



Desert Hearts: An Aging Queer Trilogy

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"Desert Hearts: An Aging Queer Trilogy" is a threesome of video essays that engage with and excavate representations of aging queer female subjectivity, homophobia, and desire in *Desert Hearts* (directed by Donna Deitch, 1985). These works act as companions that each address aging queer subjectivity differently: the first, through a mainstream lens in trailer form that fetishizes lesbian love; the second, in which I embed myself as queer subject into the film to speak to and from three different character viewpoints; and the third, which is made only of excerpts from the film that are arranged and layered to lay bare how homophobia has been so present in film representations of queer life. These corresponding video essays examine how queer narratives and characters are portrayed in *Desert Hearts* through their on-screen romance—how their queerness, rejection of queerness, potential queerness, and participation in queerness as seductress or seduced are used to keep active and legible their desire for the viewer.



Creator's Statement

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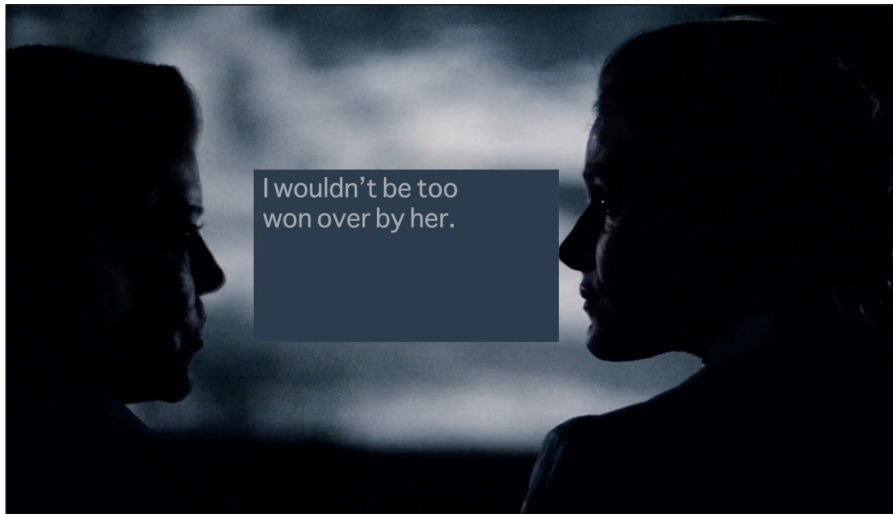
“My *Desert Hearts*: An Autoethnography of Intergenerational Queer Aging and Desire,” uses the Middlebury trailer exercise that asks video essayists to create a videographic abstract trailer that features both the scholarly abstract—subject and critical approach—and the motion picture trailer—style and tone—to make people want to see your final project (Keathley, Mittell, Grant). I had a lot of fun with this assignment at Middlebury Video Camp in 2022. I focused on the “make people want to see your final video essay” objective of the assignment. Drawing inspiration from 1980s trailers notorious for catering to adolescent male audiences like *Porky’s*, *Revenge of the Nerds*, *Weird Science*, and *Weekend at Bernie’s*, where the main goal seemed to be for teenage boys to see boobies, I wrote the script to really lean into this style of voice-over. I pitch shifted my voice as it did not make sense to have someone else do the voice over for this piece and included myself as autoethnographic expert to contextualize my presence in the trailer.



Although “Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*” was made last, it acts as meta-commentary for the trilogy, and explains and addresses “s/mother love/r” specifically to guide viewers through the creation process and my analysis. In this video essay, I produce what was promised in the trailer: to insert myself into the film as a means of analyzing the three characters in terms of age and queer desire and use them as a means of plotting my own queerness and age through their reflection. I was also interested in experimenting with humour in the context of a video essay, something that I do regularly in my performance-based art practice, and to capitalize on my skillset as a video artist.



“s/mother love/r” is the heart of this trilogy. I made this video for my final project at Middlebury Video Camp in 2022. It uses the film against itself by emphasizing homophobic moments that echo, reverberate, and scar my viewing of the film each time I watch it, and reminds me of how much homophobia shapes and affects (some of) our lives as queer people, and how much this hate stands in for love onscreen. It is about the relationship between pseudo-stepmother Frances Parker (played by Audra Lindley) and stepdaughter Cay Rivers (played by Patricia Charbonneau) as Cay falls for and enters into a passionate relationship with Vivian Bell (played by Helen Shaver). I use the repetition of shots and audio clips to make legible how pervasive homophobia is in this film in the form of seemingly offhanded comments and deliberate slurs. I apply similar techniques to key scenes with Frances Parker to show her hypocrisy in condemning Vivian and Cay for their queer deeds and desires, when she appears to have a dysfunctional obsessive maternal relationship with Cay, her stepdaughter. I use queer anthems from Robyn, Peaches, and Le Tigre to disrupt these moments and scenes and act as a queer narrator that sees, contains, recuperates, and heals homophobic jealousy and to emphasize the importance of queer survival. Keep on living!



References

Christian Keathley, Jason Mittell, and Catherine Grant. "Videographic Trailers," *The Videographic Essay: Practice and Pedagogy*, 2019, <http://videographicessay.org/works/videographic-essay/alternative-trailers>.

Biography

Dayna McLeod is a performance-based media artist-scholar and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) postdoctoral fellow at Middlebury College (2023–2025). She actively engages queer and feminist approaches to research-creation through art and media. She joined Jason Mittell and Catherine Grant as an Instructor at Middlebury College for the 2024 [Scholarship in Sound & Image Workshop on Videographic Criticism](#). She is part of a collaborative videographic project, Ways of Doing, which fosters an ethical praxis of audiovisual research with Lucy Fife Donaldson (University of St. Andrews), Colleen Laird (University of British Columbia), and Alison Peirse (University of Leeds). Her video essays have been published in *Teknokultura: Journal of Digital Culture and Social Movements*, *Intermédialités: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies*, and *Exertions*, a Journal for the Society for the Anthropology of Work. www.daynarama.com.

Review by Catherine Grant, Aarhus Universitet and University of Reading

Part way through "Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*"—the second of the three videos collected as "*Desert Hearts: An Aging Queer Trilogy*"—which deftly, smartly, and hilariously supplies a methodological rumination on the work,

essayist-performer Dayna McLeod directly asks her viewers a series of questions that I have never had to consider before as an academic reviewer:

Is it bad to make jokes in a video essay? Is that bad scholarship? Do you even think of this as scholarship?

For me, good (publishable) scholarship should be original, significant, and rigorous. So, in answer to McLeod's questions, in my opinion her videographic research experiments count as works of genius. The fact that they are also (at times, outrageously) funny is not only a very welcome bonus feature for your average, potentially jaded, academic peer reviewer, but in this case central to their scholarly contribution to, and significance for, our shared field.

McLeod's aims and formal strategies across these three videos are at least two-fold and are certainly original in scholarly terms: first, to lay bare in deeply observant, compelling, and telling ways how homophobia is strikingly present, with regard both to its discursive presentation and its audiovisual figuration, even in supremely "positive" and highly popular film representations of queer life; and second, to trace in the example of the 1985 movie *Desert Hearts* her own transgenerational identificatory move as a spectator of this groundbreaking film across the decades: from her twenties, identifying with or focusing on twenty-something co-protagonist Cay; through an interest in the prematurely middle-aged co-protagonist Vivian; and finally arriving at an empathic but critical attentiveness to Audra Lindley's terrifying depiction of Cay's stepmother and Vivian's landlady Frances in her late fifties or early sixties.

In her trailer video as well as in "Speculative Queer Autoethnography," McLeod humorously takes the autoethnographic urge to insert herself (literally) into her performative exploration of her scholarly subject way too far—that is to say, *just far enough*, given her highly skilful pastiche of numerous cinematic genres.

In the truly stellar "s/mother love/r" segment, McLeod rigorously and inventively deploys a dazzling array of videographic techniques and modalities (including, most notably: elements of vidding, alternation of fast-forward motion with normal speed replay, audio-visual rhythmic propulsion and repetition, complex sound and image layering, and onscreen transcription of key dialogue). In these and other ways, she comes to find what is (obviously) *already there* in the film but collects and re-displays this in such a way that her video's audiovisual forms of emphasis work like the insistent eruptions of internalized homophobic voices, or of desirous impulses, that might haunt and beset us. For me, this is a remarkable study of cinematic and spectatorial transgenerational psycho-sexual dynamics, and one that resonated very deeply with my own persistent love for and longstanding queer memories of *Desert Hearts*.

Review by Alanna Thain, McGill University

I strongly recommend publication of this timely and meticulously crafted trilogy. In the heteronormative mainstream today, middle-aging is having a cultural moment, celebrating women's aging into "invisibility" as both neglect and freedom. Dayna McLeod's trilogy, by contrast, makes a queer spectacle of the messiness of middle-aging with her three remarkable videos exploring the lesbian classic film *Desert Hearts* from 1985, itself on the cusp of its forties. As an accomplished video artist, performer, and researcher, McLeod's essays are both charming and disarming in their (re)enactments of queer looks, thinking beyond representation for both queers and the middle-aged in mainstream cinema. Deitch's film was groundbreaking for its time, as one of the first feature films to "de-sensationalize" lesbianism on screen, and is also a film of low-key intensity, less in your face than under your skin. McLeod's deeply personal approach to this work is both engaging and affecting, thoughtful and demanding, as well as formally inventive. The trilogy format is essential, though each video also stands on its own, as revisioning is central to McLeod's argument. By her own account, she watched this film dozens of times when she first saw it from a place not at all confident in her own queerness, and the work brilliantly preserves ambivalence and uncertainty as a queer epistemology, alongside the deep pleasures of McLeod's humour, keen insights, and impeccable timing as performer and editor.

Middle-aging is itself a notoriously unruly and volatile temporality, in terms of bodily changes, mobile goalposts of affective and professional transition, appropriate and scandalous behavior, and even in just identifying when exactly this is. McLeod's methods enact this both in terms of film analysis and as an embodied commentary on queer spectatorship. "s/mother love/r" is a real masterpiece, using every inch of the film and endless editorial techniques with precision and impact. For instance, the video transforms words carved out of a careless or cruel moment and trapped in memory into onscreen sticky notes, and then, via the music and the composite layers, into liveable and complex rhythms that keep playing and transforming, just one example of McLeod's affective editing. Letting words hang between characters both visually and sonically, McLeod asks after the work of transformation itself in a way that roots this essay in a queer perspective, rather than an explanation of queerness or an attempt to make queerness acceptable. Her treatment of Cay, newly visible to her as McLeod's own middle-aged contemporary in this particular encounter, is an empathetic way of dealing with disappointing loved ones envious of the gruelling and tender work of inventing one's own freedom. Using the insistent bass drum beat of Robyn's "Dancing On My Own" and other queer anthems to great rhythmic effect, McLeod makes of her video (and Deitch's film) an image of the transformation she also describes in her experience

of watching the film in shifting relation to its characters and concerns. Likewise, she visualizes the work of queer memory at the service of analysis as the explicit topic of “Speculative Queer Autoethnography: *Desert Hearts*.” McLeod’s full frontal take on auto-ethnography, shot in her bedroom at video camp, gently but insistently returns the gaze to the viewer, inviting them into a queer threesome of refracted desires. It’s an analytical project that in its artistry, vulnerability, risk, and refusal shares some of the affective charge of *Desert Hearts*’s own revolutionary and everyday intimacies. The trilogy is a masterclass in the multiple potentials of the video essay to model queer strategies of laying claim to mainstream representations as spaces of imagination and possibility.

