

Book Review

Ryan Conrad, ed. *Toronto Living with AIDS*.
PUBLIC Books, 2024.

Thomas Waugh

I need to pause before proceeding with this review of *Toronto Living with AIDS*, the brilliant and essential new collection of archival documents, analyses, interviews, images, and reflections, edited by Ottawa archivist, artist, author, curator, activist, and teacher Ryan Conrad. I see my laudatory wordlists have already started. But before evaluating Conrad's unearthing from the archive of an all but forgotten cohort of queer media activists from a quarter century ago, I need to declare potential or perceived conflicts of interest. Not only has the author said some very nice things about my own work in the sub-subfield of his book (the Canadian, queer, AIDS-related media archive), but he is also my past and ongoing collaborator in this and several other sub-subfields. Moreover, he was my doctoral advisee in Interdisciplinary Humanities at Concordia University (graduated 2017), as well as a member of my extended queer chosen family. He was also my vegan housemate for six years (graduated 2017!) and co-conspirator in all manner of shady artistic, social, and *political* endeavours. Are these alerts to possible conflicts of interest just acknowledgments of likely perceptions of bias, or rather are they probings of a kind of generative overlap in a domain sustained by friendship as a way of life (Roach, 2012)?

There is more. On another register, as I was reading Conrad's ten interviews with surviving original actors in the stirring chapter of Toronto media history that he brings to light, and then the eleven short "reflections" by their generational legatees, I was suddenly hit by the names of three young men who had also been part of my chosen family during the period under study—Chris Cockrill, Kalpesh Oza, and Gregg Rowe. I felt once more my deep bereavement of a quarter century ago, tempered only by the sudden reminder that Gregg, an eager PLWA student enrolled in the first rendition of our Concordia HIV/AIDS course, is alive and well in 2025

and an outgoing member of AIDS Community Care Montreal Board of Directors! Hi Gregg! Is one supposed to review books that connect you to old comrades and bring you on a deep personal level to the verge of tears?

This fine kettle of ethical fish surely reflects what another of my doctoral advisees, Antoine Damiens, has called “sticky strings and traces of past and present encounters—my own as well as that of . . . friends and colleagues” (2018, 20). Damiens goes on to an extremely perspicacious point:

Friendship and fucking, be it in an academic context or at festivals, structure artistic and intellectual productions. The separation of the personal from the intellectual, often held as a cornerstone of so-called “objective research,” erases not only how queer people sustain communities but also how our artistic and scholarly endeavours are always the result of collaborations and chosen networks of friends . . . Friendship/fucking, gossip, and ‘insider’ knowledge structure queer scholars’ experiences. (20)

But of course, this manifesto about friendship and networks is also what this sturdy book about the archives is really about. Damiens’ invocation of “fucking,” however, leads me already to voice one slight reproach and get it over with. Why is “fucking” delicately avoided in this book, alas, by interviewer and interviewees alike? Is it perhaps a normal pattern in the queer archive when subjects remember relationships in the light of day and stress of microphone, or a reflection of a tendency of that moment at the height of the pandemic at the start of the 1990s when fucking was a complex and delicate subject indeed? I know of this volume’s avoidance because I was there, and I remember. Such lacunae certainly require mention, especially in our discipline of queer studies, of course, but I have leapt ahead of myself.

In the light of my intense personal feelings, interpersonal memories, histories, and questions, in the light of this probing of so-called “conflicts,” how can I write an objective scholarly review of this book? Here is hoping that it will be even more valid and productive than a distanced, objective, “scholarly” review that “separat[es] . . . the personal from the intellectual” (Damiens 2018, 20).

These lengthy inaugural meanders now over, I move toward focusing more directly on this book. As this special media archives book reviews section of *Synoptique* testifies, and as one of Conrad’s intrepid interviewees pronounces, “archives are in the air!” (155). After a quarter century of internet immediacy and its attendant societal amnesia that feels so paradoxical, we have been facing collectively in academia and elsewhere the urgency of the archive. I am encouraged by all the honing that is going on of the vigilance, versatility, and vehemence required for preserving, making use of, and keeping alive our various hoards, especially pre-web heritages within the disciplines of media and cultural studies, and by the youngsters who are uncovering the words and images of my old friends from the 1980s as if they were Babylonian cuneiforms. *Toronto Living with AIDS* is an exemplary case study.

Conrad’s introductory essay, “Cable Access Queer: Revisiting Toronto Living with AIDS (1990–1991),” was previously published in *Jump Cut* (2021). It is

a thorough overview of the original project, its personae, and its trajectory through the years. The author's personal voice and historical insights shine through this essay. But the other 80 percent of the *Toronto Living with AIDS* book is a triumph of collectivism, like most of Conrad's previous seven books, and many of his more than two dozen video and art projects over the years. "It's great to have another 25 voices in there that aren't mine," he says in an email interview about *TLWA* (correspondence with author). This is no exaggeration: his interview skills—empathetic, interactive, tactful, and savvy—bring out the best in his subjects, who are all lively, funny, astute, diverse, and still committed after a quarter century of neoliberal devastation. Conrad's often faux-naïf millennial innocence (born in 1983, he literally missed the worst ravages of the pandemic) often triggers some astute soul-searching by the Generation X artists who thought everyone had forgotten, and as an interviewer Conrad does not hesitate to fill in the gaps. His sense of the historical context is thoroughly researched and rigorous and always productive. For example, Conrad's reflection on the "serendipity of the timing of the explosion and spread of the virus happening at the same moment where video technology is becoming more and more accessible to artists and activists," lobbed at Richard Fung, triggers in the artist a crucial clarification of the obsolete technology used in his *Fighting Chance* (74).

The conversations reveal the extent to which "generation" was a vital dynamic within AIDS culture, and Conrad never tires of lamenting the evisceration of the gay male generation preceding his own and the loss of the mentorship and transmission of culture and rituals so entailed. He did so especially in his original 2017 doctoral dissertation based on American instances, *Reviving the Queer Political Imagination: Affect, Archives, and Anti-Normativity*. This fruitful, intergenerational problematic eventually takes over this new book when the eleven "reflections" kick in, mostly from Conrad's fellow millennials!—from curator Jon Davies to trans activist-filmmaker-author Chase Joynt to multi-disciplinary Indigenous artist Jamie Whitecrow. A high point of this 50-page "reflections" section comes when veteran activist and scholar Alexander McClelland makes a timely connection between the archival videos and urgent twenty-first century issues:

Looking to the past of AIDS activism is not always a nostalgia trap. With a historical understanding, the life and death of scientific debates around the toxic drug AZT, we can see that those of us on the margins have always fought for access to knowledge and decision-making to help save the lives of our communities. While then it was the toxic anti-HIV drug AZT, today it's the toxic drug supply. (273)

Conrad's friendly interviews with the ten now-midlife veterans (not surprisingly, several original players are deceased, most notably project co-founder Michael Balser) confirm the importance of interviewing as both a tool of archival resuscitation and confirmation of what Damiens calls "the role of queer sociality in academic knowledge production" (2018, 20). We are so lucky that ten or more of the original cohort are not only alive and kicking, but also brilliant.

Several interesting findings come out of this rich and eclectic assemblage. For one thing, the Toronto chapter in cable community television is a very rich and diverse adventure across several media genres, hardly ever before on the radar of scholars (except for Conrad and yours truly) and finally now calling out for historical analysis and re-circulation. Conrad shows how different it was from the New York City episode earlier in the 1980s, which featured household names like Vito Russo, mostly because the precedent down south regaled in steady state funding while Toronto relied precariously on corporate sponsorship: paradoxically, the reverse of the customary U.S./private-vs.-Canada/public arts dialectic. This sadly was what resulted in the censorship of the Toronto work—toxic masculine and cable-subscriber hysteria going berserk at the benign sight of male-male kissing and discreet communal showering in the videos by Rashid and Saxena and by Fung respectively—leading to the cable corporation's cancellation of the whole series while still in the pipeline (fortunately not before ten of the eleven tapes were finished).

Toronto's "Public Arts/Culture/Ideas," an enterprise based at York University and instigator of a prolific outlay of books, journals, and exhibitions, is to be commended for publishing this sturdy, high-protein book, for all its steep \$40 price and small print run (400 volumes, alas). It is ironic that Conrad's saga of a *private* corporate video project stymied by homophobic management panic in 1991 would be published by an outfit that is a triumph of Canadian *public* arts funding three decades later. The title page mentions SSHRCC, York, the Ontario Arts Council, the Canada Council, and MITACS, plus the Council-funded Vtape and Archive/Counter-Archive! These credits speak volumes. Were any stones left unturned? With such "adequate" funding (for once!), is it any wonder that the book is so handsome, and especially that, as is appropriate, the illustrations, 35 frame grabs and posters, most in colour, are lush and vital testimony in themselves?

Conrad organizes the eleven tapes that were produced during the AIDS cable project into four distinct categories:

- "Documentaries" includes two works pursuing investigative research: 1) *The World is Sick (sic)* by John Greyson and 2) *The Cause of AIDS: Fact & Speculation* by Colman Jones.
- "Talk shows" includes two works based on the standard televisual format: 1) *The Great AZT Debate* by John Greyson and 2) *AIDS: A Family Affair* by Marc Bérubé and Steve Walker.
- "PLWA tapes" includes two works based on individual portraits of People Living with AIDS: 1) *Person Livid with AIDS: A Day in the Life of a Gay Man Living with AIDS* by Michael Smith and 2) *The Medicine Show* by James MacSwain and Gregory Wight.
- "Education and Outreach tapes" includes five works addressed to ethnocultural communities: 1) *anOther Love Story: Women and AIDS* by Debbie Douglas and the late Gabriella Micallef, 2) *The Colour of Immunity* by Glace Lawrence and Black CAP, 3) *Nibo' Apinewin* by Ted Myerscough with Ojibwe elder Verna Johnston, 4) *Fighting Chance* by Richard Fung, and 5) *Bolo! Bolo!* [Speak! Speak!]

by Kaspar Saxena and Ian Rashid.

Yet, one thing missing from the volume is clarity around how *Synoptique* readers can access these eleven archival tapes, either as educators, artists, fans, or stakeholders: which is surely the point of keeping moving image archives alive... It turns out that five selected original tapes are available for streaming free for school use from Vtape, thanks to the parent project Archive/Counter-Archive, along with a bountiful Guide for Postsecondary Education streamable from that productive York University-based outfit plus Vtape. Five others are distributed at Vtape's usual steep rate and through their twentieth-century distribution protocols, despite the organization's less-than-friendly search machine. This dysfunctionality around access is no doubt due to the normal time lag in producing academic publications, even crossover ones like this book, rather than any oversight on the editor's part. It is due also apparently to the complexity of inter-organizational collaboration that has brought this resource into existence. The eleventh tape, the late Michael Smith's *Person Livid with AIDS*, is available thanks to its serendipitous rescue by Conrad from a shoebox in another Toronto activist's estate—but only as performance documentation from the AIDS Activist History Project site, too raw, long, and unedited for distribution at Vtape.

But this complicated murkiness around access will not hold you back from the frenzy of archival discovery and resuscitation that this groundbreaking book from Ryan Conrad will almost certainly lead you into, if you persist. "AIDS activists changed the world" is Conrad's opening salvo (6). Over the next almost 300 pages, he demonstrates that archival rescue and resuscitation will also change the world. Along the way, this friendly, resourceful, and inventive archivist/interviewer proves that "queer sociality" will help as well!

References

- Conrad, Ryan. 2017. "Reviving the Queer Political Imagination: Affect, Archives, and Anti-Normativity." PhD diss., Concordia University.
- . 2021. "Cable Access Queer: Revisiting Toronto Living with AIDS (1990–1991)." *Jump Cut* 60. <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc60.2021/Conrad-TorontoAIDS/index.html>.
- Damiens, Antoine. 2018. "Festivals, Uncut: Queer/ing Festival Studies, Curating Queerness." PhD diss., Concordia University.
- Roach, Tom. 2012. *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement*. CUNY Press.