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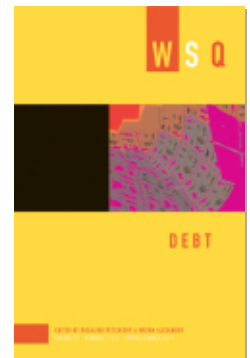
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## Trading Credit for Debt: Queer History-Making and Debt Culture

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## Trading Credit for Debt: Queer History-Making and Debt Culture

T. L. Cowan and Jasmine Rault

*Once you start to see bad debt, you start to see it everywhere, hear it everywhere, feel it everywhere.*

—Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*

If you had gone to the opening of *Rare & Raw: Queer History Then and Now* at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian History in New York City on February 15, 2013, you would have seen among the small selection of artworks “exploring the themes of queer history, visibility and notions of representation” (“Rare & Raw” 2013) twenty-seven framed photographs from Zoe Leonard’s *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, originally created for and coanimated by Cheryl Dunye’s 1996 film, *The Watermelon Woman* (Fig. 1). Returning to the museum a few days later, you would have found the photos removed from the exhibit and in their place what looked like a foreclosure notice, or what we came to think of as the foreclosure installation: four documents taped to the wall, a record of the loan agreement between the museum and the Eileen Harris Norton Collection, which owns one of the three copies of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* and which, on the day of the show’s opening, “amended” the loan agreement such that there would be no loan at all (Fig. 2). With “regrets for the unfortunate timing and difficult circumstances,” the loan was deemed too high risk and revoked, it seems, because of concerns about the material fragility and value of the photographs (Shim-Boyle, 2013).<sup>1</sup>

The story of this amended installation is compelling to us for a few rea-

sons. Most immediately, as dykes of a certain age, we have an affective, aesthetic, and intellectual attachment to *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* and to *The Watermelon Woman*; in fact, both of us became committed to the kinds of recuperative and critical feminist and queer storytelling that Leonard, Dunye, and their many collaborators in the project were for(a)ging in the early 1990s. Furthermore, this transaction situates the Leslie-Lohman Museum and the *Rare & Raw* exhibit (and its project of queer history-making) as unreliable borrowers; that is, the foreclosure installation advertises bad credit and both the museum and the exhibit get thrown into the subject position reserved in U.S. history for African Americans and other minoritized groups figured as socioeconomically delinquent. Moreover, the capital (not) exchanged in this transaction—*The Fae Richards Photo Archive*—is a series of images signifying the forgotten or abandoned African American lesbian histories that Dunye and her collaborators work to repossess and revalue in *The Watermelon Woman*, a repossession that might be said to expose the violence of (cultural) capital itself, a system that has historically devalued the lives and work of African Americans and queers. And finally, this story is compelling for us because in the moment of encountering that familiar scene—cheap paper printed with legal text, contradictorily taped both haphazardly and with forceful, binding purpose across a prominent wall (usually the front door of a repossessed property)—we were reminded of the ways in which so much queer history-making negotiates the strained relationship between good credit and bad debt. That is, the eloquent shock of this foreclosure installation activated our thinking about queer history-making through debt as a mode of inquiry, as methodology, as “queer hermeneutics” and “black study” (Crosby et al. 2012, 130) that “runs in every direction, scatters, escapes” (Harney and Moten 2013, 61).

Here, we propose that the repossession of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* effectively resituates *The Watermelon Woman* and *Rare & Raw* into the context of debt culture. As Paula Chakravartty and Denise Ferreira da Silva remind us, this is a culture “embedded in the colonial and racial matrix of capitalist accumulation of land (conquest and settlement), exploitation of labor (slavery, indentured labor, forced migration), appropriation of resources, and ultimately the very meaning of debt in what Walter Mignolo calls the ‘modern/colonial world system’” (Chakravartty and da Silva 2012, 364). That is, we understand debt culture as a “totality of social relations” that describes the colonial, racial, and sexual conditions

of not only economic/monetary subject positions and relations but also our social, political, intimate, and creative relations (Crosby et al. 2012, 130). We are interested in the ways that queer (art) history projects such as these grapple with the possibility of queering this debt culture, or being and relating to debt culture in such a way that puts us into contact with its excesses—debt as holistic, as capacious, as surplus, as crisis, as always owing and being owed, as proliferating, differentiating, and unifying. By approaching debt as a cultural condition and a mode of inquiry rather than as an individualized economic problem, we can recognize an uneasy and conflicted negotiation in these works: on the one hand we owe so much to the queers of the past, we must pay tribute, give credit where credit is due, take credit, make credit, become a credit; but on the other hand we are owed so much, an incalculable debt from generations of damages suffered, an unpayable, unseizable, and unsettling debt that we can't possess and that dispossesses us.

Following Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's articulation of the black radical tradition of bad debt—"which is to say real debt, the debt that cannot be repaid, the debt at a distance, the debt without creditor, the black debt, the queer debt, the criminal debt" (2013, 61)—we attempt to make debt "a principle of elaboration" in the long contemporary moment of queer and feminist recovery efforts (150). For Harney and Moten bad debt figures as a "fugitive" structure of feeling running through "the undercommons" in which "the debtor seeks refuge among other debtors, acquires debt from them, offers debt to them. . . . This refuge, this place of bad debt, is what we call the fugitive public" (61). Harney and Moten allow us to think about the disciplinary function of debt, about the regulatory compulsion to turn debt into credit and profit, about which debts are counted and which forgotten, and about queer, black, criminal, fugitive living in the refuge of uncountable, incalculable, unregulated, and undisciplined debt. In this essay, we read *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, *The Watermelon Woman*, and *Rare & Raw* for the ways that they elaborate the tensions of queer(ing) debt and indebtedness.

### **The Fae Richards Photo Archive**

*The Fae Richards Photo Archive* is composed of staged and artificially aged photographs that function as archival traces of the African American lesbian history that Cheryl—Dunye's main character in *The Watermelon*



**FIG. 1.** Zoe Leonard, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, 1996. Installation view, *Rare & Raw*, Leslie-Lohman Gay and Lesbian Art Museum, New York, February 15, 2013. Courtesy of the Leslie-Lohman Gay and Lesbian Art Museum.

*Woman*—seeks to recover. Both the photos and the film can be seen as part of what has been called “the archival turn” in queer and feminist scholarship and art practices since the mid-1990s (Cvetkovich 2012), which continues in shows like *Rare & Raw*. As Ann Cvetkovich explains, this LGBTQ turn to archives is concerned as much with recovering, saving, and revaluing artifacts or things—especially the ephemera that might be discarded as junk or trash—as with preserving and valuing feelings, especially those bad affects that tend to be deemed unproductive or useless (Cvetkovich 2003). In *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, these trashed lives and feelings take the form of “seventy-eight gelatin silver prints, four chromogenic prints and a notebook of seven pages of typescript on paper” (Whitney Museum of American Art). The photos—a collection of snapshots, film stills, and publicity photos—are over- and underexposed, grainy, dog-eared, warped, and worn to look like they have just surfaced after years of dank dusty storage. The mottled effect of the captions creates the illusion of their having been typed out long ago. The back jacket of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* picture book explains that “by experimenting with photographic conventions and borrowing from the lives of historical figures,

Leonard and Dunye challenge lines of race, class, and sexuality in history. Although Fae Richards never lived, she is drawn from the lives of many people. Her story, although fictional, is plausible. She stands as an homage to women whose lives are not recorded" (Leonard and Dunye 1996).<sup>2</sup> The photos chronicle the plausible fiction of Fae Richards's life (performed by Lisa Marie Bronson) from her adolescence and early career in the 1920s to her Hollywood acting work—in which she was primarily cast in the "Mammy" role—in the 1930s and then as a leading lady in black cast "race films" of the 1940s and 1950s. They also document Richards's relationship with the wealthy, white lesbian film director Martha Page (played by Alex Juhasz), Richards's career as a lesbian nightclub singer, and the intimate life Richards shared with her longtime partner, June Walker (played by Cheryl Clarke) in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Richards's story might be read as a satisfying narrative arc from good credit (within a white cultural-economic paradigm of the Southern melodrama, in which she plays the indentured and devoted servant) to a fugitive existence of bad debt in which ultimately she refuses this casting and seeks out not only roles in race films (certainly a fugitive public if ever there was one) but also black lesbian life. The tension and pressure exerted on this narrative arc comes from *The Watermelon Woman's* parallel story of Cheryl as she struggles to reconcile her attachment to the photos and to Fae Richards's life with her own aspirations to achieve good credit by rejecting bad debt.

The irony of removing *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* from a show on queer art history (in a museum of gay and lesbian art history) because of concerns about the work's fragility is particularly poignant when we recall the story of these photographs' first exhibition in Dunye's film. The survival of these photographs—prematurely "distressed," introduced as time-worn and tattered, retrieved from basements, back rooms, and broken shoe boxes of an older generation of friends and fans of Fae Richards—and by extension black lesbian cultural history, is presented as the product of some very necessary mishandling. For example, Cheryl discovers a stash of photographs scattered among the piles of unsorted materials heaped in cardboard boxes at the Center for Lesbian Information and Technology (C.L.I.T.)—unsorted except by city and race. The earnest volunteer archivist (played by Sarah Schulman) tells Cheryl that the "black collection" is "very separate. . . . If we have any photographs that there are white people in, we just cross them out." At this point in the film, Cheryl learns that Fae Richards and the white movie director, Martha Page, were lovers just

as Cheryl is starting a relationship with Diana, a classic model of blithe white privilege and cultural capital (played by Guinevere Turner, of *Go Fish* fame). The impossibility of imagining interracial lesbian histories is played for laughs in this scene, but the hilarious punch line turns out to be the effort to archive black lesbian histories at all (a point we'll return to). Cheryl is sternly informed that she most certainly may not reproduce the photographs "without the consensus-based approval of the board, which meets only every other month. Not content to wait [and despite being urged to 'respect your sisters'] she illegally documents the images with her video camera" (Cvetkovich 2002, 108). That is, Cheryl is compelled—by a disorganized, inefficient, and segregationist joke/parody of the Lesbian Herstory Archive—to disrespect her "sisters" and steal (a copy of) the photographs, repossessing these traces of history from obscurity and neglect by putting them back into a cultural economy of productive circulation (in Cheryl's life story, Dunye's film, and ultimately, queer feminist popular culture).

We meet more of these photographs through Fae Richards's dying lover, June Walker, who had collected treasures from their twenty-year relationship in a tattered paper folder, before passing it on to Cheryl, with a letter: "I was so mad that you mentioned the name of Martha Page. Why do you even want to include a white woman in a movie on Fae's life? . . . Please Cheryl, make our history before we are all dead and gone. But if you are really in 'the family,' you better understand that our family will always only have each other." But when Cheryl finally presents her documentary, played during the closing credits of Dunye's film, she does include Martha Page in Fae Richards's biography, explaining to us and to June, "I know she meant the world to you, but she also meant the world to me, and those worlds are different. . . . What she means to me, a twenty-five-year-old black woman, means something else. It means hope. It means inspiration. It means possibility. It means history. And most importantly what I understand is that I'm going to be the one who says, I am a black lesbian filmmaker, who's just beginning, but I'm going to say a lot more and have a lot more work to do." Cheryl builds an identity, "black lesbian filmmaker," and the conditions for its longevity and futurity—"who's just beginning"—through what Dunye figures as the deliberate mishandling of *The Fae Richards Archive*, against the wishes of June and the direction of the C.L.I.T.

### The Watermelon Woman

As Kara Keeling argues, Cheryl's identity and its future are negotiated within the requirements of economic viability: "her professional aspirations demand that she articulate herself into the emergent market category of 'black lesbian filmmaker' in a way that will register within the terms of that market" (2005, 223). Cheryl's final documentary, along with the film's promotional materials, shows that this emergent-market category and economic subject depend on disarticulating "black lesbian filmmaker" from other black lesbians. Fae's relationship with Martha is foregrounded, while June's much longer relationship with Fae is "relegated via the voice-over narrative to the status of 'special friend'" (224). Similarly, the film's promotional materials feature Dunye and Turner as the film's "stars," excluding Valerie Walker, the black actor who plays Cheryl's best friend, Tamara, and who commands at least as much story line and screen time as Turner's character, Diana: "Fae's relationship with June, the way she sang for the [black] 'stone butches' in the bar, etc., do not appear to be part of the past that enables Cheryl to find 'hope,' 'inspiration,' or her 'history.' . . . It is via the logic of an interracial 'lesbian' relationship that the first 'black lesbian feature film' to be picked up for distribution appears" (224, 223). That is, the "black lesbian filmmaker" as an economically viable subject position, with history, longevity, futurity, and the possibility for distribution and circulation within systems of cultural and monetary capital, depends on both Cheryl's calculated mistreatment of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* and her performance of distinction from other black lesbians in the film. Cheryl is trading debt for credit.

Despite Cheryl's performance of distinction, the subject position of economic viability that she embodies is never fully her own, and she is compelled to negotiate the ongoing legacies of state administered black dispossession and expropriation. In the scene directly following Diana's postcoital inventory of all her black boyfriends, Cheryl is misrecognized by the police as a young black man and gets arrested for being a "crack-head" and "on suspicion of stolen property"; the police officers (one white and one black), unable to conceive of a "black lesbian filmmaker," refuse to believe that a young black person of any gender or sexual orientation would have access to the capital or credit to legitimately purchase an expensive movie camera. Even with good credit, Cheryl is treated as a bad



debtor. The carceral politics here, motivated by the generalized assumption of black poverty, reflect what Saidya Hartman has identified as black lives that are “still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago” (1997, 6). Indeed, as Hartman’s work has shown, since the first efforts toward U.S. federally conferred “freedom,” the right to personhood in the immediate postbellum period, free black subjecthood has been cast as indebted to the state: “the burden of debt, duty, and gratitude [was] foisted onto the newly emancipated in exchange or repayment for their freedom. . . . Thus, the transition from slavery to freedom introduced the free agent to the circuits of exchange through this construction of already accrued debt, an abstinent present, and a mortgaged future. In short, to be free was to be a debtor” (1997, 130–1). *The Watermelon Woman* suggests that the moral, legal, and affective structures of indebtedness continue to condition the possibilities for viable black subjectivities and, as Chakravartty and da Silva note, provide “a racial architecture in which postracial discourse and neoliberal practices combine to exact even more profit from the very penury resulting from the expropriation unleashed in previous moments and modalities of racial and colonial subjugation” (2012, 364). Indeed, in our contemporary stop-and-frisk, post-2008 moment of unequally distributed and racialized precarity and foreclosure, *The Watermelon Woman* seems importantly situated within our long moment of racial and colonial penury, in which the young black subject is always on the verge of, or in danger of, being called upon to “pay a debt to society” in the form of fines, imprisonment, and interest rates spiked for “high-risk borrowers.”

When we look at Cheryl’s performance of distinction through the lens of debt culture, of foreclosure and repossession, of market value and economic viability, and by allowing the *Rare & Raw* episode in the history of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* to inform a new reading of the film, we see that debt logics function as the organizing principle, moral compass, and totalizing affect throughout. The film is framed by negotiations about payment, fairness, and questions about (black) queer temporalities. In the opening scene of *The Watermelon Woman*, Tamara and Cheryl are filming a fairly posh interracial wedding party. At the end of their shoot, the two friends are paid by a matronly white woman; Cheryl collects the envelope and then doles out Tamara’s cut. The dialogue that follows establishes the film’s debt logics:

TAMARA: Oooo, I love cash.

CHERYL: I don't like cash. I like checks. But this will have to do, okay? Can I use the equipment this weekend to work on my project?

TAMARA: You know, this is the third weekend in a row you want to use the equipment, but you've yet to shoot anything. Uh, my cut is fifty dollars short.

CHERYL: You remember what Rose and Guin said in the *Go Fish* book. If you want to make a film, you gotta make some sacrifices. Besides, we have to make money payments on the camera. Ticket to Hollywood, baby!

TAMARA: Uh, excuse you. I'm not into making sacrifices for some quote-unquote "future," all right? I want to take Stacey out this weekend for dinner and for that I need cash *today*. Okay? So just give me my money and cut the attitude.

CHERYL: I'll lend you some money.

TAMARA: Lend me some money? You gonna lend me my own damn money? You worse than white people in the bank.

CHERYL: Oh my god, it's raining.

TAMARA: I don't care if it's raining. Give me my damn money. What does one gotta do with the other? (Dunye 1996)

Here we see Cheryl as the financial administrator of her friendship/small business with Tamara, but Tamara resists the terms that Cheryl sets. Tamara loves (untraceable, accessible) cash, while Cheryl prefers the more official scrip of a check. Tamara has no interest in savings or repayment plans, and she wants money for today, to take her girlfriend out, to spend on pleasure in the moment. Cheryl models good credit behavior by withholding a portion of Tamara's fee to cover the cost of their camera payments and, by offering to lend Tamara money, introduces a credit-debt relationality and moral evaluative framework into the friendship, which Tamara refuses. Unlike Cheryl, Tamara seems unfettered by the burden of indebtedness, duty, or obligation, embodying the bad debtor who refuses "to replace the love of leisure with the love of gain and supplant the bawdy pleasures with dispassionate acquisitiveness" (Hartman 1997, 127).

Indeed, rather than seeking out good credit as the condition for respectability, Tamara models Harney and Moten's bad queer black debt—portrayed here as a "means of socialisation" (2013, 61); that is, to live in/with bad debt is "not simply to be among his own; but to be among

his own in dispossession, to be among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything” (96). In her orientation to immanent pleasure, Tamara refuses what Hartman calls an “abstinent present and a mortgaged future” (Hartman 1997, 131) and moves toward the “fugitive public” of bad debtors, “debt at a distance to a global politics of blackness emerging out of slavery and colonialism, a black radical politics, a politics of debt without payment, without credit, without limit. . . . [This debt] is still shared, never credited and never abiding credit, a debt you play, a debt you walk, a debt you love” (Harney and Moten 2013, 64). Tamara takes no interest in sacrificing for “some quote-unquote ‘future,’” refuses to subject her debt to credit, and throughout the film plays her debt as love (or sex).

The differing relationships with the duty of indebtedness are cast as the conflict through which Cheryl establishes economic subjecthood—with Tamara as a bad black debtor, June framing black queer history as shared debt, and Cheryl emerging as one who seeks abiding credit, situating her debt as the responsibility to profit from the past in order to secure her marketable future. However, as Keeling explains, Dunye’s film “allows for a different possibility to be perceived. . . . That possibility might collect the ‘stone butches,’ the ‘special friends,’ ‘the studs,’ ‘the femmes,’ the ‘woman-lovers,’ and ‘the queers’ that were part of the working-class milieu to which Fae Richards herself belonged and make those ambivalent, destabilizing and unstable forces of desire and community cohere as a collective expression of a multifarious ‘we’ that complicates any innocent notion of ‘the one’ who says, ‘I am a black lesbian filmmaker’” (2007, 224). This ‘multifarious we’ is the fugitive public of the undercommons, the refuge of bad debt that Cheryl resists, Tamara figures, and the film makes palpable even as its economic and cultural viability depend on betraying debt’s “principle of social life” (Harney and Moten 2013, 153) and playing by the rules of credit. By enacting the tensions between the individual aspirational drive to credit and the pull of “bawdy pleasures” in common mutual debt, *The Watermelon Woman* raises the possibility of a destabilized, ambivalent, complicated, and queered debt culture.

### **Rare & Raw: Queer History Now and Then**

The removal of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* from the *Rare & Raw* exhibit, and its replacement with the foreclosure installation, prompted

us to consider whether the gay and lesbian archival turn—the history-making impulse—is a symptom of the will to credit in debt culture, a will to respectability in a racist, homophobic culture. Up to this point, we have read *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* and its original exhibition in *The Watermelon Woman* through the interpretive framework of debt—the punitively racialized logics of credit and reclaimed bad debt as refuge—which allows us to recognize the disciplinary compulsion to betray, abandon, or escape the unmarketable or worthless. By bringing this elaborative interpretive framework to the *Rare & Raw* exhibition, we experience the contradictory impulses to pursue good credit and preserve bad debt as what Elizabeth Freeman calls a queer temporal “dialectics of feeling,” that is, as an aestheticized “political unconscious consisting not only of repressed social conflict but also and crucially . . . effaced or foreclosed social bonds” (2010, 127). *Rare & Raw* curators Steph Rogerson and Kelly McCray pair contemporary pieces with artworks from an earlier generation to foreground the tensions between past and present, between the will to abandon, efface, or surpass our disreputable, irresponsible, useless, criminal histories and the present fact that we can’t, haven’t, and perhaps don’t want to, a dialectics of feeling between the political unconscious of credit—let’s call it the specter of respectability—and the foreclosed social bonds of bad debt.

These dialectics resonate throughout the exhibition. On the title wall, works by G. B. Jones and Tom of Finland are juxtaposed with Nina Levitt’s life-sized diptych of Calamity Jane.<sup>3</sup> Paired sketches from G. B. Jones’s *Prison Breakout* series (1991) and Tom of Finland’s *Jailhouse* series (1987) depict queer sex between prison inmates and guards in a variety of configurations, bringing into focus the ways in which social, moral, and legal indebtedness are so often tied up with what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have famously called “criminal intimacies” (2000, 322). These intimacies “bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation” (322). In their plural configurations of threesomes, foursomes, and other orgy fantasies, these images of a proliferating vilified queer subject revel in erotic attachments to the bad debtor and encourage us to fantasize our way to their fugitive publics.

The works by G. B. Jones and Tom of Finland are small in comparison with Levitt’s *Calamity* (1991), a photographic study of a subject who lived as much as possible outside the law. Levitt’s portrait functions as a commentary on the selective project of queer history-making: three circular

“portholes” (covering her gun, her knee, and her boot) are obscured by black exposed photographic paper in the image on the left; the image on the right is entirely black exposed photo paper with only the area of those three holes revealed. Levitt gives us a visual depiction of the exclusionary processes of our history-making, wherein some (white settler colonial) queer outlaws are remembered and cherished, while others are demonized, disowned, rendered invisible, or jailed. *Calamity* is in conversation with Kent Monkman’s portraits of his Indian Princess drag persona, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle (from the 2006 series, *Emergence of a Legend*), another form of criminally indebted queer subjectivity, installed on the facing wall. Monkman’s works “emulate nineteenth-century antique daguerreotypes [and] recall the history of early photographic portraiture, the Wild West, and colonization” (Rogerson and McCray 2013). These portraits remind us of our unpaid and unpayable settler colonial debts and of the acts of violence obscured by our selective celebrations of outlaws like Calamity Jane. Monkman’s playful drag persona performs a sort of queer anticolonial Indigeneity, guiding us through the ways that Indigenous sexualities and cultures are both eroticized and demonized (Anderson 2004), regulated and disciplined through settler colonialism, and criminalized through enforced poverty and symbolic annihilation (Morgensen 2011). Furthermore, the femininities composed for these daguerreotypes gesture toward the ways that Indigenous and Métis women were forced to trade their land and culture for credit under Canada’s “civilizing” process of applying for “scrip,” a symbolic transfer through which the government gave them land “that had already been theirs from time immemorial” and in return, they “relinquished all future claims to [their] rights as . . . ‘Treaty Indian’” (Adese 2011, 204). Monkman’s delicate portraits of the feminized queerness of Cree-Métis subjectivities amend these histories of dispossession and, instead of being overshadowed by Levitt’s large diptych of Calamity Jane’s celebrated white Wild West butch criminality, materialize the racial logics of colonial exclusion that impel us to aggrandize certain figures, forms, and moments of queer history at the expense of others.

William E. Jones’s *Tearoom* (1962/2007), a fifty-six-minute film screened on a loop and projected against the back wall of the middle installation space, uses edited footage of a 1962 police surveillance operation, which captures sex between men in a public restroom in Mansfield, Ohio. Filmed from behind a two-way mirror, the footage shows the sex-

ual exchanges (money sometimes changed hands) and intimate, stolen moments before these men were arrested, and later incarcerated, for sodomy. Installed on the two facing walls of this middle space are Will Munro's mirrors from his *Blank Generation Series* (2005), silkscreened with hot-pink logos of "iconic underground club scenes [from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s] decimated by time and the catastrophic march of AIDS" (Rogerson and McCray 2013).

In the contemporary U.S. context of mass incarceration and the long moment of HIV/AIDS, these two pieces demand that we see ourselves in these painful and shimmering histories and consider the status of our intimacies in conditions of unequally distributed precariousness. This installation requires us to ask, whose queer fugitive intimacies are being policed today? In a history of "stolen moments," as queer histories tend to be, from whom or from what are these moments stolen? Who is configured today as owing a "debt to society" and what does it mean to be criminalized? As Michelle Alexander writes in *The New Jim Crow*, "In major cities [in the United States] as many as 80 per cent of young African American men now have criminal records and are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives" (2010, 7). In the racialized logics of criminalization today, aspirational white gays, lesbians, and trans\* people "in committed relationships" (to each other, to the state, and to economic futurity) are now predominantly figured in the homonationalist imaginary as "law abiding" citizens and thus in the carceral economy as debt-free and credit-worthy. But, as Dean Spade puts it, when we think of "the origins of contemporary gay and lesbian rights formation in anti-police activism in the 1960s and 70s," who would have predicted that the legacy of this activism would lead to "a neoliberal 'law and order' approach . . . that provides millions of dollars to enhance police and prosecutorial resources?" (2011, 88–89). As Spade suggests, and as Dunye's Cheryl demonstrates, the quest for respectability requires trading debt for credit and compromising the radical politics of bad, queer, black debt, and the fugitive publics from which their viability and marketability emerged in the first place. Rather than showcasing the triumph of debt-free queers, *Rare & Raw* offers viewfinder glimpses of our own belonging in the undercommons of inmates, decolonized Indian Princesses, and sodomites.



**FIG. 2.** The foreclosure installation, 2013. Documentation of the correspondence pertaining to the loan of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* to the Leslie-Lohman Museum for *Rare & Raw*. Courtesy of the Leslie-Lohman Gay and Lesbian Art Museum.

## Conclusion

In the opening scene of *The Watermelon Woman*, Tamara asks Cheryl (who has just changed the topic to weather, diverting attention away from her siphoning money out of Tamara's pay), "What does one thing gotta do with the other?" The question we ask here, What does debt culture have to do with queer history?, was generated by the unfortunate and yet strangely fortuitous repossession of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, which activated our recognition of debt as a proliferating structure of dialectical feelings that impels, saturates, and entangles "queer histories now and then." While the presence of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* in the *Rare & Raw* exhibit might have initiated and staged a very different conversation—about the aesthetics of recovery and our fantasies for longevity, repayment plans, "making it right," and trading debt for good credit—its absence, we have argued here, informs a more conflicted engagement with the queer "archival turn," and what it means to queer debt as a creative, critical, interpretive project. The foreclosure installation scattered debt everywhere—back-

ward in time to *The Watermelon Woman* and across the gallery to the rest of *Rare & Raw*. By following the capacious flight of debt beyond the incident of the amended loan, we start to see it everywhere, hear it everywhere, feel it everywhere. Queering debt requires tuning into the violent histories of credit's uneven distribution across the modern/colonial order of race and class and seeing, hearing, and feeling the refuge of owning nothing and owing everything.

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### Notes

1. In conversations and correspondence with the curators of *Rare & Raw*, Steph Rogerson and Kelly McCray, the director of the Leslie-Lohman Museum, Hunter O'Hanian, and Zoe Leonard, we learned that there was some miscommunication about how *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* would be hung and exhibited for *Rare & Raw* and that despite efforts on all sides to care for the material fragility of the photographs, on the opening day of the exhibition the loan of the Archive was unilaterally renegotiated by the current owner of the work, the Eileen Harris Norton Collection. While the museum's standard contract asks whether the loaned works require directions for "special handling or installation," the museum provides no evidence that any such directions were received. The contract does show that the works were originally loaned to the museum from February 15 to March 17, 2013. However, the posted documents show that on February 15, the day of the exhibit opening, a letter was issued by Sean Shim-Boyle, collection manager for the Eileen Harris Norton Collection, "amending the loan," indicating that the



unframed components of the work would be repossessed immediately and that the framed photographs might be displayed until February 18, at which time they, too, would be removed from the exhibit. O'Hanian asserted that the Leslie-Lohman Museum would have "moved heaven and earth" to install the piece in accordance with the artist's wishes and found the entire situation "regrettable." And Leonard offered another work to be hung in the place of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*. As of March 22, the artworks were still crated and awaiting shipment in the offices of the Leslie-Lohman Museum, presumably accumulating "interest."

2. After the film was released, the photos were collected in a small art book, *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, produced by Dunye and Leonard (1996). The work was included in the 1997 Whitney Biennial in New York and was exhibited in a broad range of venues throughout its almost twenty-year history. There are only three sets of *The Fae Richards Photo Archive*, two in private collections and one in the Whitney's permanent collection.
3. Images of the artworks in *Rare & Raw* can be viewed at the Leslie-Lohman Museum website (<http://www.leslielohman.org/exhibitions/2013/rare-and-raw.html>).

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