as its irreverent spirit, playfully imagining the show as an intervention in the status quo.

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<sup>57</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, “Fierce Pussies and Lesbian Avengers: Dyke Activism Meets Celebrity Culture,” in *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*, Gender and Culture Series (Columbia University Press, 2001), 289.

<sup>58</sup> Catherine Saafied, “Lesbians Want Their Dyke TV,” *The Independent Film & Video Monthly*, October 1993.

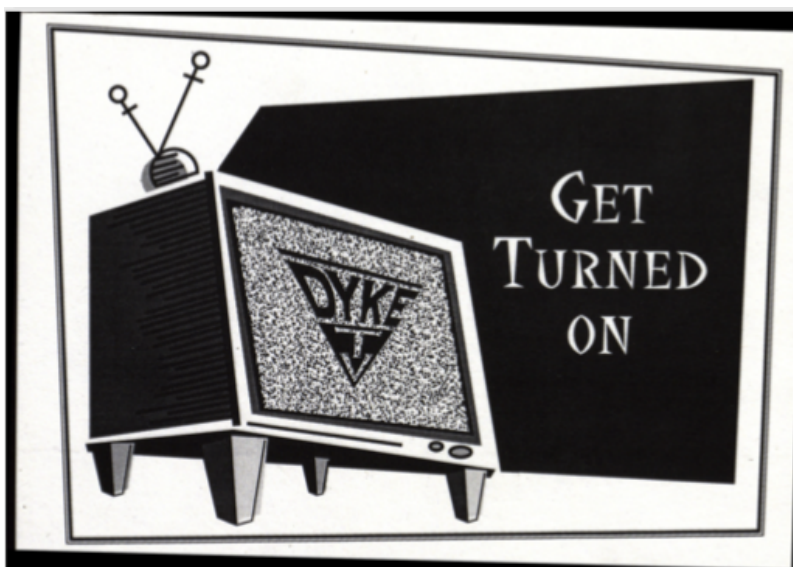


Figure 3.7 The *Dyke TV* logo, pictured here inside the television screen on this promotional flyer, was styled to resemble the logo of a superhero. MS Organization Files from the Lesbian Herstory Archives ORGFIL0374. Lesbian Herstory Archives. Archives of Sexuality and Gender, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/BNJOKD830101438/AHSI?u=northwestern&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid= b5166006&pg=10](http://link.gale.com/apps/doc/BNJOKD830101438/AHSI?u=northwestern&sid=bookmark-AHSI&xid=b5166006&pg=10). Accessed 30 June 2021.

The show's title sequence establishes its willful, irreverent tone. Set against a purple square and a black background, the letters spelling out "DYKE TV" fly into the frame one at a time. The letters, all-caps and in various bright colors, are shaped as if they have been haphazardly cut out of a newspaper or magazine. In later episodes, the "DYKE TV" letters spin around on the "Z" axis, creating a three-dimensional effect as the words spin towards and away from the viewer. The letters shrink and retreat into the center of the frame, pulse with energy, and then grow larger once more to fill the frame. The "DYKE TV" letters, combined with sounds of the drums and electric guitar as well as female vocals that play in the background of the title sequence, recall the do-it-yourself riot grrrl punk scene of the early 1990s. An alternative to the male-dominated punk scene, the riot grrrl movement encouraged young women to create their

own music and their own magazines—their own alternative subcultures.<sup>59</sup> *Dyke TV* was created in a similar spirit, made under the assumption that lesbians needed to create their own media because no one else would make it for them. The shape, color, and movement of the letters on screen evokes the avant-garde feminist political and artistic movements of the early 1990s.<sup>60</sup>



Figure 3.8 A still image from *Dyke TV*'s title sequence recalls the DIY aesthetics of the riot grrrl punk movement contemporaneous with the show.

*Dyke TV* most notably embraces love-politics in its recurring segments, which explored a wide variety of topics related to queer women's community issues. These segments provide an instructive example of what Cait McKinney calls information activism. Looking at lesbian community and advocacy projects from the 1970s-1990s, McKinney argues that lesbian activists "generated information infrastructures" including newsletters, databases, switchboards, indexes, and archives to address "their frustrated desire for information about lesbian history and lesbian

<sup>59</sup> Janice Radway, "Girl Zine Networks, Underground Itineraries, and Riot Grrrl History: Making Sense of the Struggle for New Social Forms in the 1990s and Beyond," *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 1 (February 2016): 1–31, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875815002625>.

<sup>60</sup> After the first 100 episodes of the show, the title sequence changes: it becomes a montage of clips from earlier episodes, celebrating the longevity and broad scope of the show.

life.”<sup>61</sup> Lesbian information activism draws upon “a longer history of how lesbian feminists appropriate commonplace media technologies toward the goal of better, more accessible information that might sustain feminism, and the everyday lives of lesbians.”<sup>62</sup> A televisual form of information activism, *Dyke TV* circulates information about lesbian life, history, and advocacy in the service of sustaining lesbian community culture. The televisual information activism of the show aspired to a radically inclusive lesbian feminist love-politics throughout its segments.

*Dyke TV*'s recurring “Lesbian Health” segments, for example, discuss topics such as AIDS and HIV transmission, menstruation, menopause, breast cancer, family planning, the benefits of annual checkups, lesbian healthcare resources in New York City, and more, designed to educate the audience about their bodies. This segment recalls the ethos of women’s health movement of the 1970s, reminding viewers that, as argued by publications like *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, women need to know how their bodies work because knowledge of one’s one body is empowering in a world in which women’s healthcare is marginalized in medical practice. Sexual health was a salient issue for LGBTQ people in the early 1990s, who desperately needed education and services around HIV/AIDS, and for queer women in particular, who were typically left out of mainstream news and medical research about the epidemic. The fact that cable access television in New York was relatively uncensored at the time was a huge asset to queer health activists, who could openly discuss genital and sexual health on their own television shows, thus allowing them to convey important information to their target audiences and communities.

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<sup>61</sup> McKinney, *Information Activism*, 2.

<sup>62</sup> McKinney, 6.

One striking “Lesbian Health” segment occurs in *Dyke TV*’s premiere episode in 1993, in which two women on screen offer the audience a demonstration of how to perform a cervical self-exam. This segment opens when a woman named Debbie addresses the audience: “hello to all you lovely lesbians out there!” Debbie announces that she works with the Lesbian Health program at the Community Health Project in New York and that her purpose in this segment is to teach viewers about vaginal health, specifically about vaginal discharge and cervical health.<sup>63</sup> The segment proceeds with the help of an unnamed woman who gives herself a cervical exam in front of the camera using a mirror, a flashlight, and a speculum, along with the help of a number of Barbie dolls. The unnamed woman narrates the exam in a matter-of-fact tone, demonstrating to viewers how one can use these tools to look at the cervix in order to check for any abnormalities. Perhaps most significantly, this segment includes footage of this woman’s genitalia, including her vulva, vagina, and cervix, images that would certainly have been deemed too “indecent” or “explicit” to appear on a commercial cable or broadcast channel. This segment makes the assertion that visually depicting a cervical exam will teach viewers how to perform the exams themselves, thus empowering viewers to take care of their vaginal health.

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<sup>63</sup> This organization is now known as the Callen-Lorde Community Health Center and continues to provide healthcare for LGBTQ New Yorkers.



Figures 3.9-3.11 On *Dyke TV*'s first “Lesbian Health” segment, a volunteer demonstrates how to perform a cervical exam. Barbie dolls act as assistants in this segment, mediating the gaze of the viewer.

While the tone of the segment is in part didactic, the Barbie dolls on screen add a layer of play and humor to the segment. Barbies are employed both to act in some sense as assistants—they point to the vagina on an anatomical drawing, they point to a calendar to remind viewers to check their cervixes frequently—as well as to act as viewers who watch the woman on screen perform the exam. During the exam, the camera cuts between shots of the woman and shots of the Barbies watching the woman through a television screen. Sometimes the Barbies are filmed

in profile, sometimes they are filmed as if to display close-up “reaction shots,” smiling blandly as the exam proceeds. There is not a clear practical purpose to include Barbies in this segment—if anything, they distract the viewer’s attention away from the cervical exam. The viewer’s perspective is mediated through the gaze of the Barbie watching the exam, at times blocking the audiences’ view of the screen. The Barbies in this segment, then, add a humorous take on vaginal health that echoes the tone of the larger program: serious, and yet teasing; educational, yet playful. It is not a coincidence that Barbie is literally a toy doll, an object to be played with, as well as an oft-critiqued and parodied symbol of normative gender roles and body ideals for women. This segment of *Dyke TV* echoes the work of other queer and feminist filmmakers and artists who have employed gendered toys in their own work to comment upon and critique patriarchal gender norms.<sup>64</sup> In feminist and queer film and television, Barbie is repurposed; rather than reproducing normative ideals, she is employed on *Dyke TV* to assist with an activist project designed to educate lesbians about their bodies, as well as to shift the tone of a rather didactic segment into something more wry and arch that comments upon the marginalization of lesbian health care.

The “Lesbian Health” segments operate on a variety of registers. On one hand, the segments encourage the literal care of the self through health education. These segments perform a didactic function by spreading awareness about issues related to lesbian health, in the hopes that viewers will be moved to act in the service of their own health after watching. By providing frank discussions and depictions of vaginal health on the show, *Dyke TV* offers a public service for its viewers who might not have been able to find information about sexual health elsewhere.

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<sup>64</sup> Examples include Todd Haynes’ *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1989), Sadie Benning’s *Flat is Beautiful* (1999), and the work of the Barbie Liberation Organization (a group of artists and activists who in 1993 switched the voice boxes of talking Barbie and G.I. Joe dolls to critique the gendered speech acts of the toys).

Simultaneously, these segments are filled with comedy: the use of Barbies on the show infuses the segment with a satirical tone. While self-care is a serious endeavor, this segment reminds audiences it can also be funny, critical, and/or ironic. By playing with the tone of this segment—shifting between a matter of fact, educational register and something silly and, at times, wry—*Dyke TV* both embraces self-care as a political act and critiques the need for this type of care in the first place.

Another staple of *Dyke TV* episodes, “I Was a Lesbian Child” segments feature a woman narrating the experience of looking through pictures of her childhood. The segment was inspired by a Lesbian Avengers action, at which the Avengers wore t-shirts bearing the titular phrase to a protest of a school district in Queens.<sup>65</sup> The “I Was a Lesbian Child” segment is formatted as a montage of images, curated by the subject of the photos, and accompanied by a voiceover monologue in which the subject offers her interpretation of these images as an adult, typically reflecting on her sexual identity development, family life, and growth as an individual. “I was a Lesbian Child” imagines lesbian identity as an act of reconstruction: a queer reading of childhood snapshots in the service of building lesbian histories of the self. This segment rejects normative understandings of girlhood that render it non-sexual and/or innately heterosexual and opens up questions about the possibility (or impossibility) of reading lesbian identity on the body.

Black lesbian actress Valarie Walker provides an example in her May 1994 “I was a Lesbian Child” segment, in which she applies queer reading strategies to her childhood photos. As Alexander Doty argues, queer readings “result from the recognition and articulation of the

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<sup>65</sup> Mary Patierno, interview by Amanda Belantara, Skype, November 20, 2016, [https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/files/original/91/843/Patierno\\_Interivew.1.pdf](https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=http://herstories.prattinfoschool.nyc/omeka/files/original/91/843/Patierno_Interivew.1.pdf).



complex range of queerness that has been in popular culture texts and their audiences all along.”<sup>66</sup> A type of reception practice, queer readings locate “evidence” of queerness in a cultural text through close reading and textual analysis. While queer readings are typically associated with interpretations of mainstream popular texts, the strategy is employed consistently in the “I was a Lesbian Child” segments. Early on in Walker’s segment, she offers us a black-and-white photo of her childhood self. In the photo, Walker smiles up at the camera, bright-eyed; she stands in front of a dresser in what is presumably her childhood home and wears a button-up t-shirt and casual pants. Walker explains in voiceover: “Now clearly this is me before my mom has gotten to me to beautify, to put big bows in and put me in a dress. I’m wearing my favorite sort of get-around gear at the time, which were pants and any kind of loose-fitting shirt.” The next image is a school photograph of Walker in which she poses with a strained smile, wearing pigtails and a white dress, in front of an image of a bookshelf. Walker describes in her voiceover: “And this is the dreaded photo day. Here I am trying my best to be heterosexual. I’ve got my little dress going. But as you can see even my lesbian hair refuses to conform to mainstream visual beauty expectations. My hair is going all over the place trying to find a place to be its lesbian self.” As she looks at each of the photos present in the montage, Walker reads lesbianism onto her childhood body. In the juxtaposition between these two photos, Walker sees her young self signaling queerness via particular aesthetic cues: she associates lesbianism with androgynous clothing and unruly hair. Walker also alludes to experiences specific to Black women and girls, referencing the politics of natural hair in her monologue. Walker recalls her discomfort wearing normatively feminine outfits and projects that discomfort onto the image of herself in this set of

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<sup>66</sup> Alexander Doty, “There’s Something Queer Here,” in *Making Things Perfectly Queer: Interpreting Mass Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttcmx.5>.

photos, finding traces of the way she embodies her gender and sexuality in the present in these early images.



Figures 3.12-3.13 Two childhood photos of Valarie Walker presented on screen in *Dyke TV*'s segment "I was a Lesbian Child." The first depicts Walker at home in a favorite outfit and the second presents "the dreaded photo day" upon which Walker was made to conform to more normatively feminine standards of dress.

The last image in the segment is a close-up of Walker's adult face: posing on a beach wearing sunglasses, her hair is cropped short and she presses her lips together confidently, as if to blow a kiss to the camera. Her voiceover tells us, "and here I am in P-Town, on the beach. I've fulfilled my lesbian journey. And I'm here to say, you know, to any lesbians out there who were lesbian children, rock on!" Walker's final voiceover—announcing that she has "fulfilled [her] lesbian journey" in Provincetown, a well-known gay tourist beach in Massachusetts—is an affirming message to herself and to other queer women. Walker's choice of final image here suggests the joys of queer adulthood: the possibility of self-acceptance and the potential to embrace one's sexuality and preferred gender presentation after a lifetime of pressure to conform to heteronormative standards.

The “I Was a Lesbian Child” segments provide the subjects of the photos the opportunity to rename their childhood images as queer. In a similar project, 1990s lesbian visual collective the Fierce Pussies issued a series of posters bearing snapshots of babies accompanied by the word “lesbian.” Discussing this campaign, Cvetkovich writes, “these images leave open the question of how lesbianism is visible—the childhood snapshot can be read as a predictor of her adult sexuality but it can just as easily testify to lesbianism’s uncertain origins and the impossibility of rendering it visible in the childhood face or body.”<sup>67</sup> The “I Was a Lesbian Child” segments similarly provide the opportunity for subjects to re-read their childhood images as “proof” of their lesbian identity, even as they open up questions about the soundness of this evidence. Walker’s tongue-in-cheek commentary plays with this dynamic: she asserts herself as lesbian yet does so by assigning this sexuality to individual parts of her body. Her segment develops an irreverent tone: it is simultaneously a forceful reclamation of her queerness as well as a humorous exploration of the possibility of finding evidence of a lesbian childhood. By assigning sexuality to her hair, Walker plays with the idea of lesbian visibility: she suggests that lesbian visibility is not something objective than can be measured, but something that can be interpreted retrospectively via memory, nostalgia, and reconstruction. With its tongue-in-cheek tone, the “I was a Lesbian Child” suggests that “lesbianism might be visible in any image.”<sup>68</sup>

While children are typically raised under the assumption that they will grow up to be heterosexual adults, the “I was a Lesbian Child” segments reject compulsory heterosexuality to imagine what queer childhood might look like. Cvetkovich notes, “The choice of the snapshot as genre is especially important because of its presumed power to act as a document of intimate

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<sup>67</sup> Cvetkovich, “Fierce Pussies and Lesbian Avengers: Dyke Activism Meets Celebrity Culture,” 299.

<sup>68</sup> Cvetkovich, 300.

history.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, feminist scholarship has a long history of analyzing the gender and racial dynamics of domestic snapshots. Annette Kuhn, for examples, argues that looking at images of childhood generates new ways of understanding personal and collective memory: “Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of ourselves.”<sup>70</sup> Similarly, bell hooks argues that domestic snapshots of Black families produce photos that “transcend the colonial eye,” representing Black Americans in “full diversity of body, being, and expression.”<sup>71</sup> The “I was a Lesbian Child” segments use childhood snapshots to trouble conventional understandings of lesbian visibility. These images “lesbianize the heteronormative family album”<sup>72</sup>—they trouble presumptions of heterosexuality in order to create lesbian histories of the self for each subject. In so doing, “I was a Lesbian Child” borrows from feminist analysis of the domestic snapshot to imagine a lesbian feminism that honors queer life as defiant, playful, and continuous over time in spite of living in a world that encourages the opposite.

*Dyke TV* segments are also interested in exploring sex and sexuality: many segments are infused with an erotic energy that celebrates love, sex, and healthy relationships between women. Over the years, these included “Dyke Dish,” a segment that shared lesbian celebrity and entertainment news and gossip; “Lexa’s Lesbian Love Signs,” which provided insight into dating and relationships via lesbian-specific astrology; “Blind Date,” a reality TV-esque segment that filmed lesbian couples on their first dates; “Clubland” and “Oh What a Night!,” nightlife-themed segments that interviewed guests and staff at lesbian bars and parties throughout the city; and “What’s Your Problem?,” a talk show within the show hosted by two women who took calls

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<sup>69</sup> Cvetkovich, 299.

<sup>70</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination*, 2nd edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2002), 2.

<sup>71</sup> bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 64, 61.

<sup>72</sup> Cvetkovich, “Fierce Pussies and Lesbian Avengers: Dyke Activism Meets Celebrity Culture,” 299.

from viewers to give advice about their relationship problems. In these numerous one-off and recurring segments, *Dyke TV* was continually invested in exploring the many facets of lesbian dating: this included topics like “U-hauling” (the common stereotype that lesbian relationships tend to progress quickly in emotional intensity), butch and femme gender presentation, frequency of sex and the “lesbian bed death” stereotype, lesbian cruising, queer fashion aesthetics and fashion faux pas, monogamy, and infidelity. These segments each strive to make lesbian desire visible on screen. Looking closely at *Dyke TV*’s own commercials reveals how *Dyke TV* promoted lesbian representation on screen in the service of making lesbians visible and accessible to each other, rather than making lesbian sexuality legible for a mainstream audience.

Promotional content for the show often imagines *Dyke TV* in the context of dating and relationships. These short (often one to two-minute long) segments advertised the show to its viewers and provided “bumpers” which added time if a particular episode ran a little too short of the 30-minute mark.<sup>73</sup> An early commercial produced by Black lesbian filmmaker Cheryl Dunye provides one such example. The commercial depicts two women, one Black and one white, each describing a “missed connection” experience to the camera: each fondly remembers an attractive woman that she saw “at a march” and “at a bar” but failed to talk to in the moment. One woman says, “so anyway, I was watching TV the other night, and there she was!”, and the other chimes in, “on *Dyke TV* of all places!” The second woman offers the closing line of the commercial: “well I guess you know what I’ll be watching.” With this short commercial, *Dyke TV* encourages viewers to watch the show as a means of connecting with other lesbians. Placing *Dyke TV* at the center of the lesbian dating scene, this short commercial “sells” the show to viewers as a type of dating service. Rather than meeting at an activist event or a bar, the commercial implies that

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<sup>73</sup> Patierno, interview.

*Dyke TV* provides queer women with an alternative: the opportunity to watch one another and to connect through the show.

Another recurring commercial for the show playfully depicts the fantasy that lesbian relationships provide a healthy alternative to heterosexuality. The commercial, which was filmed in the countryside on the property of a large farmhouse, perhaps in upstate New York, begins with a shot of a young Black woman, leaning against an entryway of the house, smiling confidently at the camera. A voiceover announces, “Marybeth almost joined a convent in Cleveland, Ohio.” In the next shot, a young white woman lounges on a wall of the property and grins at the camera as the voiceover continues, “Karen almost married her high school sweetheart, who is now bald and bankrupt.” In the final shot, set in a picturesque field studded with trees, the two women run towards each other, dance in a circle, and embrace. The voiceover declares, “Lesbianism, what a beautiful choice! Keep it that way. Support *Dyke TV*!” As the narrator speaks, the words “Lesbianism what a beautiful choice” appear superimposed over the image of the women in bright pink lettering. This commercial humorously suggests that the two women in question “escaped” a sad fate—an unhappy marriage, a hypothetically sexless life in a convent—by “choosing” to live as lesbians, presumably with one another. Taking up the irreverent tone of the show, this commercial plays with the idea that lesbianism is a “choice” rather than an ingrained biological trait.



Figure 3.14 In-show commercials for *Dyke TV* included “Lesbianism what a beautiful choice,” a short promotional video that playfully depicted a fantasy of lesbian separatism. Debates about the origins of homosexuality—as genetic variation vs. a “lifestyle”

choice—have circulated within the mainstream and the LGBTQ press, the LGBTQ rights movement, and amongst conservative anti-gay activists for decades. In the 1990s, the mainstream LGBTQ rights movement embraced the argument that sexual and gender diversity are fixed at birth in order to argue for legal protections for LGBTQ people.<sup>74</sup> In contrast to the mainstream movement’s biological determinism, however, *Dyke TV* boldly declares that lesbianism is a “choice” in this commercial—a personal and political decision that women make for themselves after considering other romantic and sexual options. While the ironic tone of the segment suggests that *Dyke TV* is not necessarily serious, it suggests that women have the agency to choose loving relationships with one another, and that these relationships have the potential to reshape the public sphere into something more equitable. These *Dyke TV* commercials celebrate lesbian sexuality as a rejection of compulsory heterosexuality and a commitment to a better life.

<sup>74</sup> For more on this subject, see Suzanna Danuta Walters, *The Tolerance Trap: How God, Genes, and Good Intentions Are Sabotaging Gay Equality*, Intersections (New York, N.Y.) (New York: University Press, 2014).

Providing an irreverent take on movement politics, the *Dyke TV* commercial provides viewers with a fantasy of lesbian separatism. Depicting a happy-go-lucky lesbian couple who leave behind heterosexuality, this commercial imagines the freedom-making potential of lesbian sexuality. Ana Simo shared that *Dyke TV* was meant to act as “a mirror to lesbian viewers,” a way for lesbians to see and be seen by one another.<sup>75</sup> Offering visual examples of both the fantasies and realities of lesbian dating, *Dyke TV* provided a “mirror” for lesbian viewers looking to find representation of themselves that might resonate with their desires and/or their lived experiences in its commercials.

In the tradition of information activism, many *Dyke TV* segments shared news and information about current events, lesbian artists and activists, and queer communities around the country. The show does this in a variety of regular segments: *Dyke TV* episodes typically open with a five-minute “news” segment reporting on LGBTQ issues around the country, focusing on but not exclusive to lesbian topics, followed by an “Eyewitness” segment offering an in-depth (typically five to 15 minute) investigative account of a particular subject. Many episodes include an “Arts” segment, profiling lesbian artists in film and video, literature, dance, music, painting, and comedy; over the years this included Barbara Hammer, Cheryl Dunye, Carmelita Tropicana, Su Friedrich, Toshi Reagan, Nicole Eisenman, Barbara Smith, and Dorothy Allison. As volunteer Mary Edwards told me, “We provided in a sense this service for people to be more deeply informed.”<sup>76</sup> These recurring segments foreground a wide range of lesbian life, culture, and issues, providing news coverage of arts and activism that would likely have otherwise gone unmentioned on television.

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<sup>75</sup> Simo, interview.

<sup>76</sup> Edwards, interview.



As *Dyke TV* expanded its reach via national distribution, it began incorporating national and international stories into its purview as well. In 1995, *Dyke TV* secured grant funding to attend the World Conference on Women in Beijing, China; producers combined their filmed material into an Eyewitness segment that discussed lesbian organizing worldwide and lesbian activism at the conference. In the early 2000s, *Dyke TV* fundraised to send a few producers on a road trip to different cities in the U.S.; the result was “*Dyke TV On the Road*,” a recurring segment that shined a spotlight on lesbian organizations in cities like Seattle, Denver, and Portland. During this time period, *Dyke TV* similarly expanded its purview to include more stories about transgender people in the U.S. In 2000, *Dyke TV* covered the political funeral and memorial service for Amanda Milan, a trans woman murdered in New York. After airing footage of people marching in the street and clips from speeches at the funeral, a screen displays a message from the producers: “It is time for the queer community to address the basic human rights of transgendered & third gender persons.”<sup>77</sup> In the same episode, a segment titled “Genderfuck” explores the fluidity of gender roles, identity, and presentation via interviews with a variety of people about how they imagine, define, and understand their genders. Indeed, between 2000-2006, the number of *Dyke TV* segments covering trans issues greatly increased, often aided by documentary aesthetics like the interview format, which provided trans people with the opportunity to speak about their own experiences on camera. As B. Ruby Rich has suggested, “documentary has been the dominant medium” for contemporary trans storytelling.<sup>78</sup> Taking a closer look at these segments demonstrates how the show eventually extended its

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<sup>77</sup> The term “transgendered” was commonly used in the 1990s both by people inside and outside of the community, as seen in the segments described in this section. However, transgender advocates now consider “transgendered” to be both grammatically incorrect and offensive. Organizations like GLAAD discuss this shift in part by explaining that “transgender” should be used as an adjective rather than a noun.

<sup>78</sup> B. Ruby Rich, *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (Duke University Press, 2013), 274.

radically inclusive politic to transgender people, implicitly and at times explicitly calling for lesbian and queer communities to embrace trans people as members of the community.



Figure 3.15 After a segment covering the political funeral of Amanda Milan, a transgender woman murdered in New York in 2000, *Dyke TV* aired this message urging cisgender queer people to support, uplift, and advocate for trans people.

In 2002, one “*Dyke TV* on the Road” segment profiles Other Brothers, a San Francisco-based performance artist collective for Black and Latinx butch lesbians and transmasculine people. The segment, filmed outdoors in a park, features six interviews with unnamed Other Brother members, who each describe the importance of the group to the *Dyke TV* interviewer behind the camera. “Other really defines me to the T,” one member suggests; the word “other” in some sense describes how the members feel in relation to prescriptive social gender norms. The word is also an acronym: “Other” stands for Opening the Heart and Erasing Restrictive Stereotypes, which outlines the purpose of the group: part performance collective and part support group, Other Brothers offered a space for queer and trans people of color in San Francisco to create community with one another in a majority white and cisgender city. Members

describe the necessity of such a group on camera, sharing that it provides them a space to speak about the complexities of navigating the margins of race, gender, and sexuality with one another. For example, multiple interviews mention the ways in which Black butch and transmasculine members experience racism in new ways if and when they are read as men by others; more specifically, white people treat them as “threats” because of stereotypes linking Black masculinity to aggression and criminality. As one member suggests, *Other Brothers* provides a space for queer and transgender people of color to talk “honestly on a deep level” with one another about racism and transphobia and to “express masculine energy” without fear of experiencing physical or emotional harm.

This segment offers one of the first sympathetic portrayals of transmasculine people on *Dyke TV*. While the show covered Brandon Teena’s murder in 1994 over the course of a couple of episodes, those segments largely frame Teena as a lesbian who was “passing as a man” rather than as a transgender individual who lived and understood himself as a man. *Dyke TV* was not the only media outlet to frame Teena as a “passing lesbian” in 1994—*The Village Voice* did as well, among others—which perhaps reflects how little cisgender straight and gay media professionals knew about transgender issues at the time. Because of the ubiquity of this rhetoric, transgender activists expressed frustration that the press continually misgendered Brandon Teena. In 1994, a number of trans activists, including author Leslie Feinberg, protested *The Village Voice*’s coverage of the issue, a protest which *Dyke TV* filmed for the show. *Dyke TV*’s coverage of the protest features sound bites from Feinberg and other trans activists, yet ends the segment with a statement from Donna Minkowitz, the journalist who wrote the offending *Village Voice* article: “I don’t believe that any of us is born in the wrong body...I believe very strongly that gender is a social construct...I’m not a woman in a woman’s body, and Brandon wasn’t a

man in a woman's body." Presenting Minkowitz's interview without commentary and concluding the segment with her words, the show seemingly sides with her criticism of trans activism.<sup>79</sup> In later years, *Dyke TV* featured Leslie Feinberg on the show a number of other times, but this troubling coverage of Brandon Teena's murder and the controversy it sparked between cisgender lesbian and transgender activists remains its lasting word on trans issues for some time. This "Other Brothers" segment in 2002 is the first time that multiple transmasculine people speak for themselves to the *Dyke TV* audience. Providing butch lesbians and trans men the opportunity to share their thoughts about gender, race, and masculinity on camera functions as a reparative moment on the show, a moment in which trans people are considered community insiders rather than antagonists. Depicting a number of interviews with the Other Brothers in this segment facilitates this more trans-inclusive message: airing interviews with the Brothers allows them to share their own experiences without added commentary from the *Dyke TV* team or from other cisgender community members.

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<sup>79</sup> In 2018, Minkowitz penned a reflective essay apologizing for her "insensitive and inaccurate" writing on Teena's life and death. For more, see <https://www.villagevoice.com/2018/06/20/how-i-broke-and-botched-the-brandon-teena-story/>.



Figure 3.16 Transgender author Leslie Feinberg, pictured here protesting *The Village Voice*'s coverage of Brandon Teena's murder in 1994, was interviewed a number of times on *Dyke TV*.

An Eyewitness segment from 2000 featuring interviews with a number of transgender women has a similar effect, offering trans women the opportunity to speak on camera for the first time on the show. In this segment, in a clip from a short film called *I Am Your Sister*, a diverse group of trans women including legendary activist Sylvia Rivera speak about their lives and transition-related experiences, discussing a range of topics including spirituality, employment discrimination, sex work, and police harassment on camera. Sharing the perspectives of Black, white, Latina, and Asian trans women, this segment emphasizes the multiple ways in which race and class impact trans people's lived experiences. In her interview, Rivera discusses the high rates of violence that trans women experience, especially as compared to cisgender gay men and lesbians. Rivera also shares fond memories of her friend Marsha P. Johnson, with whom she founded the trans activist group Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries in 1970.<sup>80</sup> Together,

<sup>80</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*, 2nd edition (Seal Press, 2017), 110.

these interviews portray the diversity of trans women's lives in New York in the 1990s and early 2000s. As with the *Other Brothers* segment, this *Eyewitness* video avoids limiting trans experiences to a singular story. Instead, it provides multiple trans women with the opportunity to speak on camera, the first segment to do so on *Dyke TV*.



Figure 3.17 An interview with Sylvia Rivera during an “Eyewitness” segment, in which the legendary transgender activist discusses the violence and discrimination experienced by trans women.

Many scholars have criticized commercial Hollywood narrative films and documentaries that have reproduced harmful tropes about trans people. These films often overemphasize medical transition and/or center linear understandings of trans life that fit into the “born in the wrong body” narrative, both tropes designed to make trans identity legible to cisgender viewers. Sam Feder writes that these films often reproduce “a victim and empathy model,” in which “feeling empathy and pity become the way for a viewer to access identification to another.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Sam Feder and Alexandra Juhasz, “Does Visibility Equal Progress? A Conversation on Trans Activist Media,” *Jump Cut* 57 (Fall 2016), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc57.2016/-Feder-JuhaszTransActivism/2.html>.

Feder critiques this model, arguing that “pity requires a hierarchy of personhood with a power dynamic inhibiting full human rights for trans people.”<sup>82</sup> Unlike these dominant tropes, the *Dyke TV* segments foreground a multiplicity of trans life, rarely mention medical transition, and discuss both the painful realities of transphobia and the joy to be found in trans community. Rather than employing a “victim and empathy model” that presumes a cisgender audience, these segments use documentary aesthetics to provide trans people with the opportunity to give evidence and testimony to their own life experiences. These segments affirm that trans people represent a significant part of LGBTQ communities and that their stories belong on *Dyke TV*.

Despite the inclusion of trans stories on screen, the social reality behind the scenes was a bit more complex. In their interviews with me, both Mary Patierno and Harriet Hirshorn mentioned that a trans woman volunteered with *Dyke TV* in the 1990s; this woman expressed a desire for the show to increase its coverage of trans issues. In response to such criticism, Patierno replied “this is a lesbian show.”<sup>83</sup> While Patierno “felt allied with trans women and trans men,” it seems that *Dyke TV* prioritized cisgender lesbian stories in the 1990s, perhaps to the detriment of transgender members of the community.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, Hirshorn remembered some conflict around this trans women’s time at the show—younger volunteers felt that she held “male privilege” which she used to boss them around.<sup>85</sup> Such statements suggest that, behind the scenes, *Dyke TV* volunteers espoused what Susan Stryker calls “feminist transphobia,” the specific transphobic ideologies that stem from interpretations of lesbian feminist analyses of gender.<sup>86</sup> In this case, Patierno and Hirshorn’s comments ungendered their trans producer, suggesting that her assigned

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<sup>82</sup> Feder and Juhasz.

<sup>83</sup> Patierno, interview.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Hirshorn, interview.

<sup>86</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution*, 127.

sex at birth rendered her an outsider (not a “real” lesbian) or in a position of power (someone with “male privilege”). With these interpersonal dynamics in mind, it is perhaps clear as to why *Dyke TV* rarely covered trans issues in the 1990s. Yet the “Other Brothers” and “I am Your Sister” segments, as well as the coverage of Amanda Milan’s political funeral, suggest that staff, board members, and volunteers changed their perspectives about the inclusion of trans people on *Dyke TV* as time went on. Indeed, other segments focused on trans issues in the 2000s include interviews with author Kate Bornstein and filmmakers Silas Howard, Harry Dodge, and Hans Schierl, an in-depth segment documenting transmasculine performance at the International Drag King Extravaganza, and a profile of the Trans Legal Clinic at New York’s LGBT Community Center. While not an excuse for earlier iterations of feminist transphobia, these segments demonstrate that *Dyke TV* eventually embraced trans people and encouraged their audience to do so as well. Understanding *Dyke TV*’s treatment of trans issues demonstrates how the show’s vision and aesthetics evolved over time.

Whether focused on health and wellness, lesbian self-representation, erotic connection between women, and/or an expansive sense of community, lesbian feminist love-politics on *Dyke TV* embrace queer women’s culture and community in the service of sustaining and celebrating it. Significantly, lesbian feminist love-politics on *Dyke TV* retains the nonidentitarian focus of Black and lesbian feminist theory. *Dyke TV*’s expansive understanding of dyke, queer, lesbian, and bisexual community culture imagines a lesbian community united by anti-oppressive politics rather than by sameness and identity. The development and content of the show generates lesbian feminist love-politics, implicitly and explicitly exploring and honoring lesbian community in all its diverse forms in order to advocate for a more just world in which queer life is celebrated rather than stigmatized.



### **A labor of love: Producing *Dyke TV* from 1993- 2006**

*Dyke TV* faced a number of financial, technological, and social challenges over the years.

Changes behind the scenes eventually impacted representation on screen, and after 13 years on the air, the last *Dyke TV* episode aired in 2006. Ultimately, the show became difficult to produce on a regular basis because it was largely a “labor of love” for its unpaid staff and volunteers. Brooke Erin Duffy calls this type of work “aspirational labor,” or “the incentive of future reward systems for present-day productive activities.”<sup>87</sup> Aspirational laborers, who are typically unpaid workers, “expect that they will *one day* be compensated for their productivity--be it through material rewards or social capital.”<sup>88</sup> While Duffy’s study accounts for the work of 2010s-era fashion bloggers, what she says rings true for LGBTQ public access cable producers. Those working on *Dyke TV*, working for years with little or no pay, hoped that their work would generate radical new possibilities for lesbians on television, aspirational work aimed at creating activist television. In some sense, *Dyke TV*’s radically inclusive mission was aspirational as well: despite the founders’ intentions, some women of color and trans producers on the show experienced tokenization. Examining the dissonance between their aspirational labor and vision and the realities of production for *Dyke TV*’s staff and volunteers reveals the difficulties inherent to creating non-commercial television in the new millennium.

When *Dyke TV* was founded in 1993, it was formally produced by a small nonprofit organization that Chapman and Simo created in 1990 called Sang-Froid, Ltd.<sup>89</sup> Under the umbrella of Sang-Froid, *Dyke TV* was supported by an already existing organizational structure;

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<sup>87</sup> Brooke Erin Duffy, *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational Work* (Yale University Press, 2017), 7.

<sup>88</sup> Duffy, 4–6.

<sup>89</sup> Chapman, interview.

most notably, Sang-Froid's board of directors helped support the mission and vision of the producers. By 1994, *Dyke TV* was Sang-Froid's central project; this troubled some of the board members, who wondered if the show was taking over the organization's mission.<sup>90</sup> As a result of these conversations, *Dyke TV* began to separate from Sang-Froid.<sup>91</sup> *Dyke TV* filed for incorporation as its own nonprofit called DTV Productions, Ltd. and achieved 501(c)(3) tax-exempt status by the end of 1996, developing its own board of directors with multiple subcommittees dedicated to fundraising, marketing, programming, and distribution.<sup>92</sup> The board consisted of current and former *DTV* producers, administrators, and volunteers: for example, Chapman transitioned from her position as Executive Producer and became a board member, and Patierno served on the board for many years as well.<sup>93</sup> Of the shows I study, *Dyke TV* is the only one that utilized the nonprofit model in order to support and fund production.

Like many nonprofits, DTV Productions funded itself from a diversity of revenue streams. A bequest from Patierno's brother, David Miller, provided the bulk of the early funding. Miller passed away from complications due to AIDS in early 1993; towards the end of his life, he told Patierno that he wanted to donate the money left in his estate to help fund LGBTQ activist organizations.<sup>94</sup> As his executor, Patierno distributed funding accordingly, and *Dyke TV* was one recipient of many.<sup>95</sup> Miller's donation helped secure *Dyke TV* an office space in lower Manhattan and allowed the team to pay some staff members, including Chapman, a small weekly

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<sup>90</sup> Sang Froid, Ltd. Board Meeting Minutes, Meeting of the Board of Directors, September 28, 1994, SSC-MS-00656, Box 71, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>91</sup> Sang Froid, Ltd. Board Meeting Minutes, Dyke TV Autonomy Committee, February 8, 1995, SSC-MS-00656, Box 71, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>92</sup> Certificate of Incorporation, May 16, 1995, SSC-MS-00656, Box 71, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>93</sup> Chapman, interview.

<sup>94</sup> Patierno, interview.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

stipend for their work. Miller's donation was crucial to the early success of the show: it allowed *Dyke TV* to launch its first season without financial insecurity. Still, additional funds were necessary; during her three years as executive producer and administrative manager, Chapman was able to secure a number of grants to help finance the show.<sup>96</sup> The team also relied on sponsorships from LGBTQ businesses and donations from individual donors to pay their rent.

A key grant from Manhattan Neighborhood Network provided funding for *Dyke TV* to hold free and low-cost video training workshops to teach volunteers with little to no filmmaking experience how to produce their own content.<sup>97</sup> *Dyke TV* conducted ongoing outreach campaigns to other lesbian and LGBTQ groups in the city to find participants for their workshops. Associate Producer Harriet Hirshorn remembered going to the meetings of these groups and presenting information about the show to members. "We would say, we've got this show and anything you want to produce about yourselves or anything at all, you know, come and we will teach you and we will work with you to do it and we'll leave you to finish it," Hirshorn recounted.<sup>98</sup> These groups were quick to participate, Hirshorn suggested, because it gave them the opportunity to tell their own stories: "that notion of picking up a camera and telling your own story and telling the story of your community...all of that was just really kind of riveting for people." Over the years, *Dyke TV* worked with the African Ancestral Lesbians United for Social Change, the Asian Lesbians of the East Coast, the Irish Lesbian and Gay Organization, the Bronx Lesbians United in Sisterhood, and Las Buenas Amigas (a Latina lesbian organization based in New York), among others, whose members each produced segments for the show on a wide range of topics.

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<sup>96</sup> List of Foundation Grants Received, Dyke TV and Sang-Froid, Ltd., 1994, SSC-MS-00656, Box 73, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>97</sup> Patierno, interview.

<sup>98</sup> Harriet Hirshorn, Skype interview with the author, October 2019. Further quotes from same interview.

In my conversations with them, all three *Dyke TV* founders continually affirmed that including a diverse array of lesbian voices in production was central to the mission of the show.

Patierno explained:

It was a real activist time, so there was these other lesbian groups in town...we would've been completely remiss if we didn't reach out...it just felt like a no brainer, to be honest. We lived in New York. It's a very diverse city. It was, you know, it would have been just a big void and a big problem if we didn't try to make the show reflect at least what our city looked like and what the women in our city were doing.

Chapman echoed Patierno's points: "We wanted a really diverse representation because that is who our lesbian culture is. Who's not being heard, whose lives are we not hearing about, and whose issues are we not hearing about? That was always an important element in making the show." Simo similarly affirmed, "The show aspired to reach a wide lesbian audience, well beyond the activist community. Regular, non-activist dykes of all races and social classes."

Patierno, Chapman, and Simo each considered racial and ethnic diversity a core part of *Dyke TV*'s production. Patierno affirmed that these trainings "contributed to the dynamic quality of the programming": with so many different people participating in production, *Dyke TV* could cover lesbian issues from a wide variety of perspectives. As a result of *Dyke TV*'s outreach efforts, women of color appear on the show in almost every episode.

While the work of volunteer producers helped shape *Dyke TV* into a robust and diverse television show, they were rarely part of the leadership team. Women of color volunteers on *Dyke TV* had mixed experiences working on the show. Mary Edwards, a volunteer anchor between 1993-1994, remembers *Dyke TV* as "very serious on one hand and very playful," with a "youthful energy, but also [the] energy of people who had been on the front lines much earlier

on, so there was a great sense of mentorship there that everyone brought to the table.”<sup>99</sup> As one of a number of Black women volunteers, Edwards shared, “we were all treated with the respect...I didn't feel excluded.” She elaborated, “I didn't feel that there was a tokenism going on there...I mean, it still wasn't 50-50 by any means, but it definitely was inclusionary.” On the other hand, Jaguar Mary X, a Black feminist performance artist previously known as Jocelyn Taylor, who anchored many of the show's episodes and produced a number of segments focusing on queer of color community, described her work on the show as “fun and empowering,” and yet simultaneously described experiences of tokenization.<sup>100</sup> “Reflecting back, and this is a problem with the liberal, you know, white, middle class politics, is that if you have one, you have all. That you've done the work,” she commented. X felt as if the *Dyke TV* leadership team, whether consciously or not, used her presence as anchor of the show to visually represent their inclusive mission to their audience, but did not make a concerted effort to engage with LGBTQ communities of color beyond that. “At that time I wasn't able to articulate that disappointment,” she recounted to me, noting how, during the time she worked with the show, she didn't have the language to name her experience as one of tokenization. The lack of compensation for X's work compounded this feeling of disappointment: she later expressed, “the times have changed so much...just in terms of how we treat the people we're working with...Now, you can't, at least in my mind, you can't even run a volunteer organization without making sure that [participants receive] some form of compensation.” Her unpaid labor eventually took its toll, and X left the organization in the mid 1990s to focus on her career. While *Dyke TV* provided marginalized LGBTQ people with the tools to create media, this opportunity alone did

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<sup>99</sup> Mary Edwards, interview with the author, April 2020. Further quotes from same interview.

<sup>100</sup> Jaguar Mary X, Skype interview with the author, November 2019. Further quotes from same interview.

not necessarily provide enough support for all volunteer producers to work on the show in the long term. While the Black women I interviewed shared differing experiences of inclusion and community during the show's production, few women of color lasted for very long at *Dyke TV* over the years.

Despite its robust outreach to queer women of color activist groups, *Dyke TV*'s inclusive mission was at times only aspirational. As McKinney writes, "conflicts over difference" have often structured lesbian community groups engaged in information activism, even as these groups were often aware that "a single lesbian feminist counterpublic was neither realistic nor desirable."<sup>101</sup> These conflicts reflect larger rifts and factions in lesbian feminist theory and organizing between white organizers and women of color feminists that began in the 1970s. Examining these conflicts in *Dyke TV*'s development makes visible how the founders both carved out space for women of color on the show and yet, intentionally or not, excluded some of the same women from particular aspects of leadership. Understanding this uneven process of inclusion helps demonstrate how interpersonal dynamics and conflicts about race and gender informed *Dyke TV* at the level of production, even as it strived for an expansive diversity on screen.

As time went on, DTV began to have trouble raising funding to match all of its expenses. While DTV Productions was largely run by the volunteer efforts of dozens of women, funding raised for the show went in a variety of directions. DTV paid for rent, utilities, and office supplies for the studio/office space in New York, as well as for the purchase and maintenance of their own video equipment. DTV also paid a number of staff members small salaries to compensate for their labor: in 1995, the Executive Producer, Associate Producer, Development

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<sup>101</sup> McKinney, *Information Activism*, 23, 18.

Director, General Manager, and Development Associate each were paid were between \$150-\$400 per week.<sup>102</sup> These line items added up quickly: the expenses for the year exceeded \$150,000.<sup>103</sup> In a report from June 1996, Executive Producer Cyrille Phipps wrote, “morale is at an all-time low;” it became more difficult to motivate staff to produce shows on a weekly basis without appropriate compensation or financial security.<sup>104</sup> In mid-1996, the board convened an emergency meeting to discuss the sustainability of the show amid the high the costs of production.<sup>105</sup>

As Aymar Jean Christian suggests, “Successful independent television production involves harnessing all available resources, from skills to spaces.”<sup>106</sup> As a result of the financial and social difficulties, DTV made a number of changes to its organizational and financial structure. In 1996, *Dyke TV* episodes began airing biweekly; between 1997-2001, the show aired monthly episodes. Many of these were “themed episodes”: they explored one topic in depth rather than covering a number of topics across multiple segments.<sup>107</sup> Decreasing the production output lowered costs and reduced the constant pressure on staff, board members, and volunteers to create and edit content for the show. DTV also began to offer workshops focused on digital media rather than just video production, including introductory courses to using the Internet, designing a website, and digital video editing. These workshops cost participants between \$150-

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<sup>102</sup> DTV Working Budget, January 16, 1995, SSC-MS-00656, Box 71, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Executive Producer Report, June 27, 1996, SSC-MS-00656, Box 71, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>105</sup> Minutes from Dyke TV Emergency Board Meeting, June 27, 1996, SSC-MS-00656, Box 71, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>106</sup> Christian, *Open TV*, 61.

<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth Meister, “Dyke TV: If We Don’t Put Ourselves on the Air, No One Else Will,” *Community Media Review* 9, no. 3 (1996): 23.

500 per session, creating a new source of revenue for the show.<sup>108</sup> The DTV team continually used its equipment to raise money in creative ways: they dubbed, duplicated, and digitized tapes for other filmmakers for a fee, distributed “best of” tapes on a quarterly basis for subscribers who wanted to receive compilations of segments of the show, and rented out their video equipment to other filmmakers in the city. To encourage the wider queer community in New York to support and raise funding for the show, DTV Productions held annual cocktail parties as well as smaller events at LGBTQ venues around New York City.<sup>109</sup> Finally, DTV moved offices to cheaper locations as rents rose across Manhattan: in the mid-1990s, they moved to a low-cost office in SoHo; in 2000, they rented space from A Different Light bookstore in Chelsea, and in early 2001, DTV moved for the last time, to a storefront in the Prospect Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn.<sup>110</sup> Lowering expenses and finding creative new sources of income allowed the show to continue production despite financial insecurity.

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<sup>108</sup> Flyer for Dyke TV’s Summer School Digital Media Workshops, SSC-MS-00656, Box 73, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>109</sup> Invitation to Dyke TV cabaret fundraiser, SSC-MS-00656, Box 72, Sophia Smith Collection of Women’s History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>110</sup> Interview, Hirshorn.





The nature of distribution changed over time as well. In the early years, a dedicated person in charge of distribution would deliver copies of the show to the cable channels that aired it throughout New York City's boroughs.<sup>111</sup> As cities around the country requested the show for their own local channels, distribution became a larger and more expensive task: staff and volunteers needed to copy tapes and mail them across the country, as well as keep a running and organized list of cities where the show aired, what channels it aired on, what day and time the show aired, and the contact information for a person in each city.<sup>112</sup> *Dyke TV* had dedicated stringers, or volunteer producers in each city, who filmed segments about local lesbian news and culture that they could mail to the New York office to be included in the show.<sup>113</sup> National distribution and collaboration with the stringers required close management by the staff, as well as the financial resources to produce the copies of the episodes.

In 1995, distribution got slightly more efficient: *Dyke TV* signed an agreement with Free Speech TV, a service that helped distribute cable access shows to local outlets, lessening the work for the *Dyke TV* staff.<sup>114</sup> A few years later, in 2000, Free Speech TV launched a 24/7 satellite-delivered channel on the DISH network, greatly increasing the number of homes to have access to *Dyke TV* and making distribution that much easier.<sup>115</sup> Still, DTV had to mail tapes to those cities without Free Speech TV service. *Dyke TV* also signed a contract with PrideVision TV in 2000, a new 24-hour Canadian cable channel targeted at LGBTQ audiences. While the team was excited about the possibilities of international distribution, the deal ultimately did not live up

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<sup>111</sup> Interview, Patierno.

<sup>112</sup> *Dyke TV National "Distribution Bible" Binder*, SSC-MS-00656, Box 75, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>113</sup> Interview, Patierno.

<sup>114</sup> Licensing agreement with Free Speech TV, 1996, SSC-MS-00656, Box 72, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

<sup>115</sup> Press Release from Free Speech TV announcing launch of satellite channel, January 12, 2000, SSC-MS-00656, Box 72, Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History, Smith College Libraries, Northampton, MA.

to their hopes: according to Sally Sasso, the Executive Producer of *Dyke TV* at the time, PrideVision was unable to pay the bills they owed to DTV and the channel ultimately folded shortly thereafter, in 2002.<sup>116</sup> For the show's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2003, *Dyke TV* launched a new version of its website, [www.dyketv.org](http://www.dyketv.org), which included an archive of the show's 200 episodes, available for the first time on streaming video.<sup>117</sup> Distributing the show online greatly increased its potential audience, who no longer needed to watch the show on their local public access station in order to view it.

DTV's move to Brooklyn, where it operated until the last episode aired in 2006, signaled a number of bigger shifts that may have ultimately led to the show's end. By the early 2000s, the founding producers of the show were largely not involved in its operations. Patierno, Chapman, Simo, and Hirshorn were more focused on their own projects and careers. After Sasso, who was involved with DTV throughout the 1990s, left the organization in 2003, the most senior staff member was 23 years old Jules Rosskam, a young transgender filmmaker who served as DTV's Executive Producer from 2003-2005. While Rosskam, along with a number of volunteers, organized to produce *Dyke TV* segments and episodes, the lack of mentorship from more experienced filmmaking professionals impacted the consistency and format of the show, as well as staff morale.<sup>118</sup> The young team felt overwhelmed with the responsibility of running a nonprofit and producing a national television show with little professional experience. Reflecting on his time at DTV, Rosskam commented, "We all felt really passionately about the organization and I think felt a certain level of like desperation about having the baton sort of passed to us and

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<sup>116</sup> Sally Sasso, interview with the author, October 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Robert DiGiacomo, "'Dyke TV' Turns 10, Relaunches Web Site," *Philadelphia Gay News*, July 18, 2003.

<sup>118</sup> Jules Rosskam, Skype interview with the author, November 2019.

not wanting to drop it.”<sup>119</sup> He elaborated, “everyone involved just scrambled to get money to keep the organization afloat and pay our rent.”<sup>120</sup> Roskam’s labor of love is evident in his reflections here: his words seem to affirm Angela McRobbie’s argument that, for those passionate about working in the creative economy, “work becomes akin to a romantic relationship” during moments of personal or institutional economic precarity.<sup>121</sup>

Roskam, who was the only paid staff member and worked on a part-time basis, moved the show back to a monthly format in order to decrease the pressure to produce. Fluctuation and formal experimentation are evident in these episodes, reflecting the instability of DTV at time. Most episodes in these years lack the regular segment structure of the 1990s; the weekly “news” segment largely disappears, and segments from the first few years of the show were often re-aired alongside short videos made by DTV workshop participants. A number of longtime funders of the show, including the Astraea Foundation, declined to give more money to DTV in favor of supporting newer advocacy efforts. Constant financial insecurity plagued his small team, making it difficult to envision a sustainable future for the show.

Laura Hadley Perry, Executive Director of DTV from 1999 to 20002, explained that technological and representational changes impacted the show as well.<sup>122</sup> Cheaper video technologies and digital video editing software became widely available. By 2005, new digital streaming websites, YouTube in particular, provided a free (if corporate-funded) platform for video distribution. A burgeoning LGBTQ and feminist blogosphere shifted interest away from cable access towards new opportunities and platforms for writers online. These technological

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<sup>119</sup> Roskam, interview.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making a Living in the New Culture Industries*, 1 edition (Polity, 2016), 3.

<sup>122</sup> Hadley Perry, email interview with the author, October 2019.

changes meant that many marginalized filmmakers could use new media technologies to tell their stories and share their perspectives without relying on *Dyke TV*'s resources. Similarly, as commercial media outlets grew interested in representing lesbian culture, *Dyke TV*'s efforts to claim a space for lesbians on television became less urgent. In the years between 1993-2006, broadcast and cable channels began incorporating lesbian storylines into their programming. It is perhaps not a coincidence that *Dyke TV* closed its doors two years after the premiere of *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009), the first commercial cable show to focus its storylines on the lives of a group of queer women. As Perry noted, "By 2006 it certainly no longer felt like dykes were utterly invisible, the way it had in the early '90s."<sup>123</sup> While the "lesbian chic" phenomenon was short-lived, it created a model for commercially viable lesbian content adopted by marketers, advertisers, and television executives throughout the 1990s and 2000s that appealed to heterosexual viewers and consumers.<sup>124</sup> Many LGBTQ viewers critiqued these representations for depicting queer women as conventionally feminine, typically white, affluent, and generally apolitical; still, the increase in lesbian representation sparked hope that commercial television might finally provide opportunities for LGBTQ representation, seemingly lessening the need for LGBTQ community television on cable access.

Shifting community norms perhaps impacted the end of the show as well. Both Roskam and Perry noted that, in the early 2000s, the expansion of trans advocacy in the U.S. created much dialogue and debate within wider LGBTQ communities and within DTV's members as well. Trans social justice activism coalesced into a national movement in the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Perry, interview.

<sup>124</sup> Katherine Sender, *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

<sup>125</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History: The Roots of Today's Revolution*.

While over time the broader LGBTQ movement became more trans-inclusive in response to trans activism, some cisgender lesbian and gay people still uncomfortable with transgender issues grew vocal about their anti-transgender attitudes. Conversations about the increasing visibility of transgender men began to cause rifts in queer women's communities. These conversations affected Rosskam, who came out as a trans man during his time working at DTV: "the question at that time was much more focused on, do trans men have a right to or be in with dyke spaces? And like what is the community doing with community members who, you know, were previously dyke-identified?"<sup>126</sup> While Rosskam was ready to resign from his position at DTV when he came out as trans, Sasso encouraged him to stay on board. "She was like, this is how our community is changing. *Dyke TV* needs to change if it's gonna like change with the times and stay alive."<sup>127</sup> Accordingly, DTV slightly amended its mission: the organization purported to serve "past present and future women," a phrase meant to gesture towards trans-inclusion. Still, Rosskam noted that one board member did not support the newly stated mission of the show and DTV received hate mail from frustrated community members unhappy with the new direction. The majority of DTV stakeholders were supportive of Rosskam's work and saw trans people as an integral part of their community; however, there was not consensus around the issue. Internal debates about gender inclusion on the show may have contributed to burnout amongst staff and board members—in addition to growing financial instability and a lack of human resources, a lack of consensus about the mission of the show may have made it difficult to commit to production long term.

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<sup>126</sup> Rosskam, interview.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

In 2005, lawyer Cynthia Kern was hired to serve as the Executive Director of *Dyke TV*; while hoping to revive the organization, she closed it by the end of 2006. “In the end, the money wasn’t there anymore,” she told me.<sup>128</sup> Fewer volunteers, increasing rent prices in Brooklyn, and a lower demand for services meant that DTV was quickly running out of money as well as video content. Kern tried to find creative ways to fund the organization: she asked the board of directors if she could pitch *Dyke TV* to Bravo, one of the first cable channels to market its programming to LGBTQ audiences in the early 2000s with successful shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007). The board rejected Kern’s idea, uninterested in reimagining the show for a commercial market. Years later, Kern remains unsatisfied with board’s commitment to the show’s noncommercial status: “I felt like they were being a little too precious [about it]...instead of being able to move the show forward into another incarnation and hopefully, you know, it would have reached millions of people, we had to shut down.”<sup>129</sup> Without the money to fund operations, Kern had no choice but to close DTV for good. With the help of volunteer Katrina Schaffer, Kern packed up and cleared out the DTV storefront in Park Slope and drove the records up to Mary Patierno’s house in Western Massachusetts. “It was a very, very, very sad ending,” Kern reflected. After the efforts of hundreds of people to create and sustain the show over more than a decade, it ended quietly and without community support. Some years later, Patierno donated the DTV archives to the Smith College Library, where the video content and paper records are accessible for researchers.

Examining the struggles of independent television producers to succeed in a competitive marketplace, Christian writes, “risk and failure are inextricable from innovation.”<sup>130</sup> Taking a

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<sup>128</sup> Cynthia Kern, telephone interview with the author, November 2019.

<sup>129</sup> Kern, interview.

<sup>130</sup> Christian, *Open TV*, 163.

closer look at production and distribution of *Dyke TV* in the 1990s and 2000s demonstrates how the show's producers kept the show on air for 13 years, evolving their organizational structure, production processes, distribution methods, and the subject of their content to meet new demands. Still, persistent financial struggle, social evolution in the LGBTQ community, conflicts behind the scenes, and the development of digital technologies eventually made it difficult to continue producing *Dyke TV*. Ultimately, the labor of love necessary to keep the show afloat became too much of a burden for its producers to maintain. Without the financial backing of mainstream 2000s-era LGBTQ television shows like *The L Word* or *Queer Eye*, there was no way for *Dyke TV* to compete in the marketplace.

### **Coda: The Renaissance of *Dyke TV***

In March 2018, over 100 people gathered at the Light Industry, a venue for film and electronic art in Brooklyn, New York, for a screening of *Dyke TV*. Curated by Kelly Rakowski, the creator “h\_e\_r\_s\_t\_o\_r\_y,” a popular Instagram account dedicated of lesbian history, and video journalist Ainara Tiefenthäler, the event was designed to introduce the show to younger generation of LGBTQ people. The sold-out screening, which highlighted a selection of segments from the first two seasons of the show, was followed by a Q&A session with two of *Dyke TV*'s original Executive Producers, Linda Chapman and Mary Patierno.

The idea for this event developed over a number of years. Tiefenthäler learned of *Dyke TV* after working with Patierno on a documentary project in 2014.<sup>131</sup> Soon after, she met Rakowski through a friend, and the two decided to plan a public screening of the show. With

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<sup>131</sup> Ainara Tiefenthäler, telephone interview with the author, October 2019. Further quotes in this section from same interview.



Rakowski's wide reach on Instagram, and Tiefenthäler's connections to the original Executive Producers, the two thought they would make the perfect team to execute this event. The event was indeed a success, so much so that Tiefenthäler planned three more screenings, one in Berlin and another two in Brooklyn. "Every lesbian I know is hungry for content," Tiefenthäler told me over the phone. Despite the increase in media representations of lesbian and queer life over the last two decades, Tiefenthäler expressed frustration that these stories do not usually resonate with her experiences of lesbian community. *Dyke TV*, on the other hand, felt familiar: "It doesn't seem very dated to me...overall the way topics are treated, the kind of humor, what kind of issues are covered or discussed, still seems awfully relevant." *Dyke TV*'s scrappy, homegrown feel contrasts greatly with commercial media made about lesbian lives. The show's community-oriented mission and vision still feels novel in a media landscape where LGBTQ representations are typically designed to appeal to a mainstream (straight, cisgender) audience.

Tiefenthäler imagines a broader political possibility for these screenings: she thinks the show has the potential to "open a dialogue" between different generations of queer women. This was already evident at the first screening: she said that the audience stayed present during the Q&A portion instead of leaving before or early into that portion of the event. The screenings "felt very magical," she said, because they started conversations between older and younger LGBTQ people. Harriet Hirshorn, present at one of the screenings, reflected, "it was very surprising to see how totally the show resonated for [the audience]. They were laughing and cheering and clapping and they were having a blast."<sup>132</sup>

As Tiefenthäler suggests, what seems to draw contemporary viewers to *Dyke TV* is its utopian vision of queer and feminist community and activism. "Black feminist love-politics is

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<sup>132</sup> Hirschorn, interview.

staunchly utopian,” Jennifer Nash reminds us; it is a politics bound not by shared identities but by a shared dream for a new society.<sup>133</sup> An archive of lesbian feminist love-politics, *Dyke TV* offers a glimpse of one such dream: the collected and repeated efforts at creating a television show in the service of an expansive lesbian community. When I asked the producers whom I interviewed what they liked most about working on *Dyke TV*, many answered by describing the feeling of community generated by participating in the production of the show. Working amongst a group of queer women inspired and emboldened the *Dyke TV* volunteers, staff, and board members and often shaped their future careers. For Mary Edwards, participating on one of the screenings reminded her of her own work on the show in the early 1990s: “it was a homecoming,” she reflected.<sup>134</sup>

The idea of an imagined utopian lesbian feminist community might feel particularly urgent because of the resurgence of feminist transphobia in the contemporary moment. While trans-exclusionary ideologies can be traced back to specific feminist conferences, events, and writings within the 1970s and 1980s, and have continued to circulate in some feminist circles since then, 2010s-era social media networks—Facebook and Twitter in particular—have increased the visibility of anti-trans “gender critical” or “radical” feminists (as they typically call themselves).<sup>135</sup> The contemporary visibility of feminist transphobia is not limited to online discourse: these groups have coalesced into political lobbies that organize against trans rights on a local, national, and international basis.<sup>136</sup> For many who believe that trans issues belong in

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<sup>133</sup> Nash, “Practicing Love,” 17.

<sup>134</sup> Edwards, interview.

<sup>135</sup> Julia Serano, “Putting the ‘Transgender Activists Versus Feminists’ Debate to Rest,” Medium, October 23, 2019, <https://medium.com/@juliaserano/putting-the-transgender-activists-versus-feminists-debate-to-rest-e18075df03af>.

<sup>136</sup> Katelyn Burns, “The Rise of Anti-Trans ‘Radical’ Feminists, Explained,” Vox, September 5, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/9/5/20840101/terfs-radical-feminists-gender-critical>.

feminist theory and activism, the growing presence of anti-trans feminism is cause for concern, especially because it has the potential to derail the progress trans advocates have achieved in the last three decades. Conflicts about the inclusion of trans people, replayed time and again throughout the history of feminism in the U.S. and often reductively labeled as “generational” debates, seem to point to irreconcilable differences amongst groups of feminists. *Dyke TV*, then, offers contemporary viewers an example of a different and more inclusive past, as well as a vision for a more equitable future. The show provides viewer with an example of an older generation of lesbian feminists who (seemingly) encouraged a wide variety of queer folks to create their own media—including transgender people and women of color, groups historically marginalized in the history of feminism. Against contemporary narratives that blame previous generations of feminists for originating and perpetuating anti-trans ideologies, *Dyke TV* provides viewers with hope that lesbian feminist advocacy can unite rather than divide LGBTQ communities.

Upon a closer examination of the show’s production, it becomes clear that *Dyke TV*’s radically inclusive mission did not always match the lived experiences of staff and volunteers. Few women of color worked at *Dyke TV* and the show rarely covered trans-specific issues until the 2000s. Despite the team’s interest in catering *Dyke TV* to a diverse queer community, the women of color and trans volunteers and producers who did work on the show at times experienced stigma and isolation. The discrepancy between *Dyke TV*’s vision and the realities of production reflects larger inequities present in the many LGBTQ cable access shows run by white, middle-class, and cisgender people.

Still, the show’s attempt to cover the stories of marginalized LGBTQ people is worthy of examination despite occasional tensions behind the scenes. The determination of the staff, board,

and volunteers to continue to produce episodes, and to adapt, evolve, and change their tactics and politics as new challenges, conflicts, and community norms arose, reveals how experiments in television production can reflect queer and feminist principles. As a reporter for *The Washington Blade* wrote, “The mere survival of *Dyke TV* may prove to be more political than anything they air.”<sup>137</sup> The hundreds of people who worked with *Dyke TV*, who helped produce over 300 episodes spanning *Dyke TV*’s 13-year run, provide contemporary viewers with an example of how dedication to love-politics can generate new forms of cultural production and new understandings of the legacy of lesbian feminism. *Dyke TV*’s on-screen segments present an alternative vision of late 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism: one not curtailed by transphobia or racism, but enriched by an expansive, unbounded, and freedom-seeking politics. The show’s aspirational love-politics reveals the underlying potential of the show, and of lesbian feminist theory itself: it demonstrates the imagination of a community orientated towards a sense of justice in the service of LGBTQ liberation, rather than an organization around narrow definitions of identity.

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<sup>137</sup> Tania Tasse, “Dyke TV: Television to Incite, Subvert, Provoke,” *The Washington Blade*, February 11, 1994.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **The Feel of Queer Television Production: A Case Study of the Gay Cable Network, 1982-2001**

I arrive at the studios of the Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) on West 59<sup>th</sup> Street between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenue around 2pm on a Wednesday afternoon in September 2019.

Established in 1992, MNN is a non-profit organization that programs Manhattan's five public access channels. It is a "media learning, production, and distribution hub," housing state-of-the-art TV studios where staff organize media education and production workshops for residents of the city.<sup>1</sup> MNN's 59<sup>th</sup> Street studios are modest and unassuming: I walk right past the entrance of the off-white two-story building, distracted by the luxury high rise next door. After I find the building and walk inside, I notice that the atmosphere feels more like a community center than a commercial television studio. Staff walk around in casual attire and across a nearby wall hangs a corkboard filled with flyers promoting TV shows and listing calls for actors, photographers, and videographers.

I walk to the back of the first floor, towards a large open studio where I see Andy Humm and Ann Northrop, co-hosts of *Gay USA* (1990 - present), sitting at a desk and prepping to film this week's episode of the show. The studio is lit with purple-tinted lights that create the backdrop of the show.<sup>2</sup> Inside the studio, props line the walls, and three large cameras sit in the center of the room. Humm and Northrop, who invited me to a taping of *Gay USA* after I contacted them for an interview, greet me and then quickly return to the materials on their news desk. *Gay USA* Director Richard Speziale encourages me to check out the control room, so I

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<sup>1</sup> "About," Manhattan Neighborhood Network, Accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.mnn.org/index.php/about-us>.

walk down a corridor into the small room, observing Speziale and Associate Producer Bill Bahlman prepare and cue the visual media for the show. Filming gets underway close to 3pm. I sit quietly, a one-person studio audience, watching Humm and Northrop report, discuss, and argue about the news as they have done every week for the past sixteen years.



Figures 4.1-4.2 Andy Humm and Ann Northrop host *Gay USA* weekly on the Manhattan Neighborhood Network. In the lower image, Humm and Northrop prepare for a weekly taping of the show as director Richard Speziale (in the foreground) adjusts the setting of a camera. Photo courtesy of the author.

*Gay USA* is the longest running LGBTQ television show in history. It began in 1990 as a weekly series on the Gay Cable Network (GCN), a production company devoted to programming LGBTQ content on television. From GCN's creation in the early 1980s until it folded in 2001, the company produced and aired a dozen shows focused on news and entertainment created by and for LGBTQ New Yorkers. This included shows like *Men & Films*, a pornographic review; *Be Our Guest*, a satire of 1950s game shows; *Candied Camera*, a queer variety and sketch show; *In the Dungeon*, an informational series about New York's leather and BDSM scene; and *Sixth Floor Harrison*, a gay soap opera. *Gay USA* premiered in 1990 as a combination of two separate GCN shows: *Pride and Progress* (1985-1990) and *The Right Stuff* (1984-1990). *Pride and Progress* shared news and political commentary from an LGBTQ perspective and *The Right Stuff* highlighted current events in queer nightlife and entertainment, including interviews with LGBTQ people in the arts. *Gay USA* combined these two programs into one hour-long show covering weekly news, entertainment, and LGBTQ arts and culture. After GCN closed its doors, *Gay USA* continued to air weekly on Manhattan cable access channels, largely due to the dedication of its co-anchors, Humm and Northrop, and the support of the MNN studios.

This chapter assesses the significance of GCN as a major force in the production of LGBTQ television. Over its 20 years on the air, GCN provided LGBTQ people with sobering political coverage of issues generally missing from mainstream television journalism and entertainment programming infused with a queer sensibility. While not a television network in the traditional sense—GCN did not have its own cable channel nor a system of affiliates through which to disseminate its programming—its founder and executive producer, Lou Maletta, did distribute his series via videotape to a number of cities nationwide, including Atlanta, Chicago, and San Francisco. The word “network” in the title was in some sense aspirational: Maletta

hoped to one day create a profitable cable channel devoted to LGBTQ programming, a dream he never fulfilled (but that came to fruition in 2005 with the creation of Logo TV). While not a commercial broadcast television network, GCN did help connect LGBTQ television producers around the country. In this way Maletta and his team provided a form of networked connectivity for LGBTQ people interested in producing community media, long before the creation of digital and social media platforms to do so in the 2000s, as well as an information network for viewers interested in accessing LGBTQ news.

A savvy businessman, a member of the leather community<sup>3</sup>, and a sex-positive AIDS activist, Maletta faced homophobia from advertisers, viewers, censors, and politicians, and stigma from his peers, as an out gay producer trying to market his programming without compromising his political ideals. Considering the social opposition to his work, the relative success and longevity of GCN is quite remarkable. GCN programming received numerous commendations and awards, including from the Coalition for Lesbian & Gay Rights, the Gay & Lesbian Press Association, and the GLAAD Media Awards, yet its history has received little scholarly attention.

This chapter combines analysis of episodes of *Gay USA*, interviews with producers, hosts, and assistants at GCN, as well as archival research to explore GCN's legacy.<sup>4</sup> I begin by discussing the development of GCN and Maletta's role as producer-activist-entrepreneur,

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<sup>3</sup> The leather community or leather subculture is a term that describes a group of people with an array of sexual practices associated with bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism (BDSM) as well as a particular style of dress that features items made out of leather (jackets, vests, boots, harnesses, chaps, and other items). The leather community includes people of all genders and sexualities, although historically the most visible leather community events have been associated with and organized by LGBTQ people and gay men in particular.

<sup>4</sup> I have limited my case studies to those shows that I have been able to watch. Only three out of a dozen shows have been digitized by archivists at the Fales Library of New York University, which houses the records of the Gay Cable Network, and therefore were accessible for me to view.



someone with high hopes for cable who worked tirelessly to finance his fledgling company.

Maletta built GCN into a robust production company airing multiple television shows distributed nationally, relying on his own idealism and ambition to propel him to promote GCN even as he had minimal funding to do so. I next examine the experiences of the hosts and producers of the GCN shows in the 1980s and early 1990s as they covered stories about the AIDS crisis on a weekly basis. The hosts express a range of feelings including trauma, fear, grief, and responsibility, particularly in relation to their reporting on Republican National Conventions and the deaths of their friends due to AIDS-related complications. Finally, I discuss Maletta's disappointment and resentment as he began to realize that GCN would not become a commercially successful network, which contributed to his decision to fold his company. In contrast to Maletta, Humm and Northrop both remain passionate about and dedicated to sharing LGBTQ perspectives on the news on the contemporary iteration of *Gay USA*. While my previous chapters explore how LGBTQ cable access shows circulated and archive queer structures of feeling in relation to particular current events and community issues, this chapter focuses on the *feel* of queer television production on cable access. This approach scrutinizes the affective dimensions of television production alongside its economic, political, and technological aspects. Drawing on work in production studies, I argue that exploring the feel of queer television production illuminates the joys and pleasures, as well as the disappointments and constraints, inherent to producing, marketing, and distributing local queer community television. A close examination of the experiences of those involved with GCN's production demonstrates the emotional impact of precarious television production and provides a useful precursor to understanding the precarity of contemporary LGBTQ media platforms.

### **Idealism and Ambition: Creating the Gay Cable Network**

Each person I interviewed had strong opinions about GCN founder Lou Maletta: he was “ahead of his time,”<sup>5</sup> “visionary,”<sup>6</sup> “a pioneer,”<sup>7</sup> “a sweetheart,”<sup>8</sup> and “completely, authentically himself with no shame.”<sup>9</sup> He was also “a very polarizing figure,”<sup>10</sup> “a real operator,”<sup>11</sup> “a little rough,”<sup>12</sup> and a “jolly, loveable scoundrel.”<sup>13</sup> Well remembered for his outfits—leather chaps, spandex bicycle shorts, cowboy hats, mesh tank tops—as well as his distinctive voice—“its deep and its velvety and its masculine”<sup>14</sup>—Maletta was a larger-than-life presence and personality. According to Nora Burns, the creator of *Candied Camera*, Maletta was “this completely committed leather queen but yet he also was, you know, a very energetic and dedicated chronicler of the gay community...he was just as likely to be out at an ACT UP march as, you know, a Mr. Leather Contest.”<sup>15</sup> A controversial figure, Maletta’s indefatigable commitment to LGBTQ community culture, politics, and events fueled the Gay Cable Network for two decades.

This section examines the beginning of GCN in New York City as well as the expansion of its programming across the U.S. I explore how Lou Maletta’s idealism about the potential of cable programming, both as a force for social change as well as a profitable commercial industry, fueled his passion for media production. Maletta was an activist television producer: he believed in the power of television to circulate humanizing portrayals of LGBTQ people and advocated

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Northrop, interview with the author, September 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Andy Humm, interview with the author, September 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Humm, interview.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Parker, interview with the author, December 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Olivia Negrón, interview with the author, March 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Jay Blotcher, interview with the author, October 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Steve Bie, interview with the author, September 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Humm, interview.

<sup>13</sup> John Burke, interview with the author, March 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Negrón, interview.

<sup>15</sup> Nora Burns, interview with the author, December 2019.

tirelessly for his own programming. Maletta was simultaneously a shrewd businessman: he aggressively marketed his shows in the hopes of building a financially successful career in cable television. As Aymar Jean Christian writes, “Legacy television productions shoot because their networks have secured funding or are making it themselves. Indie television productions shoot because producers have vision, passion, and the ability to organize a crew to accomplish the task.”<sup>16</sup> In this case, Maletta’s vision, passion, and ability to recruit a team of willing volunteers powered GCN for almost 20 years. I focus here on Maletta’s idealism about television and his career ambitions, demonstrating how the longevity of GCN was in large part due to Maletta’s personal commitment to the company.

*Idealism: Maletta’s Television Activism*

Maletta believed in the public service model of cable television production: that it should reach markets underserved by the broadcast networks. Maletta first became interested in television production when he worked with the team behind *The Emerald City* (1977-1978), one of the first gay cable television programs in New York, and the subject of my first chapter. Maletta, a travel agent, helped secure the *Emerald City* team trips to gay tourist destinations. While *The Emerald City* could not secure the funding to continue production for more than two seasons of the show, Maletta was fascinated by the idea of gay television programming. Steve Bie, an associate producer on *The Emerald City*, recalled, “he [Maletta] became extremely interested in what we were doing. He was obsessed with it.”<sup>17</sup>

In April 1982, Maletta established GCN programming in the 1980s with his first television show on Manhattan Cable’s Channel J called *Men & Films*, a 30-minute program

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<sup>16</sup> Christian, *Open TV*, 60.

<sup>17</sup> Bie, interview.

reviewing clips from videos of gay male pornography.<sup>18</sup> Because erotic gay images were virtually absent on television, Maletta envisioned his show in part as a service for gay male viewers. As Jeffrey Escoffier argues, pornography “played a more significant role in the life of gay men than among heterosexual men, not only because homosexuality has been a stigmatized form of behavior but because historically there were so few homoerotic representations of any kind.”<sup>19</sup> Maletta hoped to fix this problem in part by adding more homoerotic representations to the television screen in an accessible and low-cost format. In an interview with *Homo Xtra* magazine, Maletta explained, “At the time, there were no video clubs and not many VCRs. You couldn’t rent adult tapes; people had to go and pay \$40 to \$90 for a tape...[and] studios would deceive people with their packaging. You didn’t know what was on the tape. So we reviewed these tapes for people.”<sup>20</sup> Maletta hoped *Men & Films* would appeal to gay men looking for pornography but who could not afford to buy expensive videos, did not have access to a VCR machine, and/or wanted a description of a pornographic video before buying the tape. Instead of buying these videos, any cable subscriber in Manhattan could turn on the TV and watch gay pornography in their homes on *Men & Films*.

Maletta was able to include images from a wide range of gay pornography on his show because cable access channels were largely uncensored, unlike broadcast networks, which were more heavily regulated by the FCC. “We can show complete frontal nudity, complete rear nudity, and we can show hardons. But we can’t show any kind of insertion... You can show cum-after the fact. You can’t show it shooting out of a dick,” Maletta explained matter-of-factly.

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<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the *Men & Films* collection was not available for viewing when I visited the GCN archives. My analysis of the show relies upon newspaper and magazine interviews with Maletta and other archival materials.

<sup>19</sup> Jeffrey Escoffier, “Beefcake to Hardcore: Gay Pornography and the Sexual Revolution,” in *Sex Scene: Media and the Sexual Revolution*, ed. Eric Schaefer (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 319.

<sup>20</sup> Austin Downey, “The Cable Guy,” *Homo Xtra Magazine*, January 24, 1997, 23.

“These are the rules that Manhattan Cable feels will keep it from getting [sued] for obscenity.”<sup>21</sup>

*Men & Films* became so notorious for its unapologetic depictions of on-screen sex that it inspired a series of satiric and controversial skits called “Men on Film” in the 1990s TV show *In Living Color* (Fox, 1990-1994) performed by Damon Wayans and David Alan Grier.



Figure 4.3 An advertisement promoting Gay Cable Network’s first show, *Men & Films*, appeared in a July 15-28 1983 issue of the gay newspaper *The Connection*, Section II, pg. 3.

Within months of being on the air, *Men & Films* quickly expanded to include 30 minutes of news and health information. After watching the health of a close friend rapidly deteriorate following an AIDS diagnosis in 1982 (the disease was known as Gay Related Immune Deficiency at the time), Maletta claimed, “There was a real need to fill the airwaves with information that hadn’t been out there already.”<sup>22</sup> As I discussed in the previous chapter,

<sup>21</sup> “Gay Cable TV Cums of Age!,” *All Man Magazine*, Winter 1987, 34.

<sup>22</sup> “Gay Cable TV Cums of Age!,” 31.

broadcast news and mainstream print journalists were hesitant to cover the AIDS crisis in its early years. In 1982, the three major networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) devoted a combined total of only thirteen minutes to the developing epidemic.<sup>23</sup> At the time, the disease primarily affected marginalized communities, gay men and drug addicts in particular; print and broadcast journalists faced pushback from editors, producers, and executives who were afraid to cover or indifferent to AIDS-related news because of stigma and prejudice associated with these communities. Largely ignored by the mainstream press, LGBTQ people and people with AIDS turned to the burgeoning gay press, including cable access programming, for information about the epidemic. *Men & Films* became one of the first television programs to air images of lesions caused by Kaposi Sarcoma, a skin cancer common amongst people with HIV/AIDS in the 1980s.

In addition to educating LGBTQ viewers about news and health issues, Maletta hoped that his programming would impact how the wider public viewed LGBTQ people. Maletta wanted to expand his reach by creating a national network dedicated to programming LGBTQ content on television 24 hours a day, seven days a week. “It’s sad that we don’t have a national network presenting gay issues. The more people see who we are, the less afraid they’ll be of us,” Maletta expressed in an interview.<sup>24</sup> Like his forerunners in the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA) in the 1970s, who lobbied television networks to create more well-rounded gay and lesbian characters, Maletta believed that television programming could dispel stereotypes and shift homophobic attitudes. Maletta shared these views on the air as well: during campaigns to raise funds for GCN, Maletta often made appeals to the cultural significance of his programming. “The only way to change the world is by being in people’s homes all the time,” he believed.

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<sup>23</sup> Alwood, *Straight News*, 219.

<sup>24</sup> Downey, “The Cable Guy.”

Maletta's convictions were so strong that he advocated for his shows time and again when faced with threats of censorship from politicians in New York in the 1980s and 1990s who attempted to limit the sexual content of his programming. GCN faced controversy as early as 1982, when Maletta began airing *Men & Films* on Saturday nights in Woodstock, New York. Maletta owned a home in the area and brought tapes of the show to Woodstock's public access station, Channel 6, during his weekend trips upstate. December 25, 1982 happened to fall on a Saturday; dozens of Woodstock residents began to complain about the sexual content of the show after realizing that *Men & Films* aired the night of Christmas.<sup>25</sup> In response to resident complaints, local officials called for Channel 6 to be disconnected altogether unless the channel's board directors implemented "community standards" for each program.<sup>26</sup> Maletta expressed frustration at the town's homophobia in an interview with *The Advocate*: "There's no penetration, no acts are performed, there's no masturbation. The most explicit I can get is an erection. I can't understand being uptight about this, and then showing violent films on television."<sup>27</sup> The controversy soon attracted national attention: *The Village Voice*, *Playboy*, and National Public Radio all covered the town's cries to censor *Men & Films*. Eventually, Channel 6's board of directors rejected the request to screen programming or set community standards; board president Joe Trusso stated that New York law forbade censorship on public access channels. However, the board eventually did agree to reschedule programs with "explicit sex" to slots airing after midnight and *Men & Films* had to air with a disclaimer that it included "adult" material. Despite the hostile reaction from Woodstock residents, Maletta continued to defend the

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Freiberg, "Gay TV on Yasgur's Farm; Woodstock, N.Y., Victory Over Cable Censors," *The Advocate*, 1983.

<sup>26</sup> Freiberg.

<sup>27</sup> Freiberg.

sexual content of his programming: “If we keep acquiescing in people’s ideas, we are not going to put forth the truth...I don’t understand why everyone gets upset about looking at male genitalia.”<sup>28</sup>

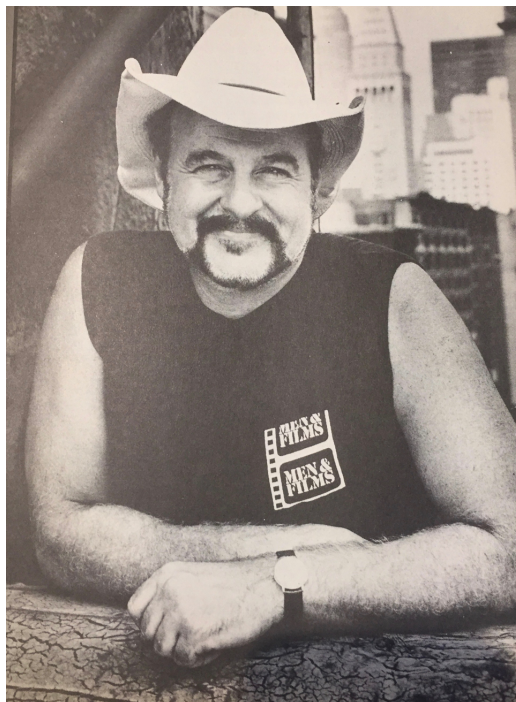


Figure 4.4 Lou Maletta, founder of the Gay Cable Network, pictured here with his signature mustache and cowboy hat. From *All Man* magazine, Winter 1987/88 issue, pg. 33.

Maletta’s sex positivity set him apart from other television activists, particularly those who worked closely with media industries executives. As I discussed in Chapter One, gay media activists typically lobbied the entertainment industry to incorporate gay and lesbian characters into mainstream film and television programming and were at times willing to sacrifice some aspects of LGBTQ social life, including sexuality, for the sake of more nuanced and less stigmatizing representation. Maletta, on the other hand, rejected sexual respectability—he was unwilling to compromise his commitment to portraying sex on screen because he believed that

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<sup>28</sup> Ed Nicholas, “Interview: Lou Maletta,” *New York City News*, June 22, 1983.



sex was a central part of gay life. Maletta's idealism about cable television extended to sexuality: he hoped televising queer sex on *Men & Films* would help reduce its stigma.

*Ambition: Maletta as Cable Entrepreneur*

While Maletta was inspired by his belief in the power of television to create social change, he was also determined to build a profitable career in the burgeoning cable industry. In a 1985 speech at the Gay Travel Agents convention, Maletta shared, "I began cablecasting a television program in New York aimed at cashing in on the Video Revolution."<sup>29</sup> In the early to mid 1980s, cable expanded to become a significant sector of the television industry. After the broadcast networks had dominated the industry for more than 30 years, cable created space for new networks on television and offered smaller businesses the opportunity to make money off of television advertisements. Maletta aimed to take advantage of the new video technologies available in the 1980s, including cable, to craft a career for himself. Many successful entrepreneurs did the same—the successes of HBO and MTV in the 1980s sparked optimism that cable was indeed a profitable emerging marketplace. Maletta collected articles tracking the growth of the cable industry: in the GCN archives at New York University, articles from publications like *The Wall Street Journal*, *CableVision*, *Market Watch*, and *Multichannel News* trace the development of cable technologies. It is striking that Maletta kept these articles over the decades, in addition to his correspondence, personal interviews, and ephemera from his shows—he was determined to achieve success and closely followed industry insiders and the trade press in order to do so.

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<sup>29</sup> Speech at the Gay Travel Agents Convention, 1985, MSS 231, Box 172, Folder 33, Gay Cable Network archives, The Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York, NY.

Financials were a key concern for Maletta. While GCN operated largely via volunteer labor, there were still significant costs associated with production. Indeed, independent television production “foregrounds the value of creative freedom and ownership, but, while this is a source of innovation, it also is fraught and costly in time and resources.”<sup>30</sup> GCN was cablecast on leased access, so Maletta had to purchase programming slots and therefore needed to raise funds to support this cost. Other fees included equipment maintenance, travel costs associated with filming on location, and the cost of distributing (by mail) tapes of the programs to different cable access stations in cities around the country. In the early years, GCN programs were filmed in Maletta’s apartment in Chelsea, or else outside, on rooftops, or on location at various LGBTQ events (plays, conferences, networking events, etc.) because he did not have money to rent studio space. Maletta sought advertisements from companies around the city to offset production and distribution costs. Many of these companies were LGBTQ-serving establishments: local gay bars, newspapers, bookstores, travel agencies, non-profit organizations, and video rental stores were some of the first to air ads on GCN. Eventually, with enough money coming in, Maletta rented a studio off of Union Square, and later rented a bigger room in Chelsea, where most of the programming was filmed.

In order to attract advertisers to his shows, Maletta emphasized the potential of cable programming in his marketing materials. Many advertisers were drawn to cable because its audience was considered “quality.” Anyone with a television set and an antenna could watch ABC, NBC, and CBS for free, but cable is a subscription service; its viewers pay a monthly fee to a cable company in order to watch programming. Cable audiences, then, were typically middle

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<sup>30</sup> Christian, *Open TV*, 59.

or upper middle-class individuals and families with disposable income—a “quality” market that many advertisers sought to reach.

Like his predecessor Steve Bie on *The Emerald City*, Maletta marketed his audience to advertisers as “quality” in the hopes of securing their business on a network associated with LGBTQ communities. He corresponded with local businesses and faxed press releases about GCN programming around town to garner interest. One such letter read,

Gay Cable Network is on the cutting edge of bringing gay news & programming to the national cable scene – and giving TV advertisers an opportunity to reach a uniquely loyal upscale audience of gay men & lesbians coast to coast. Gay advertising sells...Can U.S. business look beyond old prejudice, and see the facts for what they are?<sup>31</sup>

Maletta hoped that by positioning the GCN audience as “uniquely loyal” and “upscale”—cable buzzwords—advertisers would agree to list their brand names, services, and for-sale items even if they had misgivings about marketing to gay and lesbian consumers.

Until the early 1990s, most corporate advertisers were reluctant to advertise in the gay press or to market their products specifically to LGBTQ people.<sup>32</sup> Liquor companies were among the first to advertise their products in the gay press in the early 1980s. However, by the mid 1980s, stigma associated with AIDS led to a “deep freeze” as advertisers withdrew most campaigns designed to appeal to gay consumers.<sup>33</sup> Despite the deep freeze, Maletta was convinced that his audience could provide significant business for local and national companies. Remarkably, he completed his own market research to prove this. Maletta recruited a team to

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<sup>31</sup> Letter to advertiser, August 10, 1989, MSS 231, Box 173, Gay Cable Network archives, The Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York, NY.

<sup>32</sup> Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 2005, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Sender, 36.

survey GCN's audience in Manhattan at least twice, once in the mid 1980s and once in the 1990s, likely time-consuming and labor-intensive efforts not previously undertaken by other cable access producers. Combining this research with data from Manhattan Cable, he was able to paint a clear picture of his audience. On a 1984 rate card, he included the following statistics: GCN viewers had an average income of \$57,000, 67% held careers in professional fields, 77% had and used credit cards, and 65% were between the ages 25-39. He also noted that Manhattan Cable was installed in 250,000 homes, reaching 500,000 viewers. "Viewers are concerned with quality," the rate card claims.<sup>34</sup> By profiling his audience and highlighting their "quality" characteristics, Maletta attempted to use facts and statistics to prove that it was worth it for advertisers to invest in products and programs reaching LGBTQ people. Unfortunately, Maletta was rejected by most corporate advertisers despite his best efforts. Outside of LGBTQ-serving businesses and community organizations, only a few companies would buy advertisements on GCN.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of 1984, Maletta's ambition to create a national network began to come to fruition: he created two new shows, *Pride & Progress* and *The Right Stuff*, and started to expand his programming across the U.S. He negotiated to purchase leased access time slots in other markets, including Dallas, San Francisco, and Atlanta. Over the next few years, GCN shows began airing in Cincinnati, Chicago, and Los Angeles as well. Local producers often added their own segments to the GCN shows, incorporating community-specific news or entertainment to appeal to their audiences. For example, the GCN Cincinnati bureau, which operated from 1985-

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<sup>34</sup> Rate Card, January 1, 1984, MSS 231, Box 174, Folder 56, Gay Cable Network archives, The Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, New York, NY.

<sup>35</sup> Naya Water, a company that bottles natural spring water, was one such company. Naya Water sponsored a number of LGBTQ events in the late 1980s and 1990s.

1989, aired content filmed in New York but also incorporated programming filmed in Cincinnati, including segments featuring local drag queens, theater groups, and activists, as well as its own original scripted series called *The New Adventures of Baby Jane*.<sup>36</sup> GCN-Cincinnati video director Mark Bailey and his friends met Maletta at New York Pride in 1984 and “were immediately welcomed into the group...and put to work.”<sup>37</sup> After supporting camera crews at the pride parade, Bailey returned to Cincinnati to pitch the idea to the public access staff at Time-Warner cable, who were immediately interested. Time-Warner allowed the Cincinnati team to use their studios for taping the show, which provided the team with professional lights, cameras, and audio and video mixers.<sup>38</sup> Because of their use of professional equipment, the GCN-Cincinnati production values quickly surpassed those of New York, which frustrated Maletta, who had trouble financing his own equipment. According to GCN volunteer John Burke, Maletta at times felt competitive with GCN-Cincinnati because their content out-shined the quality of the New York segments.<sup>39</sup> While better equipped in some cases, the regional bureaus did not sustain their programming as long as GCN headquarters in New York; most closed by the early 1990s. Still, original content produced by the GCN bureaus accounts for much of the LGBTQ cable access programming created nationwide. A complete account of each of these bureaus is beyond the scope of this chapter; however, their existence points to a widespread interest in gay cable programming across the nation, particularly in the mid-to-late 1980s.

The work of producing and distributing multiple shows around the country quickly became too much for Maletta to complete alone. He recruited a rotating group of volunteers who

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Bailey, email interview with the author, January 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Bailey, interview.

<sup>38</sup> Bailey has digitized many segments from the GCN-Cincinnati shows. They can be found on YouTube here: <https://www.youtube.com/user/gcncincinnati>.

<sup>39</sup> Burke, interview.

appeared on screen, reporting on the news or hosting segments, while he managed and produced content. In the next section, I focus on the work of these individuals, discussing their strategies to report on LGBTQ news over the years. While not often appearing on screen himself, Maletta was central to GCN's daily operations, relative success, and longevity. Maletta's idealism about television and his ambitions for success propelled GCN through controversy and financial insecurity over many years. Maletta was likely the first individual to create a financially independent LGBTQ-oriented television production company. Despite creating more than a dozen shows and distributing this programming around the country, Maletta eventually grew disillusioned with cable. As I discuss towards the end of the chapter, later in life he felt great disappointment that he did not achieve the success he always hoped for. Still, his legacy as a prolific producer, activist, and entrepreneur demonstrates how passion, idealism, and ambition, grounded in both progressive social ideals and individualized career interests, can propel the cultural production of LGBTQ media makers working outside of the commercial industries.

### **Mourning, Militancy, Determination, and Fear: Producing the News on *Gay USA***

Producing, directing, and distributing three weekly shows was a huge task for one person alone. In the 1980s, Maletta placed advertisements in newspapers and trade magazines like *Backstage* in order to find a team to help with production. He recruited long term volunteers Robert Parker, Andy Humm, and Olivia Negrón in this manner. Negrón, an aspiring actress, answered Maletta's ad in *Backstage* magazine and soon became a host on both *Pride & Progress* and *The Right Stuff*. Humm, a seasoned journalist and activist, began reading news stories for *Pride & Progress* in 1985 and eventually became the longtime anchor of the show. Parker came on board as a

production assistant in 1986 and, over the years, became Maletta's "right hand man"<sup>40</sup>: he helped with all aspects of production, including booking guests, equipment management, camera work, lighting, and editing until 1994. Over the years, Maletta amassed a volunteer crew of over 20 people, including anchors, segment hosts, writers, editors, and assistants.<sup>41</sup> With the exception of Parker, who was eventually paid a small salary of \$100/week, as well as the show's editor, none of the volunteers were paid for their work.

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<sup>40</sup> Parker, interview.

<sup>41</sup> It's worth noting that the majority of GCN volunteers were white cisgender gay men; few women and people of color volunteered in a long-term capacity. Maletta did not purposefully exclude any community members from volunteering at GCN; however, he did not conduct outreach to underrepresented LGBTQ groups or communities beyond the ads he placed in the gay press and trade magazines. Volunteers largely came from his social circle, which, according to Negrón, generally consisted of white gay men like himself. To my knowledge, no GCN show was ever produced by a person of color. Like most other LGBTQ cable access shows, on-camera diversity largely came from guests: artists, activists, and local community leaders who appeared in designated segments to promote their work or discuss a particular issue. While occasional episodes explored the intersections of racism, sexism, and homophobia in gay community life, GCN shows never made central the specific issues experienced by women or queer people of color. This did not go unnoticed by viewers: a letter to the editor in the September 12, 1990 issue of *Outweek* magazine titled "Whose cable network?", written by a number of lesbian film and video producers, criticized Maletta for his lack of outreach to lesbian-owned businesses and his lack of inclusion of lesbians on the air. The racial and gender dynamics present on GCN were replicated by the majority of gay cable TV shows, which, as I discuss in the Introduction, were most often produced by white gay men.



Figure 4.5 Robert Parker, center, poses with Lou Maletta, right, and Maletta's partner Luke Valenti, left, before a production shoot. Photo courtesy of Robert Parker.

I focus here on the experiences of GCN shows' hosts and volunteers as they helped create GCN's weekly news shows, *Pride and Progress* and its successor *Gay USA*. Weekly news coverage was a hallmark of GCN programming. The footage featured on *Pride and Progress* and *Gay USA* depicts groundbreaking events in LGBTQ history: actor Rock Hudson's death from AIDS in 1985, dozens of ACT UP demonstrations, both the 1987 and 1993 Marches on Washington, international AIDS conferences, presidential conventions and elections, the murder of Matthew Shepard, Ellen DeGeneres's coming out moment, landmark Supreme Court cases, and many more. The footage also depicts stories oft forgotten in the narrative of LGBTQ history: local and regional political campaigns, the hate crimes experienced by queer and transgender people of color, the deaths of dozens of AIDS activists, fundraisers organized by LGBTQ non-



profits, local theater and dance performances, and comprehensive coverage of annual LGBTQ community events like Wigstock, the Gay Games, Mr. Leather competitions, and weeklong Pride celebrations. While the majority of this reporting was done in-studio, the GCN team also covered many events on location. GCN's journalists believed their reporting was an important public service, particularly in the 1980s and early 1990s, because LGBTQ stories were often left out of mainstream broadcast and print news coverage. By reporting on LGBTQ news, journalists believed they were "covering the absence,"<sup>42</sup> or filling the gaps made by mainstream journalists in order to make visible stories that were otherwise ignored. Because many of these events were not deemed newsworthy by mainstream broadcast or print news outlets, the archival footage in these shows offers contemporary viewers a rare glimpse of LGBTQ history.

Since the late 1960s, the alternative gay press has "covered the absence" by amplifying political change and resistance to institutional homophobia and transphobia in its news coverage.<sup>43</sup> As Gaye Tuchman writes, "making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality"<sup>44</sup>: while historically mainstream news outlets have ignored the day-to-day events and issues experienced by LGBTQ Americans, the alternate gay press has written these stories into being. Alternative newspapers, founded to share information about political and social movements, have been "instrumental in shaping opinion and establishing and mobilizing large and small-scale activist networks and reform campaigns."<sup>45</sup> Scholarly work about the alternative gay press tends to focus on print news, but gay cable access TV represents a key forum through which LGBTQ and allied journalists have practiced alternative reporting.

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<sup>42</sup> Harriet Hirshorn, interview with the author, October 2019.

<sup>43</sup> Alwood, *Straight News*, 79.

<sup>44</sup> Gaye Tuchman, *Making News*, Later Printing edition (New York: Free Press, 1980), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Maria DiCenzo and Leila Ryan, "Neglected News: Women and Print Media, 1890-1928," in *Residual Media* (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007), 240.

Two long-term emphases of GCN's news coverage included presidential conventions and the ongoing AIDS crisis. GCN's coverage of the development of the AIDS crisis in the mid-to-late 1980s and early 1990s, most notably its televised obituaries for prominent gay leaders, provided a forum through which reporters processed emotional responses to the AIDS crisis, including grief and solidarity. GCN's coverage of the presidential conventions, particularly its coverage of Republican National Conventions, demonstrates how reporters felt a sense of responsibility to this type of on-location reporting despite facing threats of homophobic violence on the floor of the convention.<sup>46</sup> While GCN covered thousands of stories over the years, its reporting on the AIDS crisis and presidential politics in particular provided ample opportunity for the type of alternative reporting that has long been a hallmark of the gay press. I demonstrate how experiences covering the news elicited grief, solidarity, fear, and a feeling of responsibility from the GCN staff, discussing how GCN's television production at times included traumatic encounters with violence, disease, and death even as the reporters were determined to cover these stories. GCN reporters' accounts of these experiences demonstrate the "felt and even traumatic dimensions" of television production.<sup>47</sup>

*AIDS News on GCN: Documenting Militancy and Mourning*

GCN shows featured weekly in-studio reporting and commentary about LGBTQ news. In the 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s, GCN covered stories about the AIDS crisis from a wide variety of angles on almost every single episode of *Pride and Progress* and *Gay USA*. Topics included news about treatment, testing, and research; discussions about AIDS activism; announcements about public figures with HIV and AIDS and obituaries for people who died of complications

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<sup>46</sup> Footage from the 1984 RNC has not been digitized by the Fales library and so is not accessible to watch.

<sup>47</sup> Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, 167.

due to AIDS; discussions about the impact of AIDS on gay sexual culture: debates about the closing of the bathhouses, discussions about safer sex, and condom demonstrations on screen; discussions about the relationship between AIDS and homophobia; mental health in relationship to AIDS; and discussions about women and people of color with AIDS. It was part of the mission of the gay press, and GCN in particular, to discuss how HIV/AIDS impacted LGBTQ community life. *Gay USA* tracked all of the changes, from the global implications of the epidemic down to its impact on the lives of individual community members, on a weekly basis. Coverage of the AIDS crisis provided a public forum for reporters to process emotional responses to the AIDS crisis and to encourage activism in response to it. On screen obituaries for community leaders who died of AIDS-related causes in particular opened up a space for collective grief to process the emotional and physical toll of the AIDS crisis on television. By covering a broad range of topics, I suggest that GCN's news coverage consistently provided a place for volunteer reporters to reflect on the feel of the AIDS crisis on television and encouraged solidarity and activism as a means of confronting it.

Gould outlines a complex "politics of grieving"<sup>48</sup> amongst AIDS activists in the 1980s and 1990s. Some preferred to mourn the deaths of people with AIDS via somber public demonstrations, such as candlelight vigils or displays of the Names Memorial AIDS Quilt. Others, including many members of ACT UP, argued that these somber demonstrations depoliticized AIDS deaths. Instead of vigils, ACT UP preferred to organize public demonstrations that targeted governmental institutions for their lack of response to the AIDS crisis, including political funerals during which ACT UP members carried the remains of their loved ones through the streets. Yet in an influential 1989 article, Douglas Crimp cautioned

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<sup>48</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 223–26.

against the ways in which AIDS activist prioritized militant action over processes and rituals of mourning. Reflecting on the psychological trauma of the AIDS crisis, Crimp argued that acknowledging the enormity of the loss was crucial to comprehending and confronting AIDS: “militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy.”<sup>49</sup>

The GCN obituaries intertwined both mourning and militancy, suggesting these emotional experiences could exist simultaneously. By acknowledging a death, dedicating a segment to the experience of mourning, and providing commentary about the need for activism in response to AIDS deaths, GCN volunteers demonstrated the importance of both expressing and politicizing communal grief. The commentary on screen went beyond the facts presented in a conventional obituary, offering viewers the chance to consider how each death reflected larger social, medical, and political issues experienced by LGBTQ communities and others affected by AIDS. The GCN obituaries provided an alternative to the depoliticized nature of the candlelight vigils and the militant activism of political funerals, combining the somber with the confrontational.

One example appears in an August 1991 episode of *Gay USA*, in which GCN pays tribute to Craig Davidson, who died from complications related to AIDS that same month. Davidson, the founding Executive Director of GLAAD, oversaw the organization’s growth into a robust non-profit with a large number of advocacy wins, including agitating the *New York Times* to use the word “gay” instead of “homosexual” and creating a handbook for media professionals about reporting on lesbian and gay community issues. Davidson’s death in 1991 coincided with the 10-year anniversary of the first reports of the AIDS crisis. By the end of the year, AIDS was the

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<sup>49</sup> Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 149.

second leading cause of death in the U.S. among men 25-44 years of age, with 180,000 cases reported to the CDC.<sup>50</sup> Increasing deaths were matched by increasing feelings of despair in activist communities: by 1991, AIDS activists and allies had been employing confrontational tactics to combat the AIDS crises for at least four years. Despite more public attention to the epidemic, increases in funding for medical research, and successes in treatment activism, deaths from AIDS increased unabated. This *Gay USA* episode provides a tribute to Davidson's life. First, a GLAAD staff member provides the voiceover narration to a detailed obituary of Davidson, describing the impact of his life and work on GLAAD and the wider LGBTQ community. Andy Humm then offers his own reflection on Davidson's death:

I'm hearing from friends that there are gay men who are tired of AIDS, tired of safe sex or no sex. And yes it has been 10 goddamn years that our love lives have been fraught with peril, if AIDS did not get us in the meantime. In the very mean time indeed. If we're tired of what we have to do to avoid HIV, we have to take a look, another hard look, at what HIV does. We all lost Craig Davidson this week to AIDS, the man who really professionalized the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and our community's response to media slurs. A graduate of Harvard Law, he poured what time he had into that effort, retired early, and died, all within a few short years. He was 37. That's my age too. Prime time for AIDS. I lost an older friend to AIDS this week. AIDS didn't kill him yet. His body has been keeping AIDS at bay for five years now. But this week it took his mind. This brilliant man now babbles when I come to see him. We had our last lucid conversation about two weeks ago. That was probably our last. We didn't get to say

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<sup>50</sup> "The HIV/AIDS Epidemic: The First 10 Years," accessed April 10, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/00001997.htm>.

goodbye, to share some final thoughts on this world that this man has spent so much of his adult life trying to improve. And now it's too late. Take a good hard look at what AIDS does and then tell me you're bored with safe sex. It's ok to be bored. It's ok to be frustrated and angry and sad. But please don't give up, not now.

As Humm describes here, the AIDS epidemic intimately affected the sexual lives of gay and bisexual men, who mourned the loss of a sexual culture free from anxiety about disease and death. Humm's comments about Davidson's death in this segment reflect the increased desperation of this era. He begins by acknowledging that many are "tired" of dealing with AIDS and the way it has impacted their sex lives. He expresses his own anger about this ("10 goddamn years"), but implores community members not to give up in the face of mounting deaths. He next emphasizes the importance of continued attentiveness to AIDS by describing Davidson's death as well as the loss of one of his friends. After describing the legacy of Davidson's activism, Humm comments, "He was 37. That's my age too."—these comments draw a connection between himself and Davidson, making this death personal. His comment also acknowledges that so many relatively young adults were dying premature deaths—that perhaps one day soon Humm himself might succumb to the disease. Humm continues talking about the personal impact of the AIDS crisis, describing a close friend with AIDS whose disease advanced to the extent that he lost his capacity for lucid thought. Humm poignantly describes the loss of this friend: "We didn't get to say goodbye, to share some final thoughts on this world that this man has spent so much of his adult life trying to improve. And now it's too late." Humm then acknowledges, "It's ok to be bored. It's ok to be frustrated and angry and sad," affirming the wide range of emotional reactions to the AIDS crisis. "But please don't give up, not now," he pleads, encouraging gay men to start or to continue having safe sex in order to prevent future HIV

infection. For Humm, the loss of Davidson, as well as the loss of his friend, serve as evidence of the need for unrelenting advocacy and community solidarity in order to address AIDS.



Figure 4.6 In an address to the audience on an episode of *Gay USA*, Andy Humm eulogizes Craig Davidson, the first executive director of GLAAD, who died of AIDS-related complications in 1991.

The cable access format provided an opportunity for GCN reporters to bear witness to the emotional impact of the epidemic. Via televised testimony, reporters like Humm could provide commentary about the individual and collective experience of grief. Hallas argues that the significance of queer films and videos about AIDS “lies in their ability to bear witness to the simultaneously individual and collective trauma of AIDS.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, these videos “structure themselves as mediated acts of bearing witness through the development of a testimonial address to the viewer.”<sup>52</sup> In a similar way, television news reporting on GCN made use of a testimonial address as reporters shared the daily experiences of living through the AIDS crisis. Humm delivers his thoughtful reflections in a direct address to the audience, a mode which affords

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<sup>51</sup> Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Hallas, 9.

television segments “authority and intimacy” when a newscaster speaks conversationally with the viewer.<sup>53</sup> The intimacy of the segment is heightened by Humm’s somber tone and the gravity of his subject matter. As Humm describes his own experience of loss, it feels as if he shares his personal feelings about AIDS deaths with the GCN audience.

These obituaries offered moments of televised mourning for GCN reporters and audiences, moments that were both intimate and collective. Countless people with AIDS died anonymously, without support, community, or family members by their side; homophobic family members or uncomfortable editors often scrubbed the cause of their death and any mention of same-gender romantic partners from death notices. Obituaries in the gay press helped to restore fullness to the lives of AIDS victims. On GCN, televised obituaries provided opportunities for reporters to pay tribute to and to grieve the deaths of community members. These obituaries served both a therapeutic and activist function, allowing GCN reporters to reflect upon the emotional toll of the AIDS crisis and call for an increased solidarity in response to ongoing epidemic.

*GCN at the RNC: Republican Homophobia on Screen*

In addition to robust in-studio reporting, GCN reported on presidential conventions to provide LGBTQ viewers with political coverage generally missing from mainstream TV journalism. At a presidential convention, the party selects a nominee for President and adopts a statement of party principles known as the platform. While the major networks covered these events in the 1980s and 1990s, they rarely discussed presidential conventions from an LGBTQ angle. It’s worth noting that it took an incredible amount of work for GCN to be able to cover these conventions: the New York team would drive together across the country, their equipment in tow, staying with

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<sup>53</sup> Hallas, 80.



friends in order to cut costs. The team then recruited local volunteers to help cover all the different events associated with the conventions. At the conventions, reporters interviewed delegates, attendees, politicians, activists, and other reporters, hoping to show their viewers what went on at these exclusive events. As Robert Parker told me in a phone interview,

You've got to educate the public, you know, to let them know where the parties stand on these issues...you've got the Log Cabin out there saying...my pocketbook is looking better than with the Democrats. It's like, yeah, but you don't care about all these social issues and you're gay and you don't care that they're attacking you...They'd rather see you locked up. They don't care that you're a Republican. If you're gay, then it's like, it's over for them, you know? So I think it was very important to show both sides, the story there with both parties, what they stand for.<sup>54</sup>

As Parker notes here, the team was particularly interested in educating gay conservatives about the homophobia of the Republican party, viewers who were typically affiliated with an organization called the Log Cabin. Formed in 1977 to oppose legislation that banned gay men and lesbians from teaching in schools, the Log Cabin Republicans advocate for LGBTQ rights within the Republican party.<sup>55</sup> Producer and *Gay USA* co-host Lee Sharmat explained in an interview that GCN wanted to cover each convention in order to challenge these viewers. “It was a whole section of American society we [had] to continue to, to do battle against. And you know, not to get complacent, understand, you know, where your enemies are and what they think of you and that they're not going to help you along,” she told me.<sup>56</sup> GCN reporters saw its political

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<sup>54</sup> Parker, interview.

<sup>55</sup> “Log Cabin Republicans | About Us,” Log Cabin Republicans, accessed April 14, 2020, <http://www.logcabin.org/about-us/>.

<sup>56</sup> Sharmat, interview.

coverage as a public service: a form of educational TV designed to reveal the deadly homophobia of the Republican party. Reflecting on the experience of reporting from each presidential convention, the GCN volunteers I spoke with expressed a remarkable determination and responsibility to expose Republican homophobia in the face of verbal and physical harassment and violence.

Expressions of this homophobia are visible in a *Gay USA* episode covering the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, Texas. After 10 years of neglect at the hands of the federal government, and hundreds of thousands of AIDS cases around the world, Gould writes “many activists began to feel desperate” in the early 1990s once they realized “the battle was going to become long and hard and that many people in the movement and many loved ones would not make it.”<sup>57</sup> This feeling of desperation is palpable in GCN’s coverage of the event, as reporters made it their mission to depict the unabashed and continued homophobia of the Republican party. Covering the RNC was particularly urgent in 1992 because the incumbent, President George H. Bush, faced a serious challenge to the White House by then-governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton. At the 1992 Democratic National Convention, which had taken place a month before in New York City, GCN reporters expressed much optimism about Bill Clinton’s presidential campaign. Clinton was the first presidential candidate in history to court LGBTQ voters: his campaign promised to increase funding for AIDS research and to repeal the ban on gay men and lesbians in the military. As GCN reporter Ed Anderson commented, “the convention highlighted the platform adopted with provisions never before so favorable to lesbian and gay rights and action against AIDS.” While Clinton did not fulfill many of these promises after he was elected, the tone at the convention was full of hope. Clinton’s more inclusive

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<sup>57</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 338.

campaign represented a marked shift from the homophobic policies of the Reagan/Bush years and seemed to suggest an increasing social and political acceptance of LGBTQ issues.

In response to the inclusion of LGBTQ rights in the 1992 Democratic party platform, the Republican party broadcast the homophobia of its policies to attract conservative voters. At the RNC, the GCN volunteer reporters experienced the impact of this homophobia as direct and indirect threats of violence. The most telling incident occurs in the middle of the *Gay USA* episode televising the RNC: cameras capture convention security and Houston police hassling the GCN reporters. Sharmat, introducing this segment from the New York studio after the fact, explains that a convention attendee laughed at the GCN reporters, calling them “faggots,” after which a woman accompanying him “freaked out” and contacted convention security about GCN’s presence.

The convention footage then airs on screen: despite the fact that all of the GCN reporters secured press credentials to enter the convention hall, the camera captures security approaching Maletta and team and questioning their right to be there. The situation escalates when security approach one of the volunteer reporter, Steve Bradley, a gay man from Houston wearing a shirt that says, “Nobody Knows that I’m HIV Positive.” Security, who incorrectly assume that Bradley is a member of ACT UP there to interrupt the convention proceedings, question him multiple times and insist he verify his press passes with the staff despite that fact that his credentials are visible around his neck. A police officer grabs Maletta’s arm; although Maletta says repeatedly “don’t pull my arm,” the officer escorts Maletta off of the floor of the convention by the collar of his shirt. During this ordeal, reporter Beth Leibo, a volunteer from Austin, Texas, cries out “you have no basis for this!” and “this is absurd!” Police officers put Leibo in handcuffs and the camera follows as the police escort her off of the floor as well. While the cameras cut

away after Leibo and Maletta are led off the floor, a voiceover from Maletta explains that Leibo was falsely charged with assaulting an officer, detained in the city jail overnight, and finally released on a \$350 bail bond. “This is a great example of Republican justice,” Maletta says sarcastically.



Figures 4.7-4.9 At the 1992 RNC, convention security and police officers hassled the GCN reporter team after a convention attendee complained about their presence. Lou Maletta and volunteer Beth Leibo were escorted off the floor of the convention and Leibo was arrested, falsely charged with assaulting an officer.

GCN’s on-location coverage of the RNC demonstrates what Hallas calls the “embodied immediacy” of AIDS activist videos.<sup>58</sup> While GCN news coverage did not exclusively cover the

<sup>58</sup> Hallas, *Reframing Bodies*, 90.

AIDS epidemic, the technology and urgency of both media are similar. In these videos, the camera “is seen to work alongside politicized subjects” as a participant in the action documented in the video, helping to communicate the political stakes of the demonstration at hand.<sup>59</sup> In the RNC segment, the camera spins around to catch the words and faces of each new speaker. As Hallas claims, the camera’s nimble presence in AIDS activist video reminds us of the “profoundly somatic dimension to bearing witness” at a protest or demonstration.<sup>60</sup> In this case, the camerawork heightens the sense of fear and impending danger represented by openly homophobic convention goers and security personnel. Parker, who filmed the encounter with RNC security, remembers it as “pretty scary.”<sup>61</sup> “My partner came with us as a reporter as well, and he was just like, ‘I’ll never do that again’...that’s how bad of an experience it was,” he added. Despite Parker’s commitment to educating the public about Republican party politics, the 1992 RNC disturbed him deeply.<sup>62</sup> This fear is palpable on screen.

In spite or perhaps because of the often violent and disturbing footage captured, Maletta believed coverage of the presidential conventions helped legitimize GCN as an organization. Over the years, during fundraising pitches on the air, in interviews with the press, and on his marketing materials, Maletta frequently boasted that GCN was the first gay organization to secure press passes for both the DNC and RNC in 1984. When Maletta was searching for an archive to donate his tapes to in the early 2000s, he often referenced coverage of the presidential conventions as particularly historically important and worthy of preservation. The presidential conventions likely appealed to Maletta’s desire to be taken seriously as both a producer and an

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<sup>59</sup> Hallas, 91.

<sup>60</sup> Hallas, 92.

<sup>61</sup> Parker, interview. Further quotes from same interview.

<sup>62</sup> The event made such an impression that he later directed his own short documentary about the convention called *Mad Elephants* which aired on *Gay USA* in 1996.

entrepreneur. By covering an event generally considered newsworthy to the public, Maletta believed GCN would gain respect as a serious and professional news outlet. Because GCN was doing something virtually no other organization was doing—covering the presidential conventions from LGBTQ perspectives—Maletta likely thought that he and his team deserved recognition for their efforts.

Yet GCN's violent encounter with convention security and Houston police demonstrates the limits of professional respectability afforded to gay, lesbian, and HIV positive journalists. The GCN reporters obeyed the convention rules and secured the appropriate press credentials and yet were still mistrusted and thrown out by security. Steve Bradley's public display of his HIV status on his t-shirt, a powerful political act designed to make the AIDS crisis personal to a largely unsympathetic and bigoted crowd, made him and the GCN team vulnerable. Recognizable as a gay organization, the reporters were then singled out and harassed by convention goers and security alike. Despite Maletta's determination to prove the contrary, the homophobic and AIDSphobic response to GCN and to Bradley in particular demonstrate that GCN would never be considered "legitimate" in the eyes of the conservative Right nor the mainstream journalism community. While their outsider status may have disappointed Maletta, it allowed GCN reporters to document the homophobia at the RNC and expose its impact on LGBTQ communities, including the reporters themselves. Indeed, the experiences of the reporters at the 1992 RNC demonstrate the incredible determination of GCN volunteers and Maletta himself to report the news, despite threats of harassment and violence, as well as the distress they felt as victims of this violence.

Through coverage of presidential conventions and the AIDS crisis, GCN produced news programming suffused with public feeling: contempt for and fear of the homophobic policies of

the Republican party, grief for those who died of AIDS, and solidarity with other LGBTQ community members experiencing all of these phenomena at once. It achieved this by combining news with commentary from gay and lesbian reporters who gave testimony that described the feel of the stories they covered. As Margaret Morse writes, “The ‘news’ is not a found object, but a cultural product and its reality is the social reality that we perform and call forth together.”<sup>63</sup> Rather than prioritize “objective” reporting, GCN reporters articulated queer perspectives missing from mainstream news coverage in order to shift the material conditions of their social realities. Like much of the gay press at the time, GCN “helped lead the eruption of rage against the status quo”<sup>64</sup> by amplifying the need for community-based resistance to institutional homophobia. In this sense, GCN reporters “covered the absence” by infusing their own work with queer feelings generally undocumented by the mainstream press. In describing these experiences at the time, and to me after the fact, GCN volunteers help demonstrate the range of everyday emotions often overlooked but central to the experience of producing queer television in times of crisis.

### **Rage against the Mainstream: GCN’s Sex Radicalism & Maletta’s Resentments**

Despite GCN’s profound and moving news coverage and political analysis, Maletta consistently struggled to financially support his company. As mentioned earlier, corporations refused to advertise on the show. Without other options, Maletta primarily funded his programming via phone sex advertisements and sex parties. Maletta continued to rely upon sexual commerce for funding despite threats of censorship from conservative politicians and disdain from the wider

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<sup>63</sup> Margaret Morse, “News as Performance: The Image as Event,” in *The Television Studies Reader*, ed. Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 222.

<sup>64</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 277.

LGBTQ community that his programming was “seedy” or too overtly sexual. Perhaps because Maletta refused to sanitize his programming, GCN failed to become a commercially successful network. Into the late 1990s, Maletta grew increasingly resentful about his failure to create a financially sustainable national LGBTQ television network. King and Mele write that examining individuals’ experiences of public access production reveals “the empowering effects of media literacy.”<sup>65</sup> While public access programming may be empowering to many producers, Maletta’s frustrations and resentments present an example of the at times demoralizing impacts of community TV production, particularly when one’s own political and sexual commitments impact its financial precarity.

Into the late 1980s and 1990s, commercials for phone sex hotlines became a primary source of revenue for GCN. It was common for the gay press to finance their publications via sexual content, which included classifieds ads, ads for local sex toy stores and pornography, and phone sex hotline ads.<sup>66</sup> An offshoot of the sex work industry, phone sex hotlines typically pair a calling customer with an erotic performer who begins a sexual conversation with the caller for a set fee. The phone sex industry became a big business in the late 1970s and 1980s; telephone hotlines were particularly popular among gay and bisexual men looking for creative options for safe sex in the midst of the AIDS crisis.<sup>67</sup> On GCN, commercials for hotlines like “550-TOOL,” “1-900-HOT-TOOL,” “970-BIG-1,” and “The Tyte Party Line” aired between the shows’ various segments. A typical commercial featured a white, muscular man in various stages of undress, lying on a bed or posed in a sexualized manner, accompanied by a voiceover narration

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<sup>65</sup> King and Mele, “Making Public Access Television: Community Participation, Media Literacy, and the Public Sphere,” 622.

<sup>66</sup> Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 2005, 200.

<sup>67</sup> Frederick S. Lane, *Obscene Profits: Entrepreneurs of Pornography in the Cyber Age*, 1 edition (Routledge, 2001), 94.



(often provided by Maletta) promising potential customers a “good time” if they dialed the provided number.



Fig 4.10 Commercials for phone sex hotlines helped finance GCN’s operations.

GCN’s reliance on the sex hotline business reflected Maletta’s frank attitudes about sexuality. Maletta celebrated sex and sexuality as a key component of LGBTQ culture and community life—after all, his first show *Men & Films* was a review of gay pornography. Maletta was unapologetic about relying on sexual commerce to support his business: in addition to the phone sex industry, Maletta threw sex parties in his own sex club “dungeon” to finance his programming. The dungeon was located at the GCN studio—his “slaves” often helped with production and editing the shows during the day.<sup>68</sup> Other LGBTQ community members, however, judged Maletta and GCN harshly for incorporating aspects of sex work into the show. According to Bill Bahlman, television producer Butch Peaston, who ran a competing gay cable company called the Gay Broadcasting System in the late 1980s and early 1990s, used to ask,

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<sup>68</sup> Humm, interview.

“would Dan Rather on the CBS network news run porno ads in the middle of a news show?”<sup>69</sup>

The phone sex commercials damaged the reputation of GCN programming. Robert Parker added that viewers and even guests on the show thought the phone sex commercials, as well as *Men & Films* itself, were “sleazy”: “in the back of people’s minds, it was like there was too much sex involved.”<sup>70</sup>

The tension between sexual respectability and sex-positive programming presented a key struggle for GCN. By the early 1990s, many gay and lesbian publishers reduced the number of explicit classifieds and sex hotlines ads in their national publications in order to attract and secure corporate advertisers. As Katherine Sender writes, “the commonsense view that sex is incompatible with national advertising usually prevailed.”<sup>71</sup> Sender calls this process “sexual containment”: “To the extent that sex can sell in gay and lesbian media, it must be contained by being distanced from an explicitly queer sexuality through appeals to aesthetic tastefulness.”<sup>72</sup> These strategies, in large part, were financially successful: as national marketers began advertising to gay and lesbian consumers, a number of glossy new magazines, including *Out*, *Deneuve*, and *Genre* employed sophisticated marketing strategies to benefit from the surge in advertising. As Streitmatter writes, “largely absent from the glossy gay magazines were the sexually explicit images, unique lexicon, and defiant editorial stances that had defined earlier generations of the genre.”<sup>73</sup> These magazines created a new model for financially sustainable LGBTQ media, one “motivated by a desire to attract advertisers, not to inform readers.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Bill Bahlman, interview with the author, October 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Parker, interview.

<sup>71</sup> Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 2005, 208.

<sup>72</sup> Sender, 226.

<sup>73</sup> Streitmatter, *Unspeakable*, 309.

<sup>74</sup> Streitmatter, 309.

In some sense, LGBTQ media publications became less alternative into the 1990s: they prioritized profit-generating content rather than amplifying struggles for LGBTQ rights and justice. This development was met with mixed reactions from consumers and critics. Many gay and lesbian readers experienced the newfound mainstream success of LGBTQ publications as affirming, a sign that the broader culture was growing to accept LGBTQ people.<sup>75</sup> Others, however, expressed concern about the “business, not politics” mentality of these publications. Cultural critics and scholars like Sarah Schulman and Alexandra Chasin saw “gay consumerism as closely linked to an assimilation of gays into mainstream culture, posing a direct threat to gay political activism.”<sup>76</sup> As the LGBT rights movement entered the mainstream in the 1990s, many activists worried that the normalizing impulse would reduce the radicalism of the movement.<sup>77</sup>

On television, this development was mirrored in part by the emergence of an LGBTQ newsmagazine show on PBS called *In the Life* (1992-2012) created by openly gay producer John Scagliotti. *In the Life* was the first public television series devoted to sharing stories about LGBTQ people. While its affiliation with PBS afford the show some prestige, *In the Life* struggled financially to sustain production, relying on grants from foundations and individual donors because PBS declined the fund the show.<sup>78</sup> PBS also declined to distribute the show nationally to its affiliates, likely out of fear of a homophobic backlash from the wider public, so *In the Life* producers had to work individually with hundreds of stations around the country to convince them to air it.<sup>79</sup> While certainly marginalized in comparison to other public television

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<sup>75</sup> Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 2005, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Sender, 8.

<sup>77</sup> Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*, 1st Anchor Books hardcover ed edition (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

<sup>78</sup> David Coon, *Turning the Page: Storytelling as Activism in Queer Film and Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 52.

<sup>79</sup> Coon, 73.

programming, *In the Life* was politically moderate. “Generally missing from *In the Life* are loud, visible expressions of rage accompanied by demands for immediate and radical change,” writes scholar David Coon.<sup>80</sup> *In the Life* also minimized erotic content on the show in order to avoid public controversy. Coon suggests that *In the Life* “took a far less radical stance” than some of its contemporaries because it was designed to reach a national audience.<sup>81</sup> While this was likely a strategic political decision, gay cable access creators sometimes critiqued *In the Life* for its more mainstream approach, expressing frustration with the way the show prioritized educating heterosexual allies rather than televising content by and for LGBTQ audiences.

Maletta’s contemporaries, meanwhile, judged GCN for continuing to embrace sexual commerce. Steve Bie, with whom Maletta worked on *The Emerald City*, made comments to that affect during my conversation with him: “he [Maletta] liked the racier quality, he liked everything to be on the edge...I didn’t watch any of that stuff...It was unfortunate, the anything goes crowd, I was not part of that group. We still felt we had a social responsibility on *The Emerald City*.”<sup>82</sup> Bie here describes a conflict between “racier” sexually explicit programming like the kind on GCN, and “socially responsible” programming, which he feels *The Emerald City* exemplified. For many gay media producers, containing explicit sexuality and offering instead a model of sexual respectability was crucial not only to maintain the financial viability of their media, but to represent a palatable image of gay and lesbian Americans to a wider public.

Maletta resented these judgements. After giving airtime to so many prominent community members, leaders, activists, politicians, and artists, he grew frustrated that his work did not get the same support from the wider LGBTQ community. Indeed, judgement about the

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<sup>80</sup> Coon, 65.

<sup>81</sup> Coon, 54.

<sup>82</sup> Bie, interview.

sexual content of GCN programming likely reflected barely-concealed judgements about Maletta's own lifestyle choices. Maletta experienced stigma as a visible member of the leather community and someone who profited from sexual commerce. As Gayle Rubin has discussed, nonnormative sexual practices like sex work and kink have historically been stigmatized and criminalized, left outside of the "charmed circle" of sexual practices generally considered "good" and "normal," which are limited to heterosexual, monogamous, marital, non-commercial, and reproductive sex.<sup>83</sup> Maletta, a gay man whose sexual subculture included kink, non-monogamy, sex work, cross-generational relationships, and drug use, fell squarely outside of the "charmed circle." This made some of his peers uncomfortable, especially those interested in promoting a more discreet, respectable image of queer sexuality to attract advertisers and to achieve mainstream acceptance.

These conversations about sexual respectability took on a classed dimension as well: a working-class individual without access to financial resources or a higher education, Maletta relied on sexual commerce to support himself. Because Maletta's work fell outside of the norms of middle-class respectability, his own lifestyle choices and his television content were judged as "sleazy" both by advertisers and by other LGBTQ community members. For Sender, the concept of sleaze is as "class-coded as it is sexually coded;"<sup>84</sup> that is, the term sleaze implies a negative judgement because it references a hierarchical standard of taste in which explicit references to sex work are assumed to degrade someone's class status. For most publishers, "containing explicit, commercial sexuality in gay and lesbian media 'desleazifies' these media, their

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<sup>83</sup> Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole Vance (Pandora Press, 1984), 281.

<sup>84</sup> Sender, *Business, Not Politics*, 2005, 221.

advertising, and the image of gay people in general.”<sup>85</sup> Judgements about Maletta’s “sleaziness” reflected both a judgement about his class status as well as his sexuality. While Maletta continually argued that his programming and his audiences were “quality,” advertisers and other community members did not agree.

When Maletta’s staff and volunteers suggested that he tone down the sex on his programs, Maletta refused. “There’s nothing wrong with sex, it’s healthy,” he would tell Parker.<sup>86</sup> Maletta remained committed to televising non-normative gay sexuality despite the negative feedback or “sleazy” reputation. “He didn’t want to stop being who he was and he didn’t want to stop doing what he was doing...He definitely wasn’t gonna assimilate,” added Sharmat, “Sex parties is what paid for the news.”<sup>87</sup> Maletta, unwilling to compromise his sexual politics for the sake of improving his reputation in the community or appeasing national marketers, continued to finance his programming via phone sex hotlines and sex parties well into the 1990s.

GCN maintained its outsider stance even as other LGBTQ news and television programming grew more mainstream. In 1992, GCN faced legal restrictions once again: conservative congressman Jesse Helms proposed an amendment to the 1984 Cable Act that would allow cable operators to ban “indecent” programs and to scramble their signal electronically so they would not be viewed by cable subscribers. The 1984 law had forbidden cable operators to exercise editorial control over programming on cable and leased access channels. Time Warner, which planned to implement the new program ban, argued that subscribers should have to write in and request access to specific shows with adult content. After years of criticism from conservative viewers, Time Warner hoped that the Helms amendment

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<sup>85</sup> Sender, 219.

<sup>86</sup> Parker, interview.

<sup>87</sup> Lee Sharmat, interview with the author, December 2019.

would grant them editorial control of the programming airing on cable access stations. In response, Maletta teamed up with two other cable access producers—Robin Byrd and Al Goldstein, both well known in New York for the sexual content of their television shows—as well as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to file a suit against Time Warner on first amendment grounds.<sup>88</sup> The producers argued that making viewers request programs by mail would stigmatize their audiences and deter advertisers; the ACLU contended that the Helms amendment amounted to government censorship of freedom of speech. After years of legal battles, a federal judge in Manhattan finally ruled on the side of Maletta, Byrd, Goldstein, and the ACLU in 1995: the judge blocked Time Warner from scrambling sexually explicit programming. A companion case went to the Supreme Court the following year and in 1996, the Supreme Court struck down the sections of the Helms amendment that would allow cable companies to refuse to air or scramble “indecent” materials on public access channels (though it did uphold sections of the act allowing cable operators to refuse programming on leased access).<sup>89</sup> Throughout the years-long legal battle, Maletta and Byrd became outspoken advocates for the first amendment, affirming that programs with sexual content had as much a right as any other show to air on cable and leased access. Yet these legal battles took a toll: as Byrd told one reporter, the legal battles “took the wind out of me.”<sup>90</sup> For Maletta, Byrd, and Goldstein continually fighting for the right to produce explicit content was exhausting.

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<sup>88</sup> James C. McKinley, Jr., “Court Will Weigh Plan to Scramble Cable Sex Shows,” *New York Times*, September 16, 1995.

<sup>89</sup> Linda Greenhouse, “High Court Splits on Indecency Law Covering Cable TV: Ruling Puzzles Experts,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1996.

<sup>90</sup> Jesse McKinley, “Robin Byrd Onstage: Live, but Not Nude,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/30/theater/robin-byrd-onstage-live-but-not-nude.html>.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, GCN continued under Lou Maletta's leadership, producing a number of shows focused on entertainment, interviews, and discussion of LGBTQ culture and nightlife. While reporting on LGBTQ news was as timely as ever—*Gay USA* episodes continued to discuss every major news story related to anti-LGBTQ discrimination and community activism, including the advent of protease inhibitors as the first successful medical treatment of HIV, the murder of Matthew Shepard and the anti-hate crimes legislation that followed, the increase in lesbian and gay characters in film and television, growing advocacy for marriage equality, and the rise of transgender advocacy in New York and around the country—Maletta's own perspective began to shift. "He was angry and resentful that he didn't get more support from the community and from advertisers...so Lou got fed up and angry and eventually decided to stop producing the show because he was old and tired and he'd run out of all his money," *Gay USA* co-host Ann Northrop told me matter-of-factly.<sup>91</sup>

Maletta's experiences living as a white man in America may have added to what Olivia Negrón considered as an attitude of "entitlement" to success: "He was really conscious of the promise of America, that we had been promised life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. He would get teary about it...Why should he have less rights because he was gay?"<sup>92</sup> Maletta believed he was entitled to the privileges experienced by his straight counterparts and, like many of his white gay male peers, resented the discrimination and stigma he experienced as "a sense of entitlement betrayed."<sup>93</sup> Yet Maletta, who had high hopes for building a career as a cable entrepreneur in the 1980s and early 1990s, never achieved his dream. The frustration he felt was

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<sup>91</sup> Northrop, interview.

<sup>92</sup> Negrón, interview.

<sup>93</sup> Gould, *Moving Politics*, 145.



perhaps another “sense of entitlement betrayed,” as his hard work did not lead him to become the successful media mogul he imagined himself to be.

Maletta began to express his resentment on the air. While Maletta previously had rarely appeared on screen, he began recording “sermon-ettes,” short segments at the end of every *Gay USA* episode in which he shared his thoughts. At times he remained wildly optimistic about the possibilities of cable and the impact of GCN programming, but he often expressed his disappointment as well. For example, in one episode in early 2000, he noted,

There’s a movement within the gay movement itself for people to be assimilated into straight culture, for us to accentuate the fact that there’s nothing different about gay people...One of things this movement was famous for was individuality, being different itself was an important part of being gay...let’s not assimilate, let’s be different.

Maletta, who continued to champion queer sexuality and sexual commerce as important parts of LGBTQ community and nightlife, grew frustrated with the trends towards mainstreaming in the late 1990s and 2000s. He expressed his commitment to anti-assimilationist politics on screen, revealing his growing disappointment with the movement and with fact that his work was never accepted by his community.

In mid-2001, Maletta decided to stop producing GCN programming altogether. In a final message to viewers on *Gay USA*, Maletta shares highlights from his 20 years directing the network. He proudly discusses the GCN presence at political conventions, his commitment to televising AIDS news, and the sheer feat of producing new content on a weekly basis for two decades. Sitting in his office next to a desktop computer displaying the GCN website, Maletta says, “this is not goodbye, this is moving on to something else.” Maletta hoped to digitize GCN programming in order to store it online where people around the country and around the world

could access the shows. He claimed he had thousands of hours of content to share including raw footage never seen by the public—the “largest and oldest video library of gay and lesbian history in the world”—and asked for volunteers to help him move offices and digitize the tapes. While Maletta never placed all of this content online himself, he did spend the next several years looking for an archive where he could donate his collection, paying for storage of the tapes in the meantime. The GCN archives finally found a home in 2009, when the Fales Library at NYU acquired the collection and slowly began to preserve and digitize Maletta’s tapes. Since acquiring the GCN archives, Fales archivists have digitized a number of GCN shows and provided GCN footage to documentaries about LGBTQ and AIDS history, including *We Were Here* (2010), *Vito: The Life of Gay Activist Vito Russo* (2011), *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), and *Larry Kramer: In Love and Anger* (2015). The archives are being used as Maletta intended: to preserve and share LGBTQ history. Unfortunately, he did not get to see much of this come to fruition: Maletta died from cancer in 2011, survived by his daughter and his long-term partner Luke Valenti.

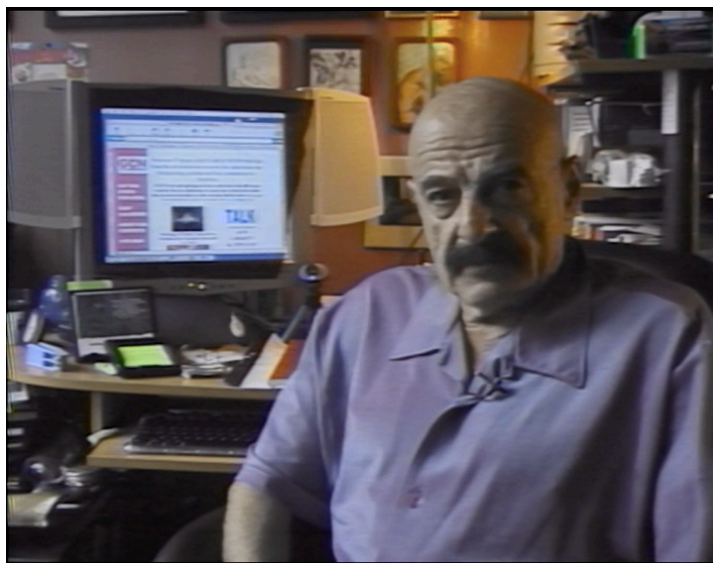


Figure 4.11 Lou Maletta shares a goodbye message with viewers as he prepares to shut down GCN.

Throughout the 1990s, GCN shows continued to share news stories and commentary about LGBTQ political struggle, much of which are now available to watch on the Fales library website. Unfortunately, the sexual content on GCN made it a risky investment for national advertisers. Maletta made the decision to close GCN in 2001 when it became clear that the programming was no longer financially viable. Maletta's resentments about sexual containment, mainstreaming, and his own failure to build an LGBTQ TV network reveal some of the potentially disheartening and demoralizing impacts of participating in cable access production, particularly as a central part of one's career. Without access to dependable funding and resources, the precarious nature of production was too challenging to continue. Ultimately, the precarity inherent to cable access production constrained Maletta's ability to achieve his goals for GCN.

#### **After GCN: *Gay USA* from 2001-2021**

After Maletta left GCN in 2001, Humm and Northrop continued filming *Gay USA* without him. Northrop had joined Humm as *Gay USA* co-host in 1996, after Lee Sharmat left the show to focus on her career. Northrop, a lifelong journalist and activist, worked as a producer at ABC and CBS in the early 1980s before she left commercial news to dedicate her life to LGBTQ advocacy. She and Humm met on staff as AIDS educators at the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a social services agency for LGBTQ youth, in the mid-1980s. Frequent collaborators, Humm asked Northrop to join him as *Gay USA* co-host after Sharmat left, and the two have continued working together ever since. For a year or so after Maletta left production, Humm and Northrop struggled to find a permanent home for the show, filming in Northrop's apartment or outside on the street because they did not have access to a studio. In 2002, MNN board member and

community activist Donald Suggs contacted Northrop and Humm, inviting them to bring *Gay USA* to the network. MNN offered Northrop and Humm a director to support their work and access to their studios, and the pair readily agreed. “It was like our savior from heaven had suddenly appeared,” Northrop remembered.<sup>94</sup> They have been filming at MNN studios on 59<sup>th</sup> street weekly ever since.<sup>95</sup> *Gay USA* continues to fill a gap in the contemporary media landscape: now the longest running LGBTQ television show in history, it is the only weekly program dedicated to covering LGBTQ news. In a contemporary media market in which many LGBTQ publications are closing down and laying off staff, *Gay USA* continues to provide a model for financially sustainable, independent, and progressive LGBTQ programming. This is due in no small part to Humm and Northrop’s continued passion and dedication to the project.

While still focused on televising LGBTQ news, the contemporary version of *Gay USA* has some marked changes from the show that aired on GCN, particularly in terms of its production, distribution, and weekly format. Now on public access (as opposed to leased access), *Gay USA* does not need to pay for its programming slot and so has no commercial programming to offset that cost. Rather than air commercials during the show, *Gay USA* is financially supported by viewer donations and small grants from the Ford Foundation and Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS. Humm and Northrop primarily use this funding to buy their Associate Producer Bill Bahlman a new computer every few years. Humm has begun paying himself a small stipend as well after decades of working for free. Other costs are minimal, because MNN provides the film equipment as well as human resources in the form of director Rich Speziale, a successful producer and broadcaster on staff at MNN. *Gay USA* still airs on

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<sup>94</sup> Northrop, interview. Further quotes in the section from the same interview.

<sup>95</sup> As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, Humm and Northrop have been filming the show from their individual apartments since mid-2020. *Gay USA* now airs live on MNN’s Facebook page as well as on TV.

television weekly; however, it is also distributed nationally via Free Speech TV, a national, independent news network that amplifies underrepresented voices, making it available to cable subscribers around the country. Episodes are also available to watch on the *Gay USA*'s website, on YouTube, and in the form of podcast on iTunes.

The content of *Gay USA* has changed slightly as well. While stories about trans individuals were rarely covered in the 1980s and 1990s, today the team reports on trans advocacy, hate crimes, and health and entertainment news on a weekly basis. Additionally, *Gay USA* used to be divided into a number of segments with different hosts, featuring on-location footage and interviews with LGBTQ artists and activists; today the show primarily centers on discussion and news commentary from Humm and Northrop with occasional guests and substitute hosts. This pared down format reduces the costs associated with producing the show, and suits the co-hosts, who enjoy discussing the news together. "One day the guest didn't show up and we found out we could yak for an hour or so," Humm commented.<sup>96</sup>

Indeed, the show is propelled not only by the news, but by the "dynamic tension," as Humm calls it, between himself and Northrop. Humm, now 65, and Northrop, now 71, act like a long-married couple both on screen and off. During my conversation with them, I noticed that they finished each other's sentences and bickered about dates, facts, and impressions, often disagreeing with one another in one moment and praising each other in the next. "The chemistry between Ann and Andy that is just very, very good...they complement each other quite nicely," Bahlman shared with me.<sup>97</sup> Bahlman, a seasoned AIDS activist who has volunteered with *Gay USA* since 2004, created and manages the show's website, [www.gayusaTV.org](http://www.gayusaTV.org), and posts the

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<sup>96</sup> Humm, interview. Further quotes in the section from the same interview.

<sup>97</sup> Bahlman, interview.

weekly episodes to YouTube and iTunes. Working with Humm and Northrop is part of what makes the experience of volunteering meaningful to Bahlman: “Ann and Andy are not just capable of reporting the news. They can provide very, very useful insights into understanding the stories they report on.” Humm and Northrop’s decades-long friendship, as well as their decades-long roots in LGBTQ movement activism, give the pair a unique historical perspective from which to discuss the news with one another and their audience.

While the chemistry between Humm and Northrop propels the show, Northrop admitted to me that she is actively searching for a replacement. “It’s a little tiring at an advanced age to keep doing it...I’ve finally reached the point where I’m ready to walk away because it’s just been a long time,” Northrop said. “You want to take over the show?” she asked me, only half-kidding. After I politely declined the offer, Humm noted that he is not necessarily looking to leave the show, but conceded, “it’s become a bit of a grind to keep up with it.” After decades of dedication to the show, the co-hosts may be ready to turn it over to a younger team. However, finding other people who have the capacity to volunteer their time on a weekly basis may prove difficult. Both Humm and Northrop have held jobs and maintained other sources of income throughout the duration of the show, privileges that others may not possess. It is unclear what will happen when either or both Humm and Northrop decide to retire.

Will audiences stick around if and when Humm and Northrop leave the show? This remains to be seen—the co-hosts are beloved amongst their audience. Their audience is as present and vocal as ever, perhaps more so now that viewers can interact with the show online. “We feel very interactive the viewers...we do have a large loyal audience. Free Speech tells us we’re the most DVR-ed show on their schedule,” Northrop shared. Humm explained that they both receive emails from viewers on a regular basis, as well as comments on Facebook and

YouTube when they post the show online. Humm believes audiences engage with the show because “they’re just very grateful for the program...They will tell you their whole life story and what's going on with them and why the show is important to them. We've posted a few of [the emails] on the website, but these are, you know, it's what keeps us going.” Humm thinks that *Gay USA* is particularly important for rural and international viewers, who might not have access to other forms of LGBTQ community and culture where they live. *Gay USA* does seem to have a dedicated viewing audience: episodes typically get 1,000-1,500 views on YouTube and each episode generates 15-20 comments. While these comments are not all positive—some criticize Humm and Northrop’s perspectives and the occasional homophobic or transphobic individual will log on to disparage the show—many express gratitude for the show. At the beginning of COVID-19 epidemic in the spring of 2020, many viewers shared concern and appreciation for the team’s continued reporting: one person wrote, “I LOVE you both. Thank you so much for keeping me informed and feeling closer to our community. Your work is greatly appreciated!”<sup>98</sup> and another said, “Andy and Ann, Thanks for being there. Please stay safe.”<sup>99</sup> After so many years of service, Humm and Northrop have become beloved and well-respected community members and activists. Feedback and support from viewers motivates them to continue producing the show each week.

After the hour-long taping in the studio, Northrop, Humm, and I chatted at a diner around the corner from MNN. While I knew of their reputation, I was still surprised when Humm told me, “we get stopped all the time, especially when we're together and then we're very recognizable.” Shortly thereafter, I was given an example of this. During our conversation, a man

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<sup>98</sup> Michael Sellers, *Gay USA* 3/25/2020, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0qZHRBUFac>.

<sup>99</sup> Chris Anderson, *Gay USA* 4/8/2020, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMDRFMDvUto&t=>.

walked up to our booth and immediately introduced himself as a viewer of the show and a member of the theater community in New York. He told them about an upcoming LGBTQ-themed play produced by theater company where his husband is on the board of directors. Humm and Northrop promised to attend the play. “Oh my god, that happens all the time?” I asked after the man walked back to his seat. “All the time,” Northrop confirmed, “the other day it was a guy in the sugar aisle.” For this individual, greeting Humm and Northrop seemed to be a public relations opportunity, a chance to promote this play so that the co-hosts would share information about it on *Gay USA*.

More than a lifeline or a publicity opportunity, however, Northrop thinks viewers continue watching *Gay USA* because of its unique perspective. “They watch because of our point of view. They get news they don't get anywhere else. They get into more in depth, sophisticated fashion than even the mainstream news that's now picking up some of this stuff. And our lefty perspective is something they don't get from mainstream journalism,” she explained. Over the years, *Gay USA* has maintained the more oppositional political perspective originally championed by Lou Maletta. Because the show now airs on public access, the co-hosts do not have to censor themselves in order to appeal to any advertisers. Humm and Northrop freely express their opinions, which skew far left of center. *Gay USA* has remained more politically outspoken than most mainstream journalism outlets, which have a mandate to attempt objectivity, and farther to the left of most well-funded LGBTQ media outlets. Northrop maintains that “the show is about inspiring the audience to action.” The show attracts a niche audience interested in LGBTQ news and activism with a progressive/Leftist perspective.

*Gay USA* provides an unconventional model for contemporary LGBTQ media: it has achieved remarkable longevity as an outlet focused on niche content appealing to a small but



loyal audience base that does not rely upon extensive financial resources. This example offers an interesting counterpart to the contemporary LGBTQ media marketplace—if the 1990s was a boon time for the LGBTQ press, the 2010s proved turbulent. The rise of a number of popular LGBTQ blogs in the 2000s, such as AfterEllen, Autostraddle, Towleroad, and Queerty, seemed to suggest that the Internet would provide a welcoming and profitable new platform for LGBTQ content. In the 2010s, companies like BuzzFeed, HuffPost, and NBC News jumped on the bandwagon by creating LGBTQ verticals, which provided opportunities for reporters and freelancers to cover LGBTQ news for a wider audience. In 2017, the emergence of two new digital platforms—Condé Nast’s *Them* and Grindr’s *INTO*—suggested that LGBTQ media might be more profitable than ever before. Yet what was seen as a boon for LGBTQ journalism has been short lived. *Adweek* proclaimed 2018 the year of “Digital Media’s Great Upheaval,” one marked by layoffs throughout the industry as multiple media outlets shuttered.<sup>100</sup> The instability of the journalism industry hit LGBTQ outlets particularly hard. In 2019, Grindr shuttered *INTO* after two short years and BuzzFeed laid off its Deputy LGBT Editor and LGBTQ Video Producer.<sup>101</sup> In the same year, Pride Media, the parent company that encompasses *The Advocate* and *Out* magazine, came under national scrutiny for failing to pay its freelancers, which was followed by a number of public layoffs.<sup>102</sup> Many smaller LGBTQ digital outlets have folded as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, unable to raise the money needed to pay their writers.

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<sup>100</sup> Sara Jerde, “Inside Digital Media’s Great Upheaval in 2018, From Layoffs to Unionized Newsrooms,” *Adweek*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.adweek.com/digital/inside-digital-medias-great-upheaval-in-2018-from-layoffs-to-unionized-newsrooms/>.

<sup>101</sup> Trish Bendix, “Does LGBT Media Have A Future?,” BuzzFeed News, January 25, 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/trishbendix/future-of-lgbt-media-out-advocate-autostraddle-into-grindr>.

<sup>102</sup> Kayleigh Barber, “How a New CEO Intends to Revive a Slimmed-down Pride Media,” *Digiday*, February 3, 2020, <https://digiday.com/media/new-ceo-intends-revive-slimmed-pride-media/>.

It's worth noting that folding doesn't necessarily equate to failure. In the history of the gay press, hundreds of LGBTQ publications have come into and out of circulation, impacting countless readers in myriad ways no matter how long or short their duration. *Gay USA*, however, does provide a model for longevity relatively unprecedented in the LGBTQ media marketplace, particularly on television, where it is the only LGBTQ news program. The show has remained in production for almost 30 years, withstanding shifts in technology, production, distribution, human resources, and finances. What lessons can be learned from its long history?

Taking seriously the longevity of *Gay USA* expands conventional understandings of LGBTQ television to include small-scale, noncommercial productions. *Gay USA* demonstrates how a simple and traditional television format—two speakers sitting at a desk, talking to each other in front of a camera—is made complex by its deep investment in LGBTQ community, history, news, and culture. The show provides a different model than the one offered by glossier LGBTQ magazines and digital platforms funded by advertisers and investments from larger companies. Instead of relying upon corporate dollars in an unstable media market, the success of *Gay USA* suggests that LGBTQ media might be most sustainable when it is funded by local resources and produced by people deeply engaged with the communities they represent on screen.

Beginning in 1982, Lou Maletta's programming on the Gay Cable Network insisted that LGBTQ television programming take seriously sex radicalism and confrontational activism. By arguing time and again that such programming belongs on cable, Maletta fought for recognition for television that others deemed too "sleazy" or too marginal to be cultural significant. Maletta's early idealism and ambition, and his reporters' ongoing dedication to producing queer TV in spite of exposure to traumatic experiences, helped infuse cable access television with queer

perspectives. As a result, GCN programming created “an archive of facts and an archive of feelings,” conveying and preserving the experiences of LGBTQ people living in the 1980s and 1990s, including its own on-screen talent.<sup>103</sup> Since 2001, Northrop and Humm have continued with this mission, insisting that an “old” medium like public access TV remains a relevant platform for LGBTQ media. Because of its longevity, GCN and *Gay USA* provide ample opportunity to explore the feel of queer television production: an approach that examines the affective experiences of producing stigmatized and precarious LGBTQ media. Now that the Fales Library at NYU has digitized decades of GCN programming, and current episodes of *Gay USA* are accessible to viewers worldwide online, this programming will offer contemporary and future scholars, activists, and producers insight into the feel of queer television production for decades to come.

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<sup>103</sup> Coon, *Turning the Page*, 84.

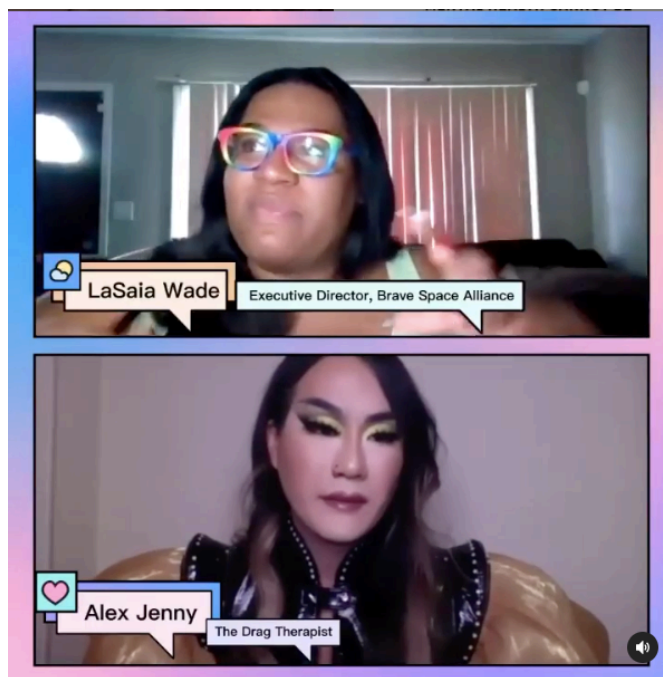
## EPILOGUE

### Survival Art: Creating LGBTQ Community Media in Times of Crisis

On November 13, 2020, a digital talk show celebrating queer and transgender artists called *The Moment* premiered on the platform Twitch.<sup>1</sup> A series of interviews and drag performances, *The Moment* is hosted by Alex Jenny, a Chinese Vietnamese trans drag queen and licensed clinical social worker in Chicago and produced by the queer-run production company A Queer Pride. On the first episode of the show, Jenny interviews Black trans activist Lasaia Wade, founder and Executive Director of the Brave Space Alliance, a non-profit organization that provides resources, programming, and services for queer and trans people on the South Side of Chicago. Jenny and Wade chat with one another from different rooms across the city, using the cameras on their respective computers to conduct a virtual interview. In a preview on Instagram, Wade's video image appears above Jenny's, framed by a blue, pink, and purple background, perhaps inspired by the colors of the trans pride flag. Wade discusses her experiences leading mutual aid projects for trans people in Chicago and Jenny expresses her own gratitude for Wade's leadership: "I can only imagine how much joy, and how proud you feel, actually leading the cause. Just watching it, I can't express enough how that helps me get out of bed sometimes. I know some people are like, if Beyoncé can do it, I can do it. No, I'm like, if Lasaia Wade can do it, I can fucking do it." Their nuanced interview explores trans joy, community, and love; it is a generous and generative conversation that celebrates trans activism and resilience.

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<sup>1</sup> Twitch is a live-streaming service: popular among gamers, Twitch allows users to interact with each other via chat as they watch live video simultaneously.



Figures 5.1-5.2 Above: Drag queen and transgender artist Alex Jenny interviews activist LaSaia Wade on her monthly talk show, *The Moment*. Below: a promotional post on Jenny's Instagram for the show.

For Jenny, creating *The Moment* has been a life affirming experience. While drag queens typically perform at in-person events at bars and clubs, since March 2020, the COVID-19

pandemic quarantine regulations have restricted in person gatherings. Consequently, like many other artists, Jenny's work has moved from the club onto social media. Jenny, who calls herself The Drag Therapist, uploads music videos, photo shoots, lip sync performances, and therapeutic wisdom onto her Instagram and Twitter accounts, in addition to hosting *The Moment* on Twitch. While she told me that working and performing primarily from her own apartment has been isolating over the past year, it has also provided her with new opportunities to thrive:

To be able to have more long-standing art to put in my portfolio, if you will, has been really nice. Being able to look back at my body of quarantine work is really fascinating to me because I was so deeply struggling, but also saying, this is how I'm keeping myself alive, and I hope that by you watching, it helps you keep yourself alive a little bit too. It is truly survival art, you know? ... I don't have to think to myself, Oh, I have a club gig in a week and I need to do something cool and new, and I have one week to plan it and then it's gone. I'm now taking my time to plan these episodes months ahead of time. I'm taking my time to commission custom looks months ahead of time. I'm working on a different timeline. And then I get to share that on social media and people get to see the fruits of my labor. That's been really rewarding.<sup>2</sup>

I expected Jenny to describe how difficult work has been this past year during our conversation; instead, she described how she has used art as a creative tool of survival amidst the struggles of living and working through the COVID-19 pandemic. Jenny shared that the pandemic has provided her with new opportunities to modify her artistic practice: instead of creating drag looks for an ephemeral club performance in a short amount of time, she can spend months preparing her looks and videos, which last longer online. This past year has granted Jenny time and space

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Jenny, interview with the author, February 2021. Further quotes from the same interview.

to invest in her “survival art”; she creates community media in the hopes that it inspires other queer and trans people to continue the day-to-day work of survival as well.

Jenny uses social media to further her therapeutic advocacy for LGBTQ people, in addition to building her brand as a drag queen. Jenny, who works at a private clinical practice in Chicago, frequently posts information about mental health and trauma on Instagram in order to critique “the white supremacist notions of professionalism” in social work so that she can “demystify what it means to hold knowledge about therapy and diagnosis.” Broadening her reach outside of her clinical practice online allows Jenny to share her knowledge with others who may not be able to afford access to these services. Jenny stresses the importance of “healing in public”: while therapists and social workers are trained to be a “blank slate” or “invisible” presence in the therapeutic relationship, Jenny believes this is a gatekeeping practice that does not reflect the mental health needs of many queer and trans people. She shares her own mental health struggles with her followers in order to model the kind of therapy she believes can speak to the specific needs of LGBTQ people.

Jenny’s online advocacy is informed by her queer theoretical approach to social work as well as to content production: she practices the principles she espouses by paying performers appropriately, centering marginalized identities on screen, and giving back to her community. She raises funds for mutual aid groups in Chicago online—for example, the first episode of *The Moment* was a fundraiser for Wade’s organization, the Brave Space Alliance. Giving money back to her community feels rewarding for Jenny: “I thought, how can I use my contacts, my network to reach out to the bigger names and then use their clout to continue to highlight Chicago trans performers and the Chicago trans community?” Jenny fundraises for local trans people, drag queens, and LGBTQ causes, and pays her own collaborators out of pocket, using

the money she earns as an influencer to provide them with pay for their work. While Jenny's reach has grown over the past year, she maintains a certain amount of skepticism about corporate-owned platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Twitch. "The way that I'm using Instagram...is very intentional and calculated. I'm never naive in being like representation on social media is the end all be all...This tool is for me to raise funds for my medical transition, to promote my career, [and] sell shit, so I can use that money for my drag and for mutual aid," Jenny shared. Like many activists who distribute their work online, Jenny understands the limitations of commercial media platforms that collect user data and employ ad-targeted algorithms but continues to use these platforms as a tool to spread information about radical politics and community-based issues.

Indeed, Jenny's work builds upon a lineage of marginalized media producers and activists interested in creating alternative, independent, and community media, like those I have examined throughout this dissertation. Jenny jokes that she "always wanted to be a reality TV star," but her current dream is to host her own talk show to oppose "all of the heinous interviews that trans people had to go through, where people were asking them about their genitals and their bodies and their transitions and trauma." Jenny hopes to interrupt the long history of exploitation, fetishization, and discrimination faced by trans and gender non-conforming people in commercial news media and talk shows on her "trans for trans" interview-based show. That is indeed what she's accomplished on *The Moment*: after interviewing Wade, subsequent episodes include interviews with LGBTQ community celebrities like trans actor Leo Shang, drag queen Lucy Stoole, and Black trans model Aaron Philip. To accomplish all of this while working from home amidst a deadly pandemic is no small feat. Jenny's survival art is "testament to the



resiliency of queer and trans people,” she believes: the culmination of the work of many individuals supporting one another in times of crisis.

That Jenny has been able to accomplish this work in Chicago is not a coincidence. The community of LGBTQ drag queens, artists, performers, and producers in Chicago is unusually close and collegial: “we're all in this together, and that has become so much more obvious and stronger over the last year,” Jenny expressed. While she feels that these communities in New York and Los Angeles are “over-saturated” and “splintered,” she suggests that people in Chicago are more willing to work together. She elaborated, “I love collaborating with other artists, that has been the biggest reward...I really think that what you see me doing is a culmination of a whole community of people that have helped me. I think that's beautiful.” Queer community art and media in Chicago is indeed thriving, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic: the city has myriad artist-run spaces, community theaters, and media arts non-profits, such as OTV, a non-profit and research-based digital platform for intersectional television, in addition to more well-established institutions such as art museums, colleges and universities, and foundations that both house and support smaller community-run projects. Coastal cities like New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco have historically been centers of LGBTQ cultural production as well as the focus of LGBTQ studies and history; Jenny’s work demonstrates how a shift in focus to midwestern cultural centers like Chicago illuminates differing social dynamics amongst cultural producers, particularly the close collaboration amongst queer and trans artists of color.

LGBTQ community-oriented media proliferates online as well and has become an increasingly important venue for queer and trans art, performance, and activism since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As Aymar Jean Christian argues, “the Internet brought innovation to television by opening mass distribution to those excluded from legacy development

processes, fostering new ways of creating and developing series.”<sup>3</sup> Over the past 25 years, contemporary queer and trans producers and artists have created media via a wide variety of digital platforms and formats, including community-specific web sites, web series, podcasts, blogs, video-sharing services, and public and private social media platforms. This type of innovation is not necessarily a new phenomenon: as my dissertation suggests, LGBTQ creatives and activists have long used accessible communications technologies to create media that speak to their specific experiences, issues, and communities.

The history of LGBTQ public access cable television I have offered in this dissertation can help scholars understand the contemporary proliferation of queer content on digital media, as well as the proliferation of a wide variety of marginal and community-oriented digital media. Much contemporary queer community media, like Alex Jenny’s social media content and digital talk show, reflects characteristics of the LGBTQ cable access shows I have examined: they are often low-budget, financially precarious productions created by and for marginalized LGBTQ people interested in employing new media technologies to create content that resonates with their own life experiences and political beliefs. The work I have analyzed throughout these chapters prefigures Jenny’s commitment to survival art: as I argued in Chapters Two and Four, public access became a forum through which LGBTQ people could spread information about and process their emotional responses to the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Both historical and contemporary queer community media exists at the intersection of art, entertainment, and activism: cabaret and drag performances are interspersed interviews with activists and news reports; in the contemporary moment, these often discuss the impacts of COVID-19. Invested in

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<sup>3</sup> Christian, *Open TV*, 4.

individual and community survival, LGBTQ activists turn to media in times of crisis, using tools at their disposal to catalyze personal, communal, and institutional social change.

While remarkable similarities exist between historical examples of LGBTQ public access cable TV and contemporary queer media online, a number of key differences are important to highlight, particularly in terms of production, distribution, and reception. The increase in cheap video production technologies and plethora of social media platforms provides contemporary queer and trans content creators with increased access to the production process in unprecedented numbers. Community media centers and public access stations are a part of this history—as I discussed, *Dyke TV* and the Gay Cable Network utilized digital production, Internet access, and streaming web platforms to increase the reach of their audiences beginning in the late 1990s, and *Gay USA* continues to produce shows online and on television. Yet the availability of digital editing software and lightweight video cameras embedded in smartphones provides millions of individual users with production technology for use on a daily basis, something unavailable during the heyday of public access in the mid 1980s-mid 1990s. LGBTQ cable access shows likely number in the hundreds; because of increased access to technology, there are countless LGBTQ web series, influencers, social media accounts, and blogs and websites. It's worth adding that a wider variety of producers across demographic categories now have access to the means of production as well. While LGBTQ cable access TV has been largely produced by white cisgender gay and lesbian people with some access to financial and social capital, contemporary queer media online is more reflective of the diversity of LGBTQ communities. Alex Jenny is one among dozens of trans media producers and influencers; digital content created by and for LGBTQ people of color as well as bisexual, non-binary, asexual, and intersex people similarly proliferates online.

Video streaming technologies and digital media platforms have greatly increased audience sizes for queer community content. While local and regional LGBTQ public access shows were typically available to an audience of thousands at a particular date and time during a given week, queer media online has a global audience that can often watch or stream content at their convenience. If public access audiences are historically ephemeral, hard to measure and analyze because of the absence of ratings for these shows (as I discussed in my Introduction), contemporary audiences online leave myriad digital traces: this includes view counts, public comments, clicks, and web cookies (data captured on a user's computer while browsing websites). For audiences and viewers interested in locating LGBTQ content, it is perhaps easier to find than ever before, at least if one has (unrestricted) access to the Internet, a computer or smartphone, and digital literacy. The accessibility and measurability of contemporary digital audiences accordingly provides scholars with a plethora of information about media reception that can facilitate the analysis of the reach and impact of given media—the type of information which I had to assemble piecemeal for this study of cable access TV.

Yet as Ron Becker writes, “Just because there are more images doesn't mean they are inherently better.”<sup>4</sup> The proliferation of LGBTQ content online has greatly expanded access to production and reception and increased the diversity of representation found in queer media, yet contemporary LGBTQ media producers encounter financial precarity, corporate censorship, online harassment, and a crowded media marketplace that makes it difficult to find commercial success. The conflicts Jenny described in her interview to me—navigating platforms designed to sell products, paying for her equipment and collaborators out of pocket, figuring out how to build

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<sup>4</sup> Becker, “Prime-Time Television in the Gay Ninties: Network Television, Quality Audiences, and Gay Politics,” 398.

a brand and a following without compromising her political ideals—reflect contemporary iterations of the conflicts described by those I interviewed for this dissertation. Like many public access programs, contemporary LGBTQ web sites, platforms, blogs, and magazines are often labors of love that fold when the costs of production, whether financial or personal, climb too high. Close examination of contemporary queer community media reveals the complex struggles and negotiations their producers encounter in the process of production and distribution, even with increased access to these processes.

Despite technological differences, both historical and contemporary queer community media help circulate queer affects that reflect and amplify the experiences of LGBTQ people living through particular moments in history. Contemporary LGBTQ content online may serve as mediated archives of the coronavirus pandemic, just as the shows I have discussed serve as televisual archives of feeling of turbulent times in LGBTQ history. For example, in one emotional Instagram post from April 2020, Jenny writes, “I very much feel like a first responder, the grief piling up in my bedroom, the only private space I have right now to do therapy. Saging it down after my sessions and honoring the emotions that spilled over, out of my screens, and into my hands, on my floor, in the air.”<sup>5</sup> In other posts, she discusses increasing fears of anti-Asian violence stoked by the racism and xenophobia of Republican rhetoric, feelings of isolation, craving physical intimacy and social proximity to others, and the importance of grieving the loss of “normal” society while still dreaming of radical social change. Jenny’s frequent reflections on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on her daily life represent her commitment to healing in public; they simultaneously chronicle the daily social experience of

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<sup>5</sup> “Alex Jenny, LCSW (@alexjenny\_) • Instagram Photos and Videos,” accessed March 18, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B-44JaFJrYa/>.

living through COVID-19, providing contemporary and future scholars, artists, activists, and casual viewers a digital archive and micro-history of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on queer and trans everyday life.

Interviews with and analysis of queer and trans media producers like Jenny reveal the contemporary feel of queer media production. Compassion fatigue, uncertainty, fear, loss, and loneliness alongside communal collaboration and mutual support—Jenny's digital presence reflects and amplifies dominant structures of feeling about the global COVID-19 pandemic circulating in 2020 and 2021. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, LGBTQ community media production provides participants with myriad personal and political opportunities: this includes the opportunity to foster political engagement, encourage local activism, create collective entertainment, process emotional trauma, experiment with entrepreneurship, educate audiences on culturally specific topics, explore desire and sexuality, and stake a claim for marginalized communities on screen. Amidst this wide variety of experiences lies a multitude of emotional responses to the production process: rage, love, desire, ambition, resentment, loss, grief, enthusiasm, and fear, among others. Exploring these feelings provides insights into the affective dimension of queer production. More than just the financial and technological aspects of television and media production that explore processes, opportunities, and constraints, this dimension illuminates the impacts of affect, feeling, and emotion on cultures of production. Careful attention to the feel of queer production illuminates the “pleasures and intensities” of media production for marginalized producers as they document their everyday experiences and create content that resists norms of dominant media.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*, 1 edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 179

This dissertation has explored LGBTQ public access cable television programs as televisual archives of feeling, programs created by and for LGBTQ people that facilitated the exchange of queer experiences, ideas, culture, and current events. These programs provide contemporary viewers with insights into the ways LGBTQ cultural producers and community members navigated historical events over time. While local and noncommercial television programs are often overlooked in studies of media history and LGBTQ cultural production, these shows offer scholars of gender and sexuality studies and media studies opportunities to explore the significance of queer community media before the rise of home computing technologies, streaming media, and mainstream LGBTQ representation. Future scholarship in this area might expand the scope of this project to include analysis of LGBTQ public access TV shows produced around the country (and their equivalents around the world); compare and contrast LGBTQ access programs to those produced by other marginalized communities underserved by commercial television; and/or explore the histories of other communications and information technologies used strategically by independent LGBTQ producers. Further research might also include more in-depth analysis of public access technologies, reception, infrastructure, and/or government regulations as other modes of understanding the significance of this work.

As experiments in television production, art, and activism, LGBTQ public access shows exemplify how queer and transgender people have historically utilized media technologies to intervene in a mainstream television system that prioritizes heterosexual and cisgender perspectives in order to make central their own experiences, needs, and desires. This legacy endures today in the digital and cultural production of LGBTQ creatives, particularly those invested in producing survival art that sustains, nourishes, and energizes their communities. Sometimes scrappy, experimental, sexual, didactic, angry, celebratory, campy, poignant, and

powerful, studying LGBTQ public access programming illuminates the interconnections between television history and queer and trans activism, innovation, and everyday life.



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