Afterword

Just as the AIDS pandemic has transformed since the heyday of queer AIDS media in the late 1980s and early 1990s, so too has the media ecology in which social movements and moving-image media intersect. The rapid development of digital video technology in the late 1990s enabled greater access to media production. Higher-quality images could be shot on both consumer and semi-professional equipment, while nonlinear editing software gradually deskilled postproduction to the point of it now being a standard feature in software packages for personal computers. The distribution of digital video images has also been revolutionized by a range of online services and practices that include blogs, peer-to-peer file sharing (BitTorrent), video-uploading sites (YouTube), social networks (Facebook), and collaboratively authored sites (wikis). The processes of convergence involved in this new media ecology are not merely technical but also cultural, facilitating the emergence of what Henry Jenkins has dubbed a new "participatory culture" that has the potential to employ the "collective intelligence" of its users for "serious" purposes and not merely leisure activities.[1] Moreover, the hugely expanded capacity of non-professionals to "archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content" has permitted remix practices to extend well beyond the avant-garde, activist, and subcultural contexts in which they originated.[2] The media piracy now rampant throughout this new media ecology ranges from the radical appropriation of corporate intellectual property to the banality of endless Internet movie parodies and mashups.[3]

So what relationship do queer AIDS media hold to this new media ecology? First, we must acknowledge the variety of ways in which queer AIDS media pioneered practices that have become central to the convergence culture posited by Jenkins. As I discussed in chapter 2, AIDS video activists involved in ACT UP were among the first to exploit the consumer technology of the VHS

camcorder for political purposes. Their lo-fi remix aesthetics spliced their own footage with sounds and images appropriated from broadcast news and music videos, a practice now endemic in the genre of the video mashup. In addition to their pervasive appropriation of mainstream media, AIDS video activists demonstrated a strong commitment to sharing resources and footage that could be reused and refunctioned in different tapes. This nonproprietary relationship to moving images has continued in Web-based grass-roots media networks like Indymedia. The circulation of queer AIDS media in different spaces of exhibition, including political meetings, courtrooms, cable-access television, film festivals, classrooms and art galleries, also anticipates the increasing drive toward the multichannel conception and the dissemination of witnessing projects in the new media ecology. For instance, in his discussion of the strategies developed by the human rights organization WITNESS, Sam Gregory cites the multiple media contexts through which NAKAMATA, a Filipino indigenous land rights organization, disseminated video images of human rights abuses against its members.[4] The footage was screened in the indigenous community, presented as direct evidence of the abuses to police authorities, sold to a prominent national news program, edited into a short video documentary uploaded to the WITNESS Web site for a global audience, and featured in Katerina Cizek and Peter Wintonick's Canadian public television documentary, *Seeing Is Believing: Handicams, Human Rights, and the News* (2002).

It is the archival function of the new media ecology that has proven most valuable to queer AIDS media themselves. Video-streamed virtual archives permit continued access to works without official distribution. For example, James Wentzy has maintained a small online archive of Quicktime files on the DIVA TV Web page, which includes Vito Russo's "Why We Fight" speech as well as other speeches, performances, and actions, while Bob Huff recently uploaded onto YouTube his AIDS activist shorts from the late 1980s and early 1990s, works long out of circulation.[5] But the archival practices enabled by the new media ecology are not limited to the construction of online open repositories of existing work. I want to conclude the present study by briefly considering two ongoing witnessing projects in this new media ecology that deploy specific archival practices not only to preserve the legacy of earlier AIDS activism but also to stimulate new forms of activism. The ACT UP Oral History Project and the SILENT|LISTEN project by the sound collective Ultra Red illuminate how radically different archival practices can bear witness to the present moment in the AIDS pandemic and its historically specific exigencies.

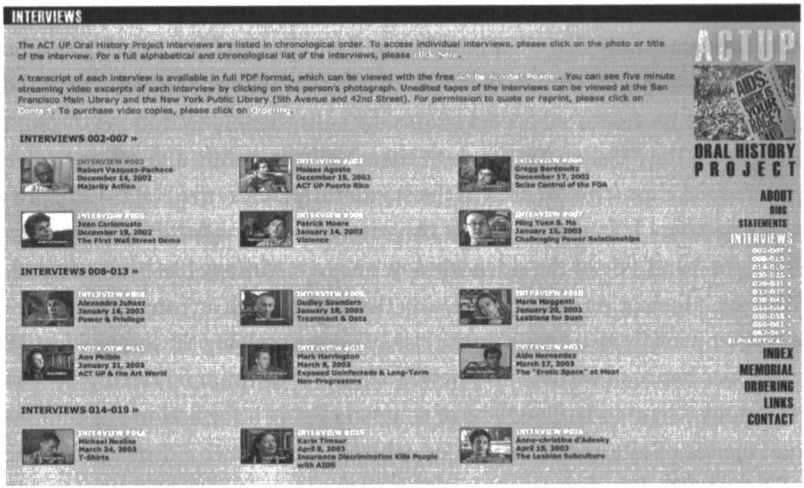
In this book, I have traced how queer AIDS media developed a versatile array of formal techniques to reframe the discursive space of testimony in the service of securing effective acts of bearing witness. Their wide-ranging experimentation with the fundamental formal elements of moving-image media—cinematography/videography, editing, mise-en-scène, and sound—demonstrate the absence of a singular formal model for the queer moving image to bear witness to the AIDS crisis. Furthermore, the act of bearing witness to AIDS retains a multiplicity of social, political, psychological, and cultural functions that cannot be reduced to a universal significance, even though they are all grounded in the ethical encounter of intersubjectivity. Queer AIDS media have remained complex acts of bearing witness even as the historically changing imperatives of the AIDS pandemic have transformed their original meaning and value. There is an oft-cited moment in *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, when Jean Carlomusto comments on how activist footage she shot during the heyday of ACT UP has now also become a record of loss.[6] What was once energizing and empowering has become difficult for her to watch, almost a burden. Time itself has reframed militancy as mourning. Thus one of the principal challenges for queer media makers in the third decade of the pandemic has become how to reframe the archive of AIDS cultural activism in ways that generate new acts of bearing witness to the present moment of AIDS and the ongoing historical trauma and crisis it constitutes. The two projects that I have chosen to discuss in this afterword engage that archive and reframe the act of bearing witness through two of the fundamental dynamics of the new media ecology: the logics of the database and the remix.

The ACT UP Oral History Project was initiated by Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard, two longtime collaborators who in 1987 founded MIX: The New York Experimental Lesbian and Gay Festival. On the twentieth anniversary of the AIDS pandemic in 2001, Schulman heard a radio story in Los Angeles that framed the history of AIDS in the United States along the lines of "At first, America had trouble with people with AIDS, but then they came around."[7] For Schulman, this story exemplified the country's prevalent cultural narrative about AIDS, which, she argues, has been sustained by highly influential cultural texts, such as Jonathan Demme's film *Philadelphia* (1993), Jonathan Larson's Broadway musical *Rent* (1993), and Tony Kushner's two-part theatrical opus *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1991–92). This narrative of moral education, which allows straight America to overcome its fear of people with AIDS, completely disavows the collective mobilization against AIDS by lesbians and gay men.[8] To prevent such forgetting in the cultural memory of AIDS, Schulman worked with Hubbard to create an oral history

of ACT UP, with the ultimate aim of interviewing every surviving member of the original New York chapter, the "mother church" as Schulman calls it.[9] The project's homepage emphasizes its present- and future-oriented acts of witnessing: "We hope that this information will de-mystify the process of making social change, remind us that change can be made, and help us understand how to do it."[10] An e-mail to Dudley Saunders, one of the interviewees, from Bethany Winkler, a quadriplegic activist in the group Unite 2 Fight Paralysis, indicates the practical value of the archive for building other social movements. She reports telling a fellow activist, "These people did it before us and they left an instructional manual!"[11]

Initial funding from the Ford Foundation enabled the ACT UP Oral History Project to interview over sixty members in the first two years, but since then lack of major grant funding has slowed down the project, leaving over one hundred members on the waiting list to be interviewed by 2005.[12] Lasting anywhere from two to four hours, the interviews are recorded on DVCAM, then transferred for preservation to digital Beta tapes, which are likely to last longer than the thinner tape stock of DVCAM. The preservation tapes and VHS viewing copies are then deposited in the New York Public Library. Working with James Wentzy, Hubbard then selects from each interview a short two-to-three-minute clip with a self-contained narrative or anecdote for uploading on the Web site. The clips they have chosen to stream both illuminate diverse aspects of the group and encourage users to order a VHS copy of the interview or to download a free transcript of the whole interview, the hyperlink to which appears next to each clip. This strategy appears to have been successful, since over forty thousand copies of interview transcripts had been downloaded across the globe by 2008.[13] The Web site was designed to be "clean, direct and easy to use," with the numbered testimonies arranged simply in chronological order, displaying a thumbnail image along with the interviewee's name, the date of the interview, and a subject heading to identify the topic covered in the short clip (figure 61).[14]

What happens to the mediated act of bearing witness when it enters the database structure of an online archive like this? Lev Manovich contends that the database has become the symbolic form of the digital age, displacing the linear, narrative logic of analog media.[15] The consequences for testimony are significant. The functional capacities of the database have the power to rationalize testimony into an information mass, which is then subject to the systematic operations of digital asset management, including description, segmentation, categorization, and indexing. This whole process therefore threatens to override or conceal the ethical, affective, and political dimen-



61. From the ACT UP Oral History Project Web site (www.actuporalhistory.org).

sions of testimony. Since these issues have been most extensively examined in relation to the video archive of the Shoah Foundation, it is worth briefly bringing this project into my discussion.[16] It also provides an impression of the kind of institutional production of testimonial databases that the ACT UP Oral History Project is attempting to counter.

Originally founded by Steven Spielberg after completing *Schindler's List* (1993), the archive of the Shoah Foundation now contains over fifty-two thousand testimonies in thirty-two languages. The scope of recording and cataloging this massive amount of testimonies led the foundation to systematize the structure of the interviews. First, the survivors were sent a forty-page preinterview questionnaire that was broken down into standardized narrative stages of Holocaust experience: prewar life, hiding, the ghetto, the camps, liberation, and postwar life. This linear narrative trajectory thus not only streamlined the attribution of catalog descriptors ultimately assigned to each interview but it also served as a de facto template for the interviews themselves. Supported by multimillion-dollar grants, the foundation researched the possibility of using automatic speech recognition technologies to catalog the archive, but ultimately concluded that it could not use them.[17] The foundation did, however, develop a cataloging system that segmented the testimonies at one-minute intervals. Attributing catalog descriptors to these automated sections proved to be a considerably faster process than cataloging by listening for the actual internal structure and integrity of the individual testimony.

These matters are more than mere technical issues of archivization, for they fundamentally shape the interface of the online archive, whether that be the small sample of clips available on the foundation's public Web site or the full archive on restricted access to specific educational institutions through Internet2. The "Online Testimony Viewer" on the public site offers twelve testimonial clips (two for each of the standardized narrative stages) and provides personal information about the witness in a standardized format on the right-hand side of the video window once a testimony has been selected. The very information and organization that makes such an interface supposedly user friendly also opens up the risk of compromising the intersubjective dynamics between witness and viewer, since the testimonial talking head is surrounded by standardized sets of contextualizing information and thumbnail menus of alternate testimonies, which can all foster a distracted mode of viewing.[18]

By contrast, the ACT UP Oral History Project provides a far more straightforward and uncluttered interface that encourages an unstructured browsing of the database far more than narrowly defined search functions. The site will eventually offer a full index of all the interviews, but it will constitute a supplementary means to navigate the archive rather than its primary one. Whereas earlier queer AIDS media used formal experimentation to reframe the discursive space of the speech act itself, particularly the talking head, the ACT UP Oral History Project's Web site reframes the conventional screen interface in which the user navigates access to those talking heads. With their medium–long shot, head-and-shoulders framing, the actual talking heads are not themselves formally radical. Rather, it is the organization of the archive's interface that embodies the radical ethos of ACT UP. Just like the group itself, this interface refuses to frame its participants in terms of hierarchy, role designation, or authorized expertise. Like the group's meetings, it brings together "a diverse, non-partisan group of individuals."

Admittedly, the very small size of ACT UP's testimonial archive in comparison to that of the Shoah Foundation partly explains why it can use a much simpler and less managed interface. But we must not forget that this issue of size is connected to the grass-roots ethos of Schulman's and Hubbard's project. Schulman acknowledges that, in researching video testimony archives during the planning stages of the ACT UP project, the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale proved more influential than the Shoah Foundation, which she characterizes as "a consensus response to Holocaust revisionism."[19] The Fortunoff archive was also established as a grass-roots initiative to counteract what many Holocaust survivors perceived

as the distortion of their experience in NBC's landmark 1980 television miniseries *Holocaust*.

Both being long-term members of ACT UP, Hubbard and Schulman are clearly insiders to the testimonial community they are interviewing. The solicitation and collection of the interviews replicated ACT UP's own grassroots organizing in existing social networks in that Hubbard and Schulman simply asked all the activists they knew and then asked those activists to suggest further names. The project therefore needed no public invitation to testify. Moreover, Schulman has been writing about ACT UP in a variety of literary genres for many years, while Hubbard has become the world's leading authority on AIDS activist film and video, having collected, preserved, and cataloged the AIDS activist video collection now in the New York Public Library. In fact, both Hubbard and Schulman have planned documentary and literary projects based on the testimonial archive, confirming that effective acts of bearing witness beget further such acts. Hubbard is currently editing a feature-length documentary entitled *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*, which brings together archival footage with interviews from the project. Under a strict division of labor, Schulman carries out all the interviews for the project, while Hubbard oversees the preservation, cataloging, and dissemination of the interviews. After every interview has been cataloged and transcribed, they meet to discuss the issues it has raised. In this way, Schulman explains, they are "constantly reconceptualizing the project." This process of ongoing feedback and assessment allows Schulman to incorporate new questions into the subsequent interviews as she and Hubbard discover previously unacknowledged issues in the group's history.[20] Along with Schulman's already extensive insider knowledge of the history and experience of ACT UP, this process ensures that the testimonial relation between Schulman and her interviewees is grounded in mutual respect, recognition, and a commitment to exploring the complexity of the group's political, social, and psychological dynamics.

Whereas Schulman and Hubbard practice a fluid, process-oriented interview technique to create a permanent testimonial archive of ACT UP's history and the experience of its members, Ultra Red has undertaken a set of rigorously constructed archival procedures to create *SILENT|LISTEN* as a project that paradoxically resists solidification into a permanent archival object. Despite its systematic use of archival discourse—"testimony," "statements," "the record," and "the minutes"—the project remains thoroughly rooted in the durational process of conceptual art and the ephemeral quality of performance art. *SILENT|LISTEN* emerged from the attempt in 2004 to revive