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## Be Kind Rewind

Navigating Issues of Access and Practising an Ethics of Care for Magnetic Media from Vulnerable Communities

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# Be Kind Rewind

## Navigating Issues of Access and Practising an Ethics of Care for Magnetic Media from Vulnerable Communities

JULIA GILMORE

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**ABSTRACT** Magnetic media, once democratizing documentary tools for marginalized communities, now face *degradescence* due to the physical degradation of magnetic tape and the obsolescence of playback equipment. However, these are not the only concerns when it comes to these media; while digitizing and providing online access have increasingly become requirements for major funding bodies and strategies adopted by archives, the contemporary neoliberal orientation toward open, online access poses additional risks for vulnerable communities.

The impending magnetic media crisis presents a critical opportunity to contend with neoliberal archival impulses; re-envision approaches to preservation, digitization, and access; and acknowledge the affective values of magnetic media for communities who have produced and cared for them. Largely unexplored in archival literature, the unique promise and precarity of magnetic media created by vulnerable communities require ethical consideration of issues of privacy, exposure, and decontextualization and an understanding of the complexities of preserving magnetic media. This article explores these considerations and issues, advocates for the adoption of a feminist ethics of care, and introduces the VHS Archives Working Group as a generative model for caring for magnetic media from vulnerable communities.

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**RÉSUMÉ** Les supports magnétiques, autrefois des outils importants de démocratisation pour les communautés marginalisées, font face à un phénomène de détérioration des formats dû à la dégradation physique des rubans magnétiques et à l'obsolescence des équipements de lecture. Cependant, ce ne sont pas les seules préoccupations concernant ces médias. Alors que le transfert numérique et l'accès en ligne de ces contenus – approches privilégiées par les centres d'archives – deviennent des conditions préalables pour obtenir du financement de la part des grands organismes subventionnaires, les orientations néolibérales contemporaines favorisant les données ouvertes et l'accès en ligne posent des risques additionnels pour les communautés vulnérables.

La crise imminente des supports magnétiques offre une opportunité de contrecarrer les impulsions archivistiques néolibérales. Elle permet de repenser les approches de la préservation, de la numérisation et de l'accès. Elle permet également de reconnaître les valeurs affectives des supports magnétiques pour des communautés qui ont produit des archives à partir de ces formats et qui en ont pris soin. Largement inexplorées dans la littérature archivistique, la promesse et la précarité uniques des supports produits par des communautés vulnérables exigent des considérations éthiques, notamment sur des questions relatives à la vie privée, à l'exposition de gens et à la décontextualisation de l'information. Ces questions doivent également être accompagnées d'une compréhension des problématiques associées à la préservation de supports magnétiques. Cet article aborde ces questions. Il plaide pour l'adoption d'une éthique féministe du soin et introduit le VHS Archives Working Group comme un modèle à émuler pour prendre soin de supports magnétiques provenant de communautés vulnérables.

## Introduction

While the precarity of magnetic media and the urgent need to actively preserve these materials have continued to gain attention in recent years, the ethical considerations concerning magnetic media produced by vulnerable communities have been largely unexplored in the archival profession. Digitization and the provision of online access to archival materials have become both priorities for archivists and expectations of users.<sup>1</sup> However, the contemporary neoliberal orientation toward open, online access comes with the risk of exposing, endangering, and decontextualizing the experiences of vulnerable communities.<sup>2</sup> This article will explore the unique considerations of preserving magnetic media, address issues of access and reuse, and introduce the VHS Archives Project as a model for enacting a feminist ethics approach to caring for vulnerable communities and their materials.

## The Magnetic Media Crisis and the Promises of Digitization

Beginning in the 1960s, the emergence of magnetic tape and the relatively low cost and ubiquity of portable video equipment brought a new documentary format to the broader public and increased the visibility of perspectives that had been underrepresented in mainstream media.<sup>3</sup> Sara Chapman, executive director of the Media Burn Independent Video Archive in Chicago, points to the release of Sony's Portapak camcorder, which used portable half-inch videotape,

- 1 Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 157–59; Jennifer Schaffner, "The Metadata Is the Interface: Better Description for Better Discovery of Archives and Special Collections, Synthesized from User Studies" (Dublin, OH: OCLC Research, 2009), 1–18; Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique: Opening Possibilities for Addressing Neoliberalism in the Archival Field," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017): 1–22.
- 2 Cifor and Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique," 1–22; McKinney, *Information Activism*, 153–204. See, also, T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault, "Onlining Queer Acts: Digital Research Ethics and Caring for Risky Archives," *Women & Performance* 28, no. 2 (2018), 121–42.
- 3 Chris Hill, "Attention! Production! Audience!: Performing Video in Its First Decade," in *Rewind: A Guide to Surveying the First Decade: Video Art and Alternative Media in the U.S., 1968–1980*, ed. Abina Manning and Brigid Reagan (Chicago: Video Data Bank, 2008): 8–29. See, also, Sara Patterson, "The Hidden History of 'Guerrilla Television': UChicago Scholars Preserve Decades-Old Videos," *UChicago News*, May 25, 2021, <https://humanities.uchicago.edu/articles/2021/05/hidden-history-guerrilla-television-uchicago-scholars-preserve-decades-old-videos>.

as the event that ushered in a new era of democratized, non-commercial media production known as guerrilla television.<sup>4</sup> Chapman also notes, however, that technological incompatibilities between half-inch videotape and the standard two-inch broadcast format, among other factors, meant that these independently produced videos rarely found a national audience. Instead, it was more common for these videos to be distributed through local and community networks.

Since the inception of magnetic media, there has been a strong connection between these media and the representation of marginalized communities. Magnetic media afforded marginalized communities and subcultures, including those of activists and performance artists, the opportunity and the agency to document and amplify their voices and experiences.<sup>5</sup> Media archivist Jack Brighton, reflecting on the 2015 Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives Unconference and Symposium hosted by the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), writes of the significant role that video plays in documenting activism and preserving history and cultural heritage for small community organizations.<sup>6</sup> On its website, the London Community Video Archive (LCVA) outlines how community videos created by marginalized groups in Southeast England during the 1970s and 1980s served as powerful tools for social empowerment, addressing issues of public housing, discrimination, and exclusion.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Marika Cifor describes how the accessibility and technological advancements of magnetic media aligned with and supported the documentary impulse of early AIDS activists and visual artists to capture and contend with the immense loss of life and vitality of queer communities as a result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>8</sup>

4 Sara Chapman, "Guerrilla Television in the Digital Archive," *Journal of Film and Video* 64, no. 1–2, (2012): 42–50, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/jfilmvideo.64.1-2.0042>.

5 Hill, "Attention! Production! Audience!," 8–29. See, also, Patterson, "The Hidden History of 'Guerrilla Television';" and Hannah Selinger, "Who Is Still Buying VHS Tapes?" *New York Times*, February 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/20/style/vhs-tapes.html>.

6 Rachel Mattson, "Who Cares for Community-Based Video? A Report from the 2015 CLIR Hidden Collections unConference," *Cataloging La MaMa's Pushcart Years* (blog), July 15, 2015, <https://pushcartcatalog.wordpress.com/2015/07/15/brighton-report/>.

7 London Community Video Archive, "About," accessed December 12, 2021, <https://the-lcva.co.uk/about>.

8 Marika Cifor, "'Your Nostalgia is Killing Me': Activism, Affect, and the Archives of HIV/AIDS" (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2017), 66–67, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2312c9bb> 66–67.

Unfortunately, magnetic media, and the content preserved on them, may not be long for this world. Owing to the physical degradation of magnetic tape and the obsolescence of the playback equipment required to view and digitize this content, the videotape faces what media preservationist and scholar Mike Casey has called *degradescence*.<sup>9</sup> Casey, writing in 2015, estimated that the shelf life of analog video was likely to be between 10 and 20 years – indicating a fast-approaching crisis point for magnetic media. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign assigns high levels of preservation risk to a number of magnetic media formats, including open-reel video, U-matic cassettes, and Betamax tapes.<sup>10</sup> Ideal storage conditions have the potential to prolong the lifespans of magnetic media; however, the general consensus among media preservation experts remains that magnetic media have a fixed expiration date – one that the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) warns is “often shorter than expected.”<sup>11</sup> In the rush to preserve this content, digitization has often become the preferred approach for community-based archives and mainstream cultural heritage institutions.

Among community-based archives, digitization has raised a number of considerations and challenges. For magnetic media – which rely on often difficult-to-source playback equipment in good working condition<sup>12</sup> and the time, technical expertise, and resources to carefully handle, transfer, store, and catalogue the materials<sup>13</sup> – digitization can be a prohibitively expensive and labour-intensive undertaking. Under-funded and under-resourced community-based archives,

9 Mike Casey, “Why Media Preservation Can’t Wait: The Gathering Storm,” *IASA Journal* 44 (January 2015): 14–22, <https://mdpi.iu.edu/doc/storm.pdf>.

10 Preservation Self-Assessment Program, “Collection ID Guide: Videotape,” University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, accessed April 19, 2022, <https://psap.library.illinois.edu/collection-id-guide/videotape>.

11 Jim Wheeler and Peter Brothers, *Videotape Preservation Fact Sheets* (Hollywood, CA: AMIA Preservation Committee, 2002), <https://amianet.org/wp-content/uploads/Resources-Video-Preservation-Fact-Sheets-2002-1.pdf>. In its guidelines for preservation of magnetic videotape, the AMIA points out that the various components of magnetic tape decay at different rates. The organization also cautions that obsolescence of older formats and playback equipment pose a potentially greater threat than material degradation, further complicating attempts to predict the shelf life of the format.

12 Karen Cariani, “Exposing Large Collections of Media,” in *Innovation, Collaboration and Models: Proceedings of the CLIR Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives Symposium, March 2015*, ed. Cheryl Oestreicher (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2015), 128.

13 Maria Troy, “A Report from the Trenches: Video Preservation,” in Manning and Reagan, *Rewind*, 90–91.

which typically rely on volunteer labour,<sup>14</sup> often must apply for grants or solicit donations to perform this digitization work.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, digitization is a beginning, not an end, to archival preservation work. Finding a long-term, sustainable home for newly digitized materials is a challenge – one that often requires additional resources and funding for storage, migration, and maintenance of the materials. In the case of grants, the majority of which provide short-term, project-based funding,<sup>16</sup> there is often an inability to sustain archiving initiatives beyond the funding cycle.<sup>17</sup> Lilian Radovac, founder of the digital archive Alternative Toronto, and Simon Vickers, digital archivist and Alternative Toronto volunteer, trace the direct impacts of contemporary funding structures on the emergence and subsequent sunsetting of various grassroots archiving projects in Canada over the last few decades.<sup>18</sup>

There is also a certain degree of precarity in volunteer-driven archiving efforts, which inherently limit who has the capacity to contribute unpaid labour.<sup>19</sup> Turnover and burnout among volunteers, many of whom may be completing short-term internships or may not have previous experience working with archival materials, is not uncommon.<sup>20</sup> This is a particular concern in the

14 Anne Gilliland and Andrew Flinn, "Community Archives: What Are We Really Talking About?" (keynote address, CIRN Prato Community Informatics Conference, Prato, Italy, October 28, 2013), 1–23, [https://www.monash.edu/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/920626/gilliland\\_flinn\\_keynote.pdf](https://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/920626/gilliland_flinn_keynote.pdf). See also, Cifor and Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique"; and Harrison Apple, "I Can't Wait for You to Die!: A Community Archives Critique," *Archivaria* 92 (Fall 2021): 110–37, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13821/15213>.

15 McKinney, *Information Activism*, 158. McKinney notes that the Lesbian Herstory Archives accepts donations but does not seek out state-supported grants or institutional partnerships, as retaining autonomy for the direction and development of the archive is paramount. The Interference Archive takes a similar stance, eschewing reliance on grants in favour of a predominantly donor-driven model, as described by Alycia Sellie, Jesse Goldstein, Molly Fair, and Jennifer Hoyer, "Interference Archive: A Free Space for Social Movement Culture," *Archival Science* 15, no. 4 (2015): 453–72, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9245-5>.

16 Bergis Jules, *Architecting Sustainable Futures: Exploring Funding Models in Community-Based Archives* (n.p.: Shift Design, February 2019), 1–35, <https://shiftdesign.org/content/uploads/2019/02/ArchitectingSustainableFutures-2019-report.pdf>. In "Community Archives," Gilliland and Flinn also draw attention to the prevalence of project-based funding for community-based archives and the impact on these funding models for the long-term sustainability of these archives.

17 Cifor and Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique," 14–15.

18 Lilian Radovac and Simon Vickers, "Food First, Then Archives: Precarity and Community Memory," *Active History* (blog), July 7, 2021, <http://activehistory.ca/2021/07/food-first-then-archives-precarity-and-community-memory/>.

19 Sellie et al., "Interference Archive," 462.

20 Ibid., 462. The gap in archival training among volunteers is also discussed in a case study of the Black Cultural Archives, presented by Bergis Jules, *Architecting Sustainable Futures*, 30–32.

case of digitization projects, which require a considerable amount of training and technical expertise in order to carry out the work. Radovac cautions that, when it comes to digitizing fragile and degrading magnetic media, “all it takes is a poorly aligned strip of tape to render an old playback unit inoperational.”<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, a number of audiovisual archivists and media preservationists are attuned to the specific challenges faced by community-based archives and are working to provide solutions through participatory approaches. XFR Collective in New York City, the BAVC Media (Bay Area Video Coalition) in San Francisco, and the recently announced CineMobilia project in Canada, among others, offer a range of educational resources, archival training, open-source tools, and small-scale digitization services. In the case of BAVC Media, the non-profit organization also provides subsidies to community organizations looking to preserve analog audiovisual materials through its Preservation Access Program, which in turn is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.<sup>22</sup> The CineMobilia project, led by Archive/Counter-Archive, a network dedicated to audiovisual image heritage, is a mobile infrastructure lab intended to facilitate the preservation of audiovisual materials from marginalized communities across Canada.<sup>23</sup> The project, funded by the Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) and launched in April 2022, is an encouraging example of how archival preservation initiatives can be designed to meet and support community networks where they are. How these newly digitized materials will end up being circulated and activated remains to be seen; however, the CFI’s guidelines for proposals state that successfully funded projects should enable internationally competitive research activities and be broadly accessible to researchers.<sup>24</sup>

21 Lilian Radovac, “Re/mediating the Archive: Building Alternative Toronto,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 32, no. 1 (2018): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2018.1404679>.

22 BAVC Media, “Preservation Access Program,” BAVC Media, accessed April 20, 2022, <https://bavc.org/programs/preservation/preservation-access-program/>.

23 Archive/Counter-Archive, “CineMobilia,” accessed April 22, 2022, <https://counterarchive.ca/cinemobilia>.

24 Canada Foundation for Innovation, *2023 Innovation Fund: Call for Proposals* (n.p.: Canada Foundation for Innovation, November 2021), <https://www.innovation.ca/sites/default/files/2021-12/CFI-Innovation-Fund-2023-Call-Proposals.pdf>.

## Issues and Illusions of Access in a Neoliberal Society

Increasingly, access to archival materials is becoming synonymous with “online” and “open” access.<sup>25</sup> Digitization has become a significant area of focus for funding organizations, foundations, and granting bodies,<sup>26</sup> alongside the expectation that these newly digitized materials will then be made accessible to a wider audience. In Canada, Library and Archives Canada provides significant funding to cultural institutions and organizations through its Documentary Heritage Communities Program (DHCP). The program requires applicants to demonstrate how their projects will have significant impacts in the broader community.<sup>27</sup> In the US, the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), one of the largest funding bodies for humanities programs and cultural heritage institutions, makes explicit its “preference for free and open access to materials.”<sup>28</sup> Even XFR Collective, which operates through a partnership-based model, states that any analog materials transferred by the collective to digital formats will be uploaded to the Internet Archive. While it notes that capacity issues related to providing digital storage are a contributing factor in this decision, XFR Collective also expresses support and alignment with the Internet Archive’s approach to providing open access to cultural materials.<sup>29</sup>

Expectations of online access are indicative of a neoliberal approach, as noted by Marika Cifor and Jamie A. Lee, in their exploration of the implications of this ideology for the archival profession,<sup>30</sup> and by Kimberly Christen, in her

25 Cifor and Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique,” 13; Cowan and Rault, “Onlining Queer Acts”; T.L. Cowan, “X-Reception: Re-mediating Trans-Feminist and Queer Performance Art,” in *The Routledge Companion to Digital Humanities and Art History*, ed. Kathryn Brown (New York: Routledge, 2020), 155–66, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429505188>.

26 Shinjoung Yeo, “Access Now, but for Whom and at What Cost?” *Information, Communication & Society* 23, no. 4 (2020): 588–604, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1529192>.

27 Library and Archives Canada, “About The Program,” Documentary Heritage Communities Program, last modified November 1, 2022, <https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/services/funding-programs/dhcp/pages/about.aspx>.

28 National Endowment for the Humanities Division of Preservation and Access, *Notice of Funding Opportunity: Humanities Collections and Reference Resources* (n.p.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 2022), 34, <https://www.neh.gov/sites/default/files/inline-files/Humanities%20Collections%20and%20Reference%20Resources%20NOFO%202022.pdf>.

29 XFR Collective, “Why Does XFR Collective Work with the Internet Archive?” accessed April 22, 2022, [https://xfrcollective.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/2017\\_why\\_ia-1.pdf](https://xfrcollective.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/2017_why_ia-1.pdf).

30 Cifor and Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique,” 1–22.

reflection of collaborating on ethically minded digital initiatives to preserve Indigenous communities' cultural heritage materials.<sup>31</sup> A neoliberal approach privileges the provision of universal access within the archival field and more broadly, where openness is viewed as a public good offering sweeping societal benefits for all. Yet, as Christen and Cifor and Lee argue, this presumption, left unchallenged and divorced from its historical and political contexts, only serves to reinforce existing power structures and exacerbate conditions of social inequality by ignoring the agency and rights of creating communities in favour of advancing dominant (market) interests.<sup>32</sup> Cifor and Lee view this rhetoric as a factor contributing to the underestimation of archival labour, increased partnerships with for-profit interests, and reduced funding and resources for cultural heritage institutions.<sup>33</sup> Grants and funding opportunities, where they do exist, increasingly encourage applicants' demonstration of their economic impact and ability to generate revenue.<sup>34</sup>

For community-based archives, which are in part defined by communities' desires for autonomy and ownership over their histories and materials,<sup>35</sup> the neoliberal impulse to make materials widely available often undermines marginalized communities' agency over how their stories are told and how their cultural records are circulated.<sup>36</sup> While granting organizations offer valuable financial resources to increase the visibility of underrepresented groups that have been traditionally excluded from the historical record, funding restrictions that necessitate making materials widely accessible to those outside these communities may be at odds with the wishes and desires of those community members

31 Kimberly Christen, "Does Information Really Want to Be Free? Indigenous Knowledge Systems and the Question of Openness," *International Journal of Communication* 6 (November 2012): 2870–93, <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1618/828>.

32 *Ibid.*, 2875–80; Cifor and Lee, "Towards an Archival Critique," 4–16.

33 *Ibid.*, 11–14.

34 Lois K. Yorke, "Nine Hundred Points of Light: The Canadian Community of Archives," *Canadian Issues* (Summer 2014): 44–49, as discussed in Cifor and Lee, 14.

35 In Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy, and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9, no. 1 (2009): 73, the authors state that "the defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on *their own terms*" (emphasis in original).

36 Christen, "Does Information Really Want to Be Free?" 2879–80; Cowan and Rault, "Onlining Queer Acts," 132; T.L. Cowan, "X-Reception," 155–66.

who want to mediate online access or do not want their materials to be on the Internet at all.

In their study of digitization practices at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, a community archive in the Park Slope neighbourhood of Brooklyn, Cait McKinney points out that digitization changes both the types of encounters that are possible with these materials and their inherent nature and notes that these changes may not always be desirable for the communities that produced them.<sup>37</sup> McKinney recognizes that digitizing fragile magnetic media and making these materials available online can be vital to the resiliency and survival of marginalized communities but emphasizes that these “onlining” efforts must be guided by “community-generated understandings of privacy, vulnerability, and the ethics of exposure.”<sup>38</sup>

Community-based archives, many of which exist entirely online,<sup>39</sup> continue to contend with issues related to the intended audiences and scope of their digital presence. Others have questioned whether an online environment is the right place for sensitive materials at all.<sup>40</sup> A significant concern with placing materials online relates to Helen Nissenbaum’s theory of contextual integrity, in which information created in one context takes on new meanings, becoming radically altered and potentially harmful when circulated online.<sup>41</sup> In one example, Cifor describes how materials related to early AIDS activism “frequently circulate and are appropriated in ways divorced from the context of their production.”<sup>42</sup> Elsewhere, T.L. Cowan proposes the term *X-Reception* to describe the infinitely multiplying variables and sites of reception and circulation that are created when performance materials from vulnerable communities are placed online and emphasizes

<sup>37</sup> McKinney, *Information Activism*, 157.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>39</sup> Born-digital community-based archives that have emerged in the last decade include the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), A People’s Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, the Digital Transgender Archive, the Pittsburgh Queer History Project, the Rise Up! Feminist Digital Archive, and Alternative Toronto. The financial demands and operating costs of a physical location, including rent, utilities, insurance, and the need to maintain proper storage conditions for housing archival materials, are likely additional factors contributing to the shift toward digital archives, particularly for community-based archives with limited budgets and resources.

<sup>40</sup> Cowan and Rault, “Onlining Queer Acts,” 121–42.

<sup>41</sup> Helen Nissenbaum, “Protecting Privacy in an Information Age: The Problem of Privacy in Public,” *Law and Philosophy* 17, no. 5 (1998): 559–96, <https://nissenbaum.tech.cornell.edu/papers/privacy.pdf>.

<sup>42</sup> Cifor, “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me,” 144.

the need to weigh the benefits with the potential risks that come from shifting “infrastructures of intimate reception, to the scenario of potentially open-access online platforms.”<sup>43</sup> For magnetic media, which may have sat dormant and inaccessible for years or decades before being revived on newly acquired playback equipment, the gap between the contexts in which these materials were created, the original audiences, and the current landscape, in which the materials are now being viewed, is likely significant. In addition, attempts to identify subjects and seek permissions from contributors are further hindered by the inherent opacity of the medium, which requires viewers to have access to playback equipment that is often difficult to source to even view the content.

When it comes to decisions about making materials available online, Cowan cautions that adding take-down policies and attempting to obtain copyright permissions do not cover the extent of archivists’ ethical responsibilities to creating communities.<sup>44</sup> In Cowan and Jasmine Rault’s endeavours to develop the Cabaret Commons, an open-source digital platform for archiving trans-feminist and queer (TFQ) performances in Canada, the authors were confronted with the risks of circulating and onlining materials created within intimate networks, especially when creators and subjects could not be identified and where even attempting to seek this permission might induce harm.<sup>45</sup> While some of the TFQ performance artists wanted their work available online, others were adamantly opposed to having material available outside the community in which it was created, making it difficult to achieve consensus and ethically proceed with the project.

Cifor describes similar challenges faced by the Visual AIDS organization in developing Artist+ Registry, a digital archive created to showcase the work of self-identified HIV-positive artists.<sup>46</sup> Several artists were interested in contributing works for an on-site exhibition; however, those same artists did not want to be featured in an online directory that was searchable and more public in nature,

43 Cowan, “X-Reception,” 157. Cowan’s concept of X-Reception is an expansion of Beth Coleman’s theory of X-reality, outlined in B. Coleman, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

44 Cowan, “X-Reception,” 163.

45 Cowan and Rault, “Onlining Queer Acts,” 121–42; T.L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault, “The Labour of Being Studied in a Free Love Economy,” *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 14, no. 3 (2014): 471–88, <https://ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/issue/14-3ephemera-aug14.pdf#page=165>.

46 Cifor, “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me,” 153–99.

as “inclusion in the Artist+ Registry made the privacy of their serostatus too public, specifically for those whose jobs may require working with the public.”<sup>47</sup> Cifor’s case study of the Artist+ Registry project demonstrates that consent in one context does not equate to consent across all contexts.

## Practising an Ethics of Care

As filmmaker and queer media scholar Alexandra Juhasz writes, the rapidly advancing degredation of magnetic media directly and disproportionately impacts marginalized communities, who are “always fighting for a small and fragile hold on representational practice even as the dominant culture resists, powerfully.”<sup>48</sup> McKinney and Hazel Meyer also point out that when mainstream archives do engage in audiovisual preservation, they often assign archival value to certain types of content and subject matter, thus prioritizing specific voices and perspectives at the exclusion of others.<sup>49</sup> What emerges from the literature is both a desire for and an urgent need to apply what Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor term a “feminist ethics of care”<sup>50</sup> to archival efforts related to vulnerable communities – particularly for collections with materials that are sensitive in nature and format. In a feminist ethics approach, archivists take on a caregiving role, employing radical empathy to acknowledge and honour their connections and affective responsibilities to records creators, subjects,

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>48</sup> Alexandra Juhasz, “VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and ‘Queer Cinema,’” in *The Oxford Handbook of Queer Cinema*, ed. Ronald Gregg and Amy Villarejo (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 636, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190877996.001.0001>.

<sup>49</sup> Cait McKinney and Hazel Meyer, “Play, Rewind, Repeat: Queer Porn Archives and the Digital Afterlives of VHS,” in *Tape Condition: Degraded* (n.p.: n.p., 2016), <https://caitmckinney.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TCD.pdf>. McKinney and Meyer detail their experiences creating *Tape Condition: degraded*, an exhibition on queer porn archives and VHS tapes at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), rebranded as The ArQuives in 2019.

<sup>50</sup> Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, “From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 81 (Spring 2016): 23–43, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557/14916>.

users, donors,<sup>51</sup> and their communities.<sup>52</sup> In community-based archives, where volunteers and members take on various roles within the archive, the boundaries between these groups often overlap or start to collapse,<sup>53</sup> further necessitating the adoption of a holistic, mutually beneficial, and culturally situated approach to archiving practices. If community members do not want their materials kept at all – a reality Harrison Apple faced in developing the Pittsburgh Queer History Project – archivists must also honour their right of refusal.<sup>54</sup> The necessities of addressing these possibilities and concerns only become more critical given the advancing degrescent state of magnetic media; there might not be another time to make these decisions.

Respecting the wishes and desires of marginalized communities involves prioritizing the community over the archive. Discussing interviews conducted with volunteers of the Lakeland Digital Archive, a documentary heritage project in an African American community outside Washington, DC, Katrina Fenlon et al. reported that participants tended to place more emphasis on the future sustainability of the community itself and less on the archive.<sup>55</sup> These findings align with Alycia Sellie et al.'s case study of the Interference Archive, an activist archive in Brooklyn, whose members tended to view building connections, maintaining relationships, and providing resources for social movement networks as the primary goals of the archive.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, Apple has adopted Eve Tuck's desire-based framework<sup>57</sup> in their research and archival work to centre

51 Itza A. Carbajal, "The Politics of Being an Archival Donor: Defining the Affective Relationship Between Archival Donors and Archivists," in "Radical Empathy in Archival Practice," ed. Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez, Jasmine Jones, Shannon O'Neill, and Holly A. Smith, special issue, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3, no. 2 (2021): 1–26. Carbajal proposes the addition of donors as a fifth node on Caswell and Cifor's "web of mutual affective responsibility." Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 24.

52 Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics," 23–43.

53 Gracen Brilmyer, Joyce Gabiola, Jimmy Zavala, and Michelle Caswell, "Reciprocal Archival Imaginaries: The Shifting Boundaries of 'Community' in Community Archives," *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 6–48, <https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13695/15093>.

54 Apple, "'I Can't Wait for You to Die,'" 110–37.

55 Katrina Fenlon, Jessica Grimmer, Alia Reza, and Courtnie Thurston, "'Meaning in the Present': Understanding Sustainability for Digital Community Collections," *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 58, no. 1 (2021): 445–49, <https://doi.org/10.1002/pa2.476>.

56 Sellie et al., "Interference Archive," 453–72.

57 Eve Tuck, "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 3 (2009): 409–27, <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>.

the interests of donors and community members.<sup>58</sup> In doing so, Apple is shifting away from prioritizing acquisition in favour of approaches that afford “preservation in place,”<sup>59</sup> including teaching community members how to use new technologies and making copies of materials to be distributed exclusively among members’ own personal networks.

A feminist ethics approach can generate consideration regarding how archival materials can be activated over time in respectful ways that give as much to the community as they do to the broader public – if not more. In a companion essay to her experimental film *Video Remains*, Juhasz writes of the power that video and nostalgia have to “allow for a refiguring of time and feeling . . . that can become collective and potentially productive of new feelings and knowledge.”<sup>60</sup> Juhasz describes a praxis she terms “queer archive activism,” which involves engaging with archival media to remember and reanimate the past to inform contemporary activist movements. Apple, however, argues that, as archivists, “we are not entitled to a queer past”<sup>61</sup> – a prescient reminder that the impulse to archive should never supersede the interests of the community. Understanding these interests – and the contexts surrounding the creation, custody, and circulation of material community memory – requires a significant amount of time and resources: to build, repair, and sustain relationships with community members; to design, co-design, or redesign archiving activities and existing workflows to centre community interests and contexts; and to advocate for these steps as necessary to achieving ethical archival outcomes. The ability to apply these “slower”<sup>62</sup> approaches to interactions with magnetic media materials and their creating communities is challenged by, among other factors, the degrescence of these formats and the neoliberal priorities of contemporary funding models.

58 Apple, “I Can’t Wait for You to Die,” 133.

59 Ibid., 134.

60 Alexandra Juhasz, “Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 321–22.

61 Apple, “I Can’t Wait for You to Die,” 112.

62 Kimberly Christen and Jane Anderson, “Toward Slow Archives,” *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 87–116, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09307-x>. Building on their work alongside Indigenous communities, Christen and Anderson present “slow archiving” as a decolonizing framework and praxis that emphasize relationality and prioritize the design of ethical processes over products (e.g., digitization outputs). Crucially, this model aims to facilitate a shift in archival thinking around the collection, stewardship, and provision of access to Indigenous cultural heritage materials, whereby the act of slowing down affords space and time for critical reflection and relationship building.

Additionally, while community-based archives are often required by granting bodies to demonstrate in their funding applications that they provide wide access, providing this kind of access does not adequately account for the affective outcomes that come from engaging with these materials. In her exploration of affect theory as it relates to the archival profession, Cifor writes that recognizing and respecting the affective relationships that marginalized communities have to their materials is central to developing archives that disrupt traditional power imbalances and support social justice aims.<sup>63</sup> Centring the desires and experiences of individuals and communities who are connected to the materials, seeking to understand the contexts in which they were created, and acknowledging that archival records produce a range of affective responses will necessarily inform whether providing unfettered access to these materials is appropriate, or even wanted.

Enacting an ethics of care involves resisting the dominant neoliberal archival impulse to prioritize open, online access in favour of envisioning spaces that could (and should) accommodate private, closed, and off-line interactions between community members and their materials. Crucially, open and/or online access promises engagement, but it cannot guarantee the level or quality of engagement. Uploading a digitized version of a fading VHS tape can potentially make the content accessible to a seemingly infinite number of people (with Internet access) across the globe, whereas hosting a small viewing party to show that same videotape in a physical location may provide space for only 20 people. Yet, if those 20 people engage in discourse, make new connections, and share their own experiences and affective responses *in communion* with each other, as the following case study of the VHS Archives Working Group demonstrates, is that activation not just as valuable? Is it *more* valuable? And, depending on the material, is it more appropriate? This is not to say that it is impossible to have these forms of engagement online as well – only that measuring engagement through website analytics does not and cannot accurately account for the affective responses that come from experiencing the materials, raising concerns for the majority of funders and granting bodies that rely on these metrics to demonstrate impact in quantifiable and neoliberal terms.

63 Marika Cifor, "Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse," *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016): 7–31, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-015-9261-5>.

## Case Study: VHS Archives

VHS Archives is a cross-media project developed by Juhasz that “considers (by doing) what might be some best (and/or queer) practices about video, archives, activism, teaching, queer/feminist community-making, and the digital.”<sup>64</sup> The project began in 2017 and has expanded over the years to include a working group, a small digital repository, and a series of graduate-level courses, cotaught by Juhasz, for students at Brooklyn College and the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). Each of these iterations of the project explores methods for ethically interacting with and reactivating queer media archives, using items from Juhasz’ personal collection of VHS tapes, amassed during her research in the late 1980s on media related to AIDS activism,<sup>65</sup> as a starting point. This case study primarily explores the efforts and outputs of the VHS Archives Working Group while also briefly touching on later expansions of the project, which present additional models for continuing this work in the future.

### The VHS Archives Working Group

The VHS Archives Working Group, led by Juhasz, was a collective of scholars, students, librarians, archivists, technologists, and community members interested in identifying best practices for engaging with VHS collections.<sup>66</sup> The project was a multi-year initiative, funded by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and sponsored by the Center for the Humanities at CUNY.<sup>67</sup> Recognizing the unique materiality of magnetic media and their significant role in the documentation of queer, activist, and racialized communities, the group came together to collectively address “the difficulties, surprises, losses, and bounty

<sup>64</sup> Juhasz, “VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and ‘Queer Cinema,’” 635.

<sup>65</sup> Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore Kerr, “Stacked on Her Office Shelf: Stewardship and AIDS Archives,” Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center, City University of New York, January 13, 2017, <https://centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/stacked-on-her-office-shelf-stewardship-and-aids-archives>.

<sup>66</sup> Graduate Center, City University of New York, “VHS Archives,” Center for the Humanities, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/public-engagement/working-groups/vhs-archives>.

<sup>67</sup> Graduate Center, City University of New York, “Public Engagement,” Center for the Humanities, accessed December 2, 2021, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/public-engagement>.

that adhere to the task of collecting, preserving, and facilitating access”<sup>68</sup> to these materials. By acknowledging these affective aspects and considering their related ethical questions and anxieties, the group effectively took up Cifor’s invitation to engage with affect theory in archival endeavours.<sup>69</sup>

From 2017 to 2020, the working group met in person on a monthly basis to present magnetic media encountered in their personal archives and professional research activities.<sup>70</sup> In one meeting, archivist Michael Grant spoke of unexpectedly uncovering a rare episode of a public access television program produced and hosted by a transgender African American woman in the late 1990s.<sup>71</sup> The program had appeared without context at the end of a VHS tape in a collection of educational videos, and Grant, acknowledging the potential research value of the tape, discussed the tension between this value and the ethical implications of digitizing and making the material available online, thereby exposing the host to an unintended audience.

Writing about the meeting, fellow archivist and group member Rachel Mattson described how Grant’s presentation sparked the working group to imagine alternative access models for queer archival materials.<sup>72</sup> Adopting an ethics-oriented framework, the collective envisioned two interconnected spaces, one online and one off-line, for activating these materials. The first, titled Party Games, involved individual community members hosting small numbers of participants (partygoers) for a variety of in-person activities (party games) of the members’ choosing.<sup>73</sup> Activities might include making art, recording oral histories, and performing re-enactments. For group member Tara Mateik’s party game, partygoers were invited to don 1990s-themed clothing and “bring an object or image

68 Alexandra Juhasz, “The Work(s) of the VHS Archives Working Group,” Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center, City University of New York, August 16, 2018, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/the-works-of-the-vhs-archives-working-group>.

69 Cifor, “Affecting Relations,” 7–31.

70 Juhasz, “VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and ‘Queer Cinema,’” 639.

71 Rachel Mattson, “Queer Histories, Videotape, and the Ethics of Reuse,” Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center, City University of New York, December 18, 2017, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/queer-histories-videotape-and-the-ethics-of-reuse>.

72 Mattson, “Queer Histories.”

73 Alexandra Juhasz, “Party Games with VHS Archives,” Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center, City University of New York, December 19, 2018, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/party-games-with-vhs-archives>.

that relates to an interior, private, and emotionally charged place.”<sup>74</sup> Examples of objects brought by partygoers included diaries, photographs, and a collection of postcards from hospital waiting rooms. Mateik screened previously unreleased raw footage from his documentary *Homecoming Queens*, after which participants discussed “the complication of making public and distributing works that expose emotionally and politically charged interior and private spaces”<sup>75</sup> and collaborated on creating a zine to further delve into these questions. For Mateik and his partygoers, the physical zine became a tangible memory of the affective experience of viewing the documentary – a new artifact that bridged the gap between queer history and contemporary experience.

Intertwined with the Party Games model was the development of an open-source tool and website called the Analog Archives.<sup>76</sup> As Juhasz explains, the tool was designed (with the collaboration of three community partners, including XFR Collective and a design practice) as an online space to host a small number of digitized videos.<sup>77</sup> These videos, which the collective called short stacks, could be uploaded by partygoers through the project’s GitHub page. The videos could then be engaged with either online or at a party game, with the Analog Archives website serving as a point of connection for the various members’ stacks. In keeping with the collective’s intention to practice an ethical approach to access and reuse, the online experience of the Analog Archives was imagined as a closed, invitation-only space with clearly outlined, community-specific rules of engagement for participation.

In the description of their proposed model(s), the VHS Archives Working Group members state their commitment to prioritizing the safety and care of the people involved as well as the materials.<sup>78</sup> Juhasz summarizes the principles that guided the group’s approaches, which include designing preservation and digitization initiatives thoughtfully and with purpose; building context for

74 Tara Mateik, “Hard Copies: Homecoming Queens,” Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center, City University of New York, July 31, 2019, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/hard-copies-homecoming-queens>.

75 Mateik, “Hard Copies.”

76 Alexandra Juhasz, “‘Our Shelf Is a Table with Shared Stuff’: From VHS to Analog Archives,” Center for the Humanities, Graduate Center, City University of New York, August 16, 2019, <https://www.centerforthehumanities.org/distributaries/end-of-year-reflections-on-the-vhs-archives-working-group>.

77 Juhasz, “Party Games with VHS Archives”; Alexandra Juhasz, “My VHS Archives Party,” *Media Praxis* (blog), November 20, 2018, <https://aljean.wordpress.com/2018/11/20/my-vhs-archives-party>.

78 Juhasz, “Party Games with VHS Archives.”

materials while avoiding unwanted exposure of their creators and subjects; and resisting scaling projects to the point where it becomes untenable for community members to manage and safeguard their materials. Although Juhasz states that neither the Party Games model nor the Analog Archives tool should be viewed as archiving or accessibility projects, the VHS Archives Working Group has effectively created a framework that could be adopted by archivists and a wide range of community-based archives.

Unfortunately, the VHS Archives Working Group no longer appears to be active. Although videos and posts created by the collective are still available on the Center for the Humanities website, the dedicated landing page for the project now redirects and the promise of the Analog Archives tool, as it was first envisioned by the group, has yet to be fully realized.

During the time that the VHS Archives Working Group was regularly meeting, Juhasz also developed and taught an experimental course, alongside media artist and educator Jennifer McCoy, to graduate students of the CUNY Master of Arts and Brooklyn College's Performance and Interactive Media Arts (PIMA) programs, with the expressed desire of "making archives of old things usable for contemporary communities."<sup>79</sup> The course, also titled VHS Archives, involved students engaging with 12 digitized tapes from Juhasz' collection relating to AIDS and activism to create original research and creative media projects that brought these materials into dialogue with the efforts of present-day AIDS activist groups. Inspired by the tapes' contents and the "ethical research practices and archival art impulses that were covered in [the] coursework,"<sup>80</sup> students sought connections with the filmmakers and community-based activist organizations and drew on the images and issues presented in the videos to create their final group projects. These projects, which included an activist performance art show and media for a campaign on safe consumption sites, point to the continued relevancy of magnetic media for marginalized communities and provide stirring examples of how these materials can be ethically reactivated to support political and social change in contemporary society. A second edition of the VHS Archives graduate-level course was offered in the fall of 2020, and Juhasz has continued to teach similar courses related to ethically minded interactions with archival

79 Alexandra Juhasz and Jennifer McCoy, "Re-energizing VHS Collections, Expanding Knowledge: A Conversation about VHS Archives," *KULA* 2, no. 1 (2018): 4, <https://doi.org/10.5334/kula.24>.

80 Juhasz, "VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and 'Queer Cinema,'" 641.

materials to students at CUNY, Brooklyn College, and Queens College. The core component of these courses continues to involve students interacting with items from Juhasz' videotape collection.

### VHS Activism Archive

The VHS Archives Project has also evolved through the collaborative development of the VHS Activism Archive,<sup>81</sup> an online repository and open educational resource (OER) that provides descriptive information on Juhasz' video collection as well as links to VHS Archives course syllabi, course materials, and related video archives that share a similar focus on preserving magnetic media from queer, activist, and artist communities. The repository is part of Brooklyn College's OER pilot project and is hosted on the Omeka content management platform.<sup>82</sup>

While the VHS Archives Working Group is no longer active, the spirit of the collective's work can be felt in the VHS Activism Archive. The repository includes item-level descriptions for all 184 items in Juhasz' video collection; however, only a select few items have been digitized with embedded streams of the content or external links to view the material on other platforms. Additionally, a portion of the site requires a login (with no option for direct registration), indicating that a layer of mediated access has been incorporated into the design of the repository.

The VHS Activism Archive project team has also collaborated on programming related to the collection, including public screenings and discussions of archival activist videos, in collaboration with the Interference Archive, and the creation of a zine with the performance art collective Feedback Loop.<sup>83</sup> By incorporating elements of off-line and invitation-only online experiences, the VHS Activism Archive can be seen to be embracing aspects of both the Party Games model and the Analog Archives tool.

As with many community archives, the VHS Activism Archive stems from a personal collection<sup>84</sup> and a collecting impulse to preserve not only these materials

81 VHS Activism Archive, "About," accessed July 28, 2023, <https://activismvhs.omeka.net/about>.

82 VHS Activism Archive, "Alexandra Juhasz AIDS Activism VHS Collection," accessed July 28, 2023, <https://activismvhs.omeka.net/collections/show/3>.

83 VHS Activism Archive, "Archived Spring 2022 PIMA 7020: Feedback Loop," accessed July 28, 2023, <https://activismvhs.omeka.net/collections/show/14>.

84 Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd, "Whose Memories, Whose Archives?," 79.

but also the voices, images, and artistic legacies of the filmmakers and artists who created the tapes – and with whom Juhasz has or had personal relationships. The affective nature of the archive can be felt throughout the collection, as descriptions of the items often include comments from Juhasz that contextualize the materials and these relationships. Juhasz notes that the videotapes were primarily gifted by members of her personal network for the purpose of enabling pedagogy or research.<sup>85</sup> While there is stated interest in expanding the archive by adding original works that have been created in response to the videos (most likely by students in the VHS Archives courses) and enhancing descriptions of existing videos in the collection through community contributions, it is clear that this growth is being carefully undertaken in consideration of the relational nature of the collection. The site includes a notice stating that the tapes are digitized only if permission to do so has been obtained,<sup>86</sup> indicating an awareness that personal connections to donors cannot substitute for consent from the filmmakers and creators. Where tapes have been digitized, they are often accompanied by annotations from students, primary source materials, and references that provide both contemporary and historical context for the materials. While there can be no guarantee that material circulated online will be used exclusively for the intended purposes (in this case, teaching and research), explicitly stating this intention on the site, incorporating layers of mediation between descriptions of the materials and the content itself as appropriate, and providing rich referential information to accompany (or stand in for) the videos strongly suggest that measures have been taken to preserve the contextual integrity of the collection and the agency of the tapes' creators.

The VHS Activism Archive is an encouraging extension of the VHS Archives Project first envisioned by Juhasz in 2017; however, the lingering sustainability issues inherent with short-term project-based funding and community archives<sup>87</sup> require a degree of cautiousness alongside the optimism. Sustaining community is not concerned solely with preserving an archive's contents; it is also about attending to the interests of community members, recognizing the affective relationships within communities (of which the material may be a conduit), and designing approaches and opportunities that oblige ethically minded encounters

<sup>85</sup> VHS Activism Archive, "FAQs," accessed July 28, 2023, <https://activismvhs.omeka.net/faqs>.

<sup>86</sup> VHS Activism Archive, "FAQs."

<sup>87</sup> Jules, *Architecting Sustainable Futures*, 2.

with these materials. It requires that others continue to take up the shared ethos of those involved in the VHS Archives Project and similar community-minded initiatives (and in a timely fashion) to develop an archival praxis for the care of magnetic media. The vibrant cultures and histories documented on fading magnetic tape are more than worthy of this attention.

## Looking Ahead with Love and Hope

The case study presented in this article provides a compelling model for how community members, archivists, students, educators, and media preservationists can engage with the ethical questions and affective impacts related to access, preservation, and reuse of magnetic media. When videotape and other magnetic formats first emerged as documentary media, they provided marginalized communities with outlets for representation, identity-making, and creative expression, making visible voices and perspectives that had been absent from and excluded by traditional broadcast platforms and in dominant media narratives.<sup>88</sup> As Juhasz underscores, the impending degrescence of magnetic media disproportionately impacts the vulnerable communities that relied on and embraced their potential.<sup>89</sup> The disappearance of these materials could signal another act of remarginalization and an upholding of the archival status quo,<sup>90</sup> particularly when cultural heritage institutions, limited by budgets and resources for digitization, decide which materials (and in effect, whose stories) to prioritize for preservation.<sup>91</sup> Conversely, the wide circulation of these materials beyond their intended audiences and without the consent of their creating communities can also act to remarginalize communities and lead to the loss of their ownership and autonomy.

<sup>88</sup> Cifor, "Your Nostalgia is Killing Me," 66–67; Hill, "Attention! Production! Audience!," 8–29; Mattson, "Who Cares for Community-Based Video?"; Patterson, "The Hidden History of 'Guerrilla Television.'"

<sup>89</sup> Juhasz, "VHS Archives, Committed Media Praxis, and 'Queer Cinema,'" 636.

<sup>90</sup> Margaret Byrne, "Conference Report on 'Preservation,'" *MAIN: Media Arts Information Network*, October–November 1994, 21, quoted in Lindsay Kistler Mattock, "Media Arts Centers as Alternative Archival Spaces: Investigating the Development of Archival Practices in Non-Profit Media Organizations" (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2014), 122, [https://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/22859/1/Mattock\\_ETD.pdf](https://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/22859/1/Mattock_ETD.pdf).

<sup>91</sup> McKinney and Meyer, "Play, Rewind, Repeat," 4; Troy, "A Report from the Trenches," 92–93.

Magnetic media have stories to tell, but respecting the agency of the storytellers matters more. The preservation of magnetic media is an urgent concern; however, archiving practices, and the funding models that support this work, must be designed (or redesigned) and informed by an ethics of care. Collectives and non-profit organizations focused on democratizing video preservation, including the CineMabilia project, XFR Collective, and BAVC Media, have provided many community-based archives with resources to perform small-scale digitization work. However, many of these archives still rely on project-based funding (in addition to donations and volunteer labour).<sup>92</sup> When funding bodies and granting organizations require the provision of wide access, quick returns, and measurable impacts,<sup>93</sup> this can have the unintended result of compromising the values and intentions of the communities these materials originated from and ignoring the ethical responsibilities of the archivist to meaningfully demonstrate community-oriented care. Instead, what is needed is for funding bodies and granting institutions to recognize the affective relationships between vulnerable communities and their materials and, in doing so, to move away from requiring these communities to provide wide, unrestricted access to these materials in favour of allowing community members to decide which levels of access are appropriate. Open access has increasingly become synonymous with online access; however, this level of access is not always in the best interests of vulnerable communities. As several archival scholars caution, the open-access movement has the potential to further decontextualize materials, and it risks exposing community members to harm or even inflicting harm on people, particularly those who may be unaware of (or who have not consented to) the circulation of their materials to unknown or broader audiences.<sup>94</sup>

In 2017, Rachel Mattson referred to the work of video preservation as an act of practising “tenderness in the face of the magnetic media crisis.”<sup>95</sup> This is a

92 Apple, “‘I Can’t Wait for you to Die,’” 130; McKinney, *Information Activism*, 162; Gilliland and Flinn, “Community Archives,” 12; Jules, *Architecting Sustainable Futures*, 18; Sellie et al., “Interference Archives,” 462.

93 Cifor and Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique,” 1–22.

94 Christen, “Does Information Really Want to Be Free?,” 2870–93; Cifor, “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me,” 1–286; Cifor and Lee, “Towards an Archival Critique,” 1–22; Cowan, “X-Reception,” 155–66; Cowan and Rault, “Onlining Queer Acts,” 121–42.

95 Rachel Mattson, “Tenderness in the Face of (the Magnetic Media) Crisis . . . & Other Archival Dilemmas” (presentation, The New School, New York, NY, November 2017), <https://aljean.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/2018-mattson-tendernessmmcrisis.pdf>.

helpful framework for considering the inherent vulnerabilities of the creating communities and of the medium itself. Expanding Mattson's approach requires an exploration of how these acts of tenderness can relate to and counter the neoliberal impulse and the increasing pressure to provide open access to cultural materials. While the ethical issues raised by both the VHS Archives Working Group and Cowan and Rault, through their work with the Cabaret Commons,<sup>96</sup> may appear insurmountable, they relate to imperative questions that must be addressed at the *start* of any projects related to preservation and remediation of magnetic media from vulnerable communities, not considered as afterthoughts. Preservation cannot come before considerations of access and of what constitutes ethical reuse. Embracing and engaging with the complexities of these questions will lead to the design of spaces and approaches to preservation that prioritize the safety and agency of vulnerable communities, honour acts of archival refusal, and respect the intimate environments in which the materials were originally created.<sup>97</sup>

The multi-layered VHS Archives Project has created a variety of resources that can serve as helpful starting points for incorporating an ethics of care into preservation activities. These include (1) a set of guiding principles<sup>98</sup> that could be incorporated into digital preservation courses and community archiving training workshops, where the emphasis is often on mastering the technical aspects of preservation and the creation of descriptive collection inventories; (2) a model for designing research projects<sup>99</sup> that allow students to practice creative and ethical reactivations of magnetic materials from marginalized communities; and (3) a collection of practical examples for workshops, events, and programs<sup>100</sup> that are applicable for a range of audiences and environments.

In an eloquent call to action that acknowledges precarity while still imagining possibility, Juhasz describes the practice of queer archive activism as one that

<sup>96</sup> Cowan and Rault, "Onlining Queer Acts," 121–42; Cowan and Rault, "The Labour of Being Studied," 471–88.

<sup>97</sup> Cowan and Rault, "Onlining Queer Acts," 121–42; Cowan and Rault, "The Labour of Being Studied," 471–88; Juhasz, "Party Games with VHS Archives."

<sup>98</sup> Juhasz, "Party Games with VHS Archives."

<sup>99</sup> Juhasz and McCoy, "Re-energizing VHS Collections."

<sup>100</sup> Graduate Center, City University of New York, "VHS Archives: About the Working Group," Center for the Humanities, accessed July 28, 2023, <https://centerforthehumanities.org/public-engagement/working-groups/vhs-archives>.

“adds love and hope to time and technology.”<sup>101</sup> The VHS Archives Working Group’s proposals for Party Games and the Analog Archives – both of which envision and accommodate private, communal, and off-line experiences with magnetic media materials – are two exciting examples of what this work could look like. Similarly, the VHS Archives course materials and the VHS Activism Archive provide additional models for teaching and adopting these approaches in practice – both in archival studies programs and within the profession writ large.

Another suggestion is for archivists and community groups to collaborate on the development of policies on ethical reuse that can accompany the copyright and fair-dealing statements that appear on archival websites and online repositories and in reading rooms. Doing so would surface some of the ethical issues related to preserving and facilitating access, particularly to materials from marginalized communities, and educate the archival public on these considerations. Archivists can also play an advocacy role by recommending revisions to the current requirements mandated by granting bodies for preservation programs and digitization projects to allow for community-determined provisions of access.

The impending magnetic media crisis – at once a race against time and against technological obsolescence – presents a powerful opportunity to counter neoliberal expectations of open access and wide use; advocate for responsive, community-centred funding models; and further propel the archival profession toward a sweeping and necessary adoption of an ethics of care. By attending to the specific needs of vulnerable communities through the prioritization of a feminist ethics approach at the outset of any archival efforts, archivists can make the preservation of magnetic media a generative and caring act that critically explores and imagines new avenues to experience, support, and sustain these communities and their materials.

<sup>101</sup> Juhasz, “Video Remains,” 328.

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