Epilogue

Doing Lesbian Feminism in an Age of Information Abundance

"THE PATRIARCHY IS A PYRAMID SCHEME" reads the hand-painted sign held aloft by the artist and activist Ginger Brooks Takahashi, who stands in front of a densely postered wall at the 2006 New York Art Book Fair (figure E.1). The sign's red letters look finger painted and a bit as if they are written in menstrual blood, in the style of Judy Chicago's deep-lez Central Core Imagery.[1] They follow a crude typography that stretches and compresses to accommodate the upside-down black triangle in the placard's center. Although it's hard to make out in the photo, Takahashi wears a baseball cap emblazoned with a fist inside a Venus symbol, the woman-power emblem familiar from second-wave lesbian-feminist typography. This is mid-2000s queer lesbian-feminist revival. Handmade aesthetics, second-wave protest techniques, and a critique of patriarchy appear alongside clear markers that locate the image in a later time: the upside-down triangle symbol made famous by ACT UP and Queer Nation and Takahashi's role as a founding member of LTTR, the feminist genderqueer artists' collective and journal (2001–2006) whose first issue was titled "Lesbians to the Rescue."[2]

The artist A. L. Steiner took the photo as part of the larger multimedia project *The Patriarchy Is a Pyramid Scheme* (2008), but that is not how most people encounter it today. Instead, the image lives on via Instagram, the retailer Otherwild, and the hashtag #thepatriarchyisapyramidscheme. Otherwild is a store and graphic design studio based in Los Angeles and New York that makes contemporary clothing and housewares, some of which are based on archival images from lesbian-feminist activist histories drawn from Instagram. Promoting its work through social media, the retailer has partnered with the popular Instagram account @h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y to produce wearable encounters with lesbian-feminist print ephemera.

FIGURE E.1 A. L. Steiner with Ginger Brooks Takahashi, "Untitled (The Patriarchy Is a Pyramid Scheme)," digital photograph, 2006. Courtesy of the artists.

On Otherwild's ecommerce site, users can buy a "The Patriarchy Is a Pyramid Scheme" T-shirt for $40. The white, long-sleeved shirt is screen-printed with Takahashi's sign, which emblazons the wearer's chest: same blood-red color, same hand-drawn font, same black triangle. Users shopping the site confront an image of a model wearing the shirt standing in front of a woven, Pride-rainbow wall-hanging. The model is posing in a way that replicates Takahashi's sign-holding posture. When the user rolls over the image of the model, the graphic flips to Steiner's original photo of Takahashi.[3]

Otherwild's Instagram account, which boasts eighty thousand followers, also shares the archival photos that form the basis of the company's clothing. Those who buy and wear the shirt are encouraged to share selfies under hashtags such as #thepatriarchyisapyramidscheme. Users who take the time to read Otherwild's Instagram captions encounter a brief history

of the original photo and are reminded that the patriarchy taken on by their queer and lesbian predecessors is alive and well, theirs to inherit and dismantle: "Systemic patriarchal oppression and racism are multilayered and multi-functional, often hiding themselves so successfully that they're ineffable, invisible, and unquestioned. With this phrase, the name of the game is exposed and its players laid bare."[4] Users also learn that Otherwild donates 25 percent of sales from this particular shirt to ENLACE, an antiracist prison abolition organization focused on women of color.[5] The rest is split by Takahashi, Dean Daderko, Steiner, and Otherwild, who came to this arrangement after some acrimony over whose work is represented on the shirt—Steiner's photo or the concept for the sign, developed collectively out of "a series of social interactions" among Steiner, Daderko, Takahashi and other friends in the early 2000s.[6]

Nostalgia for lesbian feminism is certainly at play here, but this is not a depoliticized longing for the past.[7] Otherwild's interface insists on maintaining connections to each item's historical referent through the site's rollover function—a user cannot "look" at details on a particular item without also browsing its history—the reproduction and its referent are mechanically stitched together. This interface design insists on pedagogical encounters with historical information. At the same time, Otherwild is a business that trades in the abundance of iconography from lesbian history, which is no longer rarefied, marginalized, or subject to erasure in the same ways it once was.

Otherwild's work responds to a desire for encounters with lesbian-feminist activist archives through networked digital interfaces. The sometimes tenuous connection to history is what gives this clothing interest. A navy blue tote bag screen-printed with yellow text that reads "We Are Everywhere" reproduces two images of this popular gay liberation slogan in action: one depicts a pin button from the Lesbian Herstory Archives collection, the other is a photograph of balloons printed with the slogan from a 1978 issue of *Lesbian Tide*.[8] The balloon photograph was taken by Bourge Hathaway at a lesbian rally that took place at the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, though the Otherwild caption reads simply, "'We Are Everywhere' Lesbian Tide, 1978."[9] Without the reference to the button, or the grainy black-and-white photo of the balloons, scanned from a newsletter, the tote bag is still cute, but it's just a tote bag. With the original photos for context, the bag becomes a point of pride, identification, and membership. The "We" invoked on the bag transcends generations and distinctions between digital and analog media, and it brings the archives

out into the streets. This connection to the past is drawn out of digital networks and can be yours, for a price.

Otherwild is merely one player in a larger aestheticized revival of lesbian-feminist history. This aesthetic emerges from an affective and commercial economy in which a wide range of primary source materials are reblogged, scanned, copied, and circulated through social media. Lesbian information is no longer scarce; rather, it is readily available online via digital collections produced by institutional and community archives, artists, and public history projects.[10] These abundant conditions inspire looser ideas about what digitized objects from the past are for, who ought to control them, and how the integrity of the histories they represent should be presented online.

Instagram's photo-sharing cultures are not known for the didactic strength of their captions, but queer and feminist historical Instagram accounts do try to provide context and to name the people pictured in digitized materials.[11] Conflicts often erupt in the comments sections when accounts do not bother to include this information or get it wrong.[12] Some users are reading these posts carefully and critically, suggesting a temporal orientation to Instagram that is at odds with the image-sharing platform's reputation for distracted, perpetual scrolling.[13] Kelly Rakowski's @h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y is the most popular of these accounts, with more than 160,000 followers and a tagline on its profile that qualifies its historical responsibilities as merely social media: this is "A DYKE IG Acct, Not An Archive" responds to the intense representational expectations queer feminist communities express on social media.[14] The tagline also disarticulates @h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y from a specific, *actual* archives with a similar name: the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). Where @h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y and Otherwild are community-oriented "brands" with business interests related to lesbian history, the LHA is a nonprofit community organization committed to the preservation of records related to lesbian politics and life. The archives' own popular Instagram account also uses social media to do outreach with materials the LHA houses, in keeping with its long-standing practice of using media to make materials accessible for those who are unable to visit New York. Though these organizations have different goals, they all operate within a larger economy of attention in which LGBT visibility on social media platforms is leveraged toward neoliberal equity, diversity, and inclusion regimes (think for example, of specially animated #Pride hashtags released by platforms each June). Public libraries, community archives and cultural heritage organizations play a role in this process.[15]

Instagram posts that share lesbian ephemera don't always provide context for the histories they reference, particularly when images and iconography circulate beyond the queer networks that initially gather and digitize this information. For example, Otherwild's first and best-known reproduction is a T-shirt with the slogan "The Future Is Female," based on a photograph of the lesbian folk singer Alix Dobkin wearing the shirt while standing in front of New York City's first women's bookstore, Labyris Books, in 1975. The photo was taken by Dobkin's girlfriend at the time, the photographer Liza Cowan. Forty years later, on May 26, 2015, @h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y posted the image. Labyris Books had created the shirt in 1975 to promote the store and the women's publishing movement. From the present, the garment is difficult to separate rhetorically from histories of trans-exclusionary feminist organizing, particularly given Dobkin's history as a political columnist who often published transphobic views about lesbian feminism.[16] In 2015, the "The Future Is Female" shirt became a uniform for a certain kind of liberal, often white feminist, as it was taken up by Hillary Clinton's supporters during and after her 2016 presidential campaign.[17] What once articulated a commitment to publishing as a form of world building outside patriarchal structures becomes enmeshed in celebrity culture and "lean-in" styles of popular, white feminism aimed at equality for some. The shirt has been knocked off by countless retailers and circulates as mainstream feminist fast fashion. Otherwild's follow-up T-shirt, "The Future Is Female Ejaculation," is willfully less portable.

"The Future Is Female" is an easy slogan to coopt and separate from its lesbian-feminist roots: it is a hopeful, palatable mainstream feminist sentiment grounded in reproductive futurity and a celebration of the category "woman." The very different temporality of "The Patriarchy Is a Pyramid Scheme" locates the need for radical queer feminist practices in both the future and the past: pyramid schemes grow exponentially, but lesbian history is full of tools for dismantling them, including the digital networks that revive all this print ephemera. Photographs, scans from newsletters and other print documents, deeply researched captions, and hashtags all organize lesbian feminist history as information that can be circulated through digital networks.

Images that accounts such as @h_e_r_s_t_o_r_y, @lesbianherstoryarchives, and @lgbt_history choose to share on their feeds frame how Instagram users visualize lesbian history. Most of these users are far too young to have "been there." Like the information activists before them, these accounts use the interface to redress transphobia and white supremacy in

movement histories through photo selection and captioning practices that highlight activism by queer and trans people of color. These efforts at inclusion do not necessarily shift the white gaze through which many queer history Instagram accounts look.[18] As China Medel argues, archivally engaged accounts made and maintained by and for people of color foreground unique aesthetic practices that approach knowing about the past in ways that depart from an emphasis on capture and accumulation.[19]

Instagram and Tumblr—the other image-sharing platform formerly popular with queer users, especially youth—are also subject to platform constraints via profit-oriented practices, including content moderation aimed at upholding "community values."[20] Sisterhood, protest, and aesthetic aspects of dyke culture abound, but there is little overt sexuality. Seminude images, images that are too sexually suggestive, and even Zoe Leonard's 1992 poem *I Want a Dyke for President* are regularly flagged and removed by Instagram. Users fight back, editing images slightly so they conform technically with policies (for example, by placing "stickers" over nipples and genitals), avoiding risky hashtags, altering metadata, or simply reposting an image in the hope that a few hundred more users will catch a glimpse before the offending nipples are taken down once again.

This information work takes places under conditions in which the rapid and abundant online circulation of ephemera from late twentieth-century lesbian-feminist activism has the potential to isolate all of these images from the real, laboring bodies who first made them. Within the flows of online image sharing cultures, T-shirt slogans, and the monetization and mainstreaming of queer and trans history, it is easy to scroll distractedly through these faces, marches, and even memorials. That casual, rapid flick of the thumb characterizing my habitual scroll through Instagram is far removed from the methodical pace at which hundreds of print newsletters might be folded and stamped for mailing by dedicated volunteers. Earlier generations of information activists labored to share whatever good lesbian information they could scrounge up. Historical Instagrams operate within abundant conditions produced precisely by these earlier generations of information activists, who preserved their work in archives. While differences of pace, scale, and rhythm are plain, something else ties this contemporary work with digital technologies to information activism of the past: a media praxis deeply committed to the ongoing, everyday work of managing information. Through tagging, reblogging, and holding other users accountable to the histories they engage, information activists continue working on lesbian-feminist infrastructures within queer digital networks.

Binding original archival references to the contemporary projects that enliven them is a way to slow down the speed at which digital networks operate: take a breath; think about where this comes from; hold space for those who did this work; read the caption or citation. This practice is a way of marking the economic and temporal discontinuities between lesbian historical legibility in the 1970s and today, and a response to information abundance. Finding strategies to cope with feeling overwhelmed by information is a practice shared by earlier information activism with paper tools. A single image comes up over and over again when information activists write about their work: being overwhelmed by too much paper and attempting to stay on top of the influx. Clare Potter describes this feeling in her handbook to indexing in the Circle of Lesbian Indexers:

> I suddenly realized that I had accumulated overnight—or so it seemed—hundreds of 3 × 5 cards. Although they sat quietly in the file drawers in front of me, I began to get this very distinct feeling that they were surreptitiously plotting to disrupt my best laid plans and would in a pique come raining down on me in gleeful anarchy. What I'm intimating here is that the numbers of cards we can safely manage without the help of machines seems finite.[21]

Potter gives life to her paper database of lesbian periodicals. The cards become a rogue army, stalking her from the drawers as they grow their ranks in anticipation of just the right moment to sabotage the system she put in place to order them.

The "very distinct feeling" Potter tries to describe through this image is one of precarity: an existence of "radical contingency," without predictability, security, or guarantees.[22] I have argued that information activists do their work because access to good lesbian information is so *precarious*: unavailable, inconsistent, temporary, or even impossible. Information activism attempts to build stable infrastructures that ameliorate this problem. It also produces more paper on the verge of disorganization or even erasure, through misfiling or neglect. Precarity has a certain temporality experienced when singular agents do not seem to have control over events that have been set in motion.[23] Try as Potter might to keep her collection of cards within the limits of what "we can safely manage" by hand, the collection continued to grow; such is the paradoxical sequence that seems to come along with committing to any information-management project,

particularly ones carried out by activists, on the margins of institutional structures and their supports. What seems like so much possibility at the project's outset—a usable subject guide to all lesbian periodical literature—quickly becomes precisely the project's undoing as information accumulates in unmanageable ways.

Lauren Berlant describes "cruel optimism" as "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object."[24] Lesbian-feminist information is one such problematic object. Digital technology's promise of newer and ever-greater methods of management, preservation, and access are optimistic sites of attachment. Optimism informs the belief that digital archives can remember, commemorate, and preserve. But as Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has shown, digital media rhetoric often conflates storage with memory. For Chun, "Memory is an active process, not static. A memory must be held in order to keep it from moving or fading."[25] Lesbian-feminist work with digital media is an active process of holding, where efforts such as selection and description ensure more than mere storage. But this work is ongoing and incompletable, perpetually chasing after a lasting, usable archive and always trying to catch up.

Berlant understands living with precarity through affective attachments to "good life" fantasies as they motivate ways of being in the present.[26] Good-life fantasies can be individual (love, happiness, a comfortable middle-class life) or they can be collective (about family, a political scene, or dreams of a reciprocal world). The projects I have examined straddle the singular/private and collective/public, imagining information to serve both kinds of good-life fantasies: the figure of the well-informed "lesbian" is used to imagine a political collective with organized demands, but also to shore up livable lives for individual women. This collective-singular tension is expressed in the LHA's founder Joan Nestle's assertion that the archives existed "for any lesbian woman who needed an image or a word to survive the day" and in JR Roberts's hope that her Black lesbian bibliography would "lead to a better understanding of Black lesbian life and that this knowledge [would] help us all as we attempt to revolutionize our relationships with one another."[27] Nestle and Roberts both propose an active stance for those brought into lesbian-feminist information infrastructures, evoking struggle met by revolution. These optimistic scenes stand in contrast to Potter's sense of trying not to get too overwhelmed by her drawers full of index cards.

Potter's words are closer to the register of "styles, active habits, and modes of responsivity" that add up to a politics of getting by.[28] In more re-

cent work, Berlant has described these "getting by" modalities as the "poetics of infrastructure," where regular people find ways to adjust to and work on and in systems not of their own making.[29] These forms of adjustment and improvisation guide what I have argued is a lesbian-feminist approach to information work: carrying on with the routine and repetitive tasks required to achieve a greater "good-life" vision of what information might do for movements. I have argued that lesbian feminism hinges on visions of the future, sometimes modest ones grounded in making lesbian lives more inhabitable, with information.

Potter describes having too much of the thing she sought in the first place: cards. The tyranny of abundance is a common complaint among information activists who face growing pressure exerted by too much stuff and too little time. These conditions shape information activists' everyday approaches to their work processes. Saskia Scheffer at the LHA described her willingness to assign less-than-perfect metadata to a digital image this way: "At some point I just need to get stuff up [online], and I can't spend more time waiting for inspiration."[30] As I have argued, this approach accepts provisionality and welcomes revision, critiquing categorical description's inherent inadequacies to complex forms of life. Here the limitations of time and space have productive effects for the project: at some point, Scheffer just makes a decision because she trusts her judgment and built a system in which she can change that decision later on.

Scheffer, Potter, and other information activists navigate a careful balance between abundance and scarcity, always catching up to the information they work to wrangle. *Matrices*' paper newsletter network made countless connections possible, but these connections outgrew the pages of the newsletter and became impossible to document. The network's success became an obstacle for its very status as a publication. As Berlant explains, optimism is cruel when the "very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place."[31] Here the object/scene of desire—the newsletter, the cards, the ringing telephone, or the archives—continues to produce information in need of management, and activists burn out as they try to keep up.

Community archives bring their own scenes of carrying on in the face of tasks that seem endless. Writers who set the scene of encountering the Lesbian Herstory Archives often try to get across a sense of being overwhelmed by stuff through descriptions of "piles" and "overflow" that are nearly genre writing about the space. The LHA's vertical subject files are

"bulging"; the collections are "overwhelming" and "confusing"; the building's walls are "filled"; the special collections are "piled to the ceiling" and "crammed into every available corner"; the basement is filled with "hundreds of paper documents"; and "the rooms, bathrooms, and closets burst," while "piles of unsorted publications formed a two-foot-high mound in a corner of what was once a bedroom overlooking a tree-lined street."[32] I made this turn myself in the introduction to this book, describing a basement "overcrowded" with "stuff." The feeling of being overwhelmed comes up over and over again, but attempts to address this problem through media practices can end up creating more paper, as with Potter's cards.

The LHA's mandate to preserve and provide access to any records of lesbian lives that otherwise would be lost presents the irony that these lives, once collected, might get lost in the archives' piles. A pivotal scene in Leslie Feinberg's semiautobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) imagines the protagonist Jess leaving a letter for a long-lost lover, Theresa, at an archives that is probably the Lesbian Herstory Archives. Jess writes, "Since I can't mail you this letter, I'll send it to a place where they keep women's memories safe. Maybe someday, passing through this big city, you will stop and read it. Maybe you won't."[33] Ann Cvetkovich reads this scene as emblematic of the LHA's role in making trauma and "erotic feelings the subject of archival history."[34] While rereading *Stone Butch Blues* around the time of Feinberg's death in 2014, as I was working on the research that would become this book, I came to this passage and felt stressed out. Would Jess/Feinberg's letter get accessioned properly? Might it get lost in the piles of materials waiting to be processed—the "unsorted, two-foot high mounds" Jack Gieseking describes? Would Jess remember not only to sign but to mail in the donor agreement form that will allow researchers future online access to the letter? Will the letter get scanned? How will a finding aid describe the complexity of Jess/Feinberg's trans identity in relation to "lesbian?"

These overly technical worries about a piece of paper in *Stone Butch Blues* (a work of fiction) are irrational thoughts furnished by the isolation of academic research and writing. But there is also something here about the impossible temporalities of attachment. An imagined future subject who might shore up or challenge the status quo guides information activists. Archiving the past is work motivated by attachment to this subject in the future. The ongoing management of information about the past generates more and more material for this future subject who is always in the process of arriving, and is only anticipated in certain forms. Put simply, the archives, by its very nature, can never catch up to what, and who, it wants to serve.

Describing the LHA's overwhelming abundance of stuff takes up Cvetkovich's argument that "the history of any archive is a history of space, which becomes the material measure and foundation of the archive's power and visibility as a form of public culture."[35] Remarking on this history of space, Gieseking reads many of the Lesbian Herstory Archives' spatial idiosyncrasies as material evidence of a productive, queer instability. The organized chaos is evidence of how "activist archives are notoriously underfunded and always in process," but it also marks how the "Lesbian Herstory Archives enacts a specific way of destabilizing what *archive* means."[36] These descriptions also set a scene in which lesbian history is always being made, and we are always catching up to its making. As Barbara Godard has argued, the challenge of archives in the twenty-first century is that their once black-boxed processes are being put on display.[37] In placing the archives' digital media practices on display, I situate these practices in an ongoing, perpetual state of information abundance that digital media cannot exactly solve, despite promises that it will do so. All kinds of "digital" media promise mastery over information: the newsletter through its network; the telephone hotline through its "neutral" search-query method; the index cards through their nearly computational ability to store and sort; the digital archives with its promise of access and preservation. Lesbian feminists probe the limits of the digital through resourceful practices that contribute to a gendered history of emergent media technologies: digitization as strategizing and working around constraints.

I have argued that a "digital imperative" shapes the direction of archives in the present, becoming a normative trajectory or standard with the potential to solve the too-much-stuff crisis. This is the same digital imperative that led Potter to consider abandoning her cards for a computer program. Compression is a potent fantasy of digital formats, guiding the development of media infrastructures and technical standards as they encounter users.[38] Compression's potential is a factor when an organization such as the LHA thinks about digitizing the special collections that are "piled to the ceiling" and "crammed into every available corner."[39] Digital collections "compress" the space that materials take up in a number of ways: digitized materials are easier to relocate to offsite storage; fewer visitors need to take up space in the physical archives if they can get what they want online; and, finally, the "fidelity" of original formats is compressed, as in the case of the noise-reduced, streaming-ready MP3s that archives offer in place of cassette tapes. But compression does little to address the ongoing precarious conditions information activists must navigate. Digitization creates

an abundance of data that must be managed, kept track of, stored, and sorted, all processes with which information activists must catch up and stay afloat. Digitization also opens records of lesbian-feminist information activism to contemporary social media, through which their historical specificities may, or may not, be preserved.[40] Somehow these Instagram feeds feel endless—scroll, scroll, scroll, scroll, scroll—although the images they offer merely scratch the surface of what's available.

Rather than a rupture or solution to the archives' problem of stuff, digital media in practice can often seem quite banal: the LHA continues to digitize tape after tape just as it continued to catalog book after book thirty years ago. The differences among media formats matter, but situating digitization at the twenty-first-century archives in a longer genealogy of activism aimed at building lesbian information infrastructures emphasizes continuities and discontinuities among styles of media practice over technologically determined changes.

By connecting lesbian-feminist information from the early 1970s to the present, I have argued that activists have long thought carefully and intentionally about their work with media, whether with paper or an online interface. To be more modest about the digital is not to dismiss or diminish the work information activists do. Quite the opposite. Through media practices, lesbian feminist activists take on a familiar killjoy role, supplanting fantasies of the digital with attention to everyday operations and uses that matter. In refusing to share the same orientation to "good" digital objects, they make room for other possible encounters with digital media.[41] Through the systems they design and the everyday decisions they make, their work brings into relief such vital questions as what access really means, given its often-forgotten gendered dimensions, or how subject classification and metadata perpetuate categorizations that wound.

This work, organized around ongoing negotiations about "lesbian's" relevance and leverage in the past and present, is critical, to be sure. It also puts forward visions of joy motivated by collectivity, the erotics of taking part in a sexual public and the idea that more livable lives in the present might be built out of loving attention paid to the past. Lesbian-feminist information activism intervenes with fantasies of digital mastery and abundance but does so to make room for its own modest practices of keeping up under the precarious weight of information. That there will continue to be more and more paper to do something with ensures a past that matters, a present animated by vital technologies, and a future with value in it.