Vol. 27, no. 2, Winter 2025

Rhetorical Attendance as a Practice of Hope

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Abstract: This reflective piece examines the author's experiences of creating an archival cultural rhetorics dissertation project. The project examined a protest event, Denim Day, staged by Virginia Tech's Gay Student Alliance in January 1979. By chance, in 2019, when she began working on this project, Virginia Tech held a Denim Day Do-Over during April's Pride Week Celebration. The article begins by examining the rhetorical situation in which institutions commemorate their histories, foregrounding the problems that arise when an institution thinks of its own happiness first. Next, she invites readers to listen closely to the stories GSA members told about the event, both in the archival materials from 1979 and in the 2019 oral history interviews that highlighted their work. These stories are complex and show that the GSA was navigating very hostile territory as they attempted to advocate for themselves. They did so with wit and courage, in spite of the backlash they received. Gray closes by framing Mira Shimabukuro's concept of rhetorical attendance as a way to listen in and to the archives.

Keywords: cultural rhetorics methods, archival studies methods, queer studies, rhetorical attendance, slow scholarship, unruly rhetorics

Doi: 10.37514/PEI-J.2025.27.2.11

In this piece I reflect on the methodological lessons of my dissertation project, an archival cultural rhetorics study examining how representatives of Virginia Tech University, a large, land-grant institution, memorialized histories of institutional oppression against gay and lesbian student activists. In particular, I focus on what it means to encounter materials in the archives and then *listen to them*. I explore the way that Mira Shimabukuro's "rhetorical attendance" helped me to do this work, paying particular attention to what it means to attend when we find dissonance and gaps in the materials we study.

In Spring 2019, I took an archival studies course and found a special collection that caught my interest: the Timeline of LGBTQ+ History at Virginia Tech. Through the timeline, I learned about a remarkable event in January 1979, when the VT Gay Student Alliance (GSA) incensed straight students, faculty, and administrators alike with an event called "Denim Day." The flyer in VT's *Collegiate Times* newspaper read simply "Support gay rights! Wear DENIM today!" (Timeline of LGBTQ+ History at Virginia Tech). Subsequent letters to the editor revealed a range of responses from outright homophobia to veiled threats; to my surprise, around 50% of the responses defended both the GSA and gay rights. I was most compelled by letters from GSA members who wrote to explain themselves. The "purpose of Denim Day," they wrote, was "not a head count" (Noll 4) but rather "an exercise in oppression" (Noll 4; Benoit 4) meant to *force* straight students to experience a taste of the discrimination visited on their queer peers. Despite the innocuous advertising, the GSA knew what they were asking of their classmates: to suspend judgement, to walk in anoth-

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er person's shoes, "if only for one day" (Benoit 4).

Through serendipity, Pride Week in Spring 2019–the same semester I took my archival studies course–featured a Denim Day Do-Over. The slate of events promised to draw on the archives to tell the story of Denim Day 1979 and also to unveil a brand-new oral history exhibit commemorating the 40th anniversary of the event. I was eager to see how the Resource Office and Newman Library would bring Denim Day to life. The archival materials themselves gave me what Sara Ahmed would probably call "killjoy joy" (2023, 76). Frustrated with being bullied and unable to express themselves, the Gay Student Alliance forced the rest of campus to pay attention. As the materials show, a large number of students responded negatively to Denim Day 1979, calling it a "stunt" or "game." I was delighted by the GSA's bravery and their willingness to rile up the entire campus with a protest.

In 2019, the idea of wearing denim to show your support for gay rights sounded simple, perhaps even passé. Context is critical for understanding the type of rhetorical gesture GSA students made. Virginia Tech, and Southwest Virginia more generally, was not a place where people could be openly queer. As early oral history interviewees Eugene Lawson and Scott Sterl recounted an "unspoken acceptance" and a "live and let live" attitude, though no one ever asked or affirmed whether the couple was gay (10:59-12:05). Southwest Virginia had a code: *you can be gay, just don't talk about it*. The Gay Student Alliance made a tactical decision to ignore this code to argue that gay love was as natural as slipping into a pair of jeans and walking across the Drillfield to class.

In fact, the GSA's actions in 1979 reverberated throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia; archival records indicate that the university received a phone call from then-governor John Dalton, who vented his displeasure that university administration allowed the event to happen (Kelly). After the phone call, GSA student leaders were called to the Dean of Students' office and told that they would "never again" hold such an event (Kelly). Prior to this event, queer students fought to have their organizations *recognized*; it took four years after their first attempt in 1971, and the university fought them at every turn. The Timeline of LGBTQ+ History preserves administrative communications from the time that reveal the distaste and distrust with which high-level administrators viewed these openly gay and lesbian students. Martha Harder, Dean of Student Programs, attended the student government meeting where the first gay student organization was approved in 1971. Harder expressed her skepticism that the organization was not "just an organization for gays to meet more gays" (para 3). She forwarded the matter to VT Counsel Walter Ryland, who repeated this accusation then added his own disparaging remarks to the record, writing "Pardon my repressive bias, but I can see them holding teas now" (4). From the beginning of their attempts to organize on campus, queer students were treated as bad-faith actors and repeatedly accused of lying about their motives. Further, as Ryland's letter and Dalton's phone call attest, VT administration believed that recognizing a gay student organization would be detrimental to the institution itself.

As the Do-Over approached, I studied the materials in the archives and I started to wonder: how

would the 2019 event tell the story of VT's 1979 administration banning queer students from expressing their queerness? How would the institution respond to the rich, "lively" (Cifor) archives, which told a very clear story of institutional injustice? The events surrounding Denim Day Do-Over (a radio show, the Do-Over photo at the Moss Arts Center, and a theater performance staged the night afterwards) highlighted the rich experiences of queer alumni and promoted a nuanced understanding of their activist work. However, VT as an institution (through event appearances by administrators and through university-sponsored social media accounts) focused on how the modern institution exceeded its discriminatory past. High-level university administrators attended the Do-Over photo, along with the much-beloved VT Therapy Dogs, who promoted the event on Instagram (@vttherapydogs). University social media promoted Denim Day Do-Over as an opportunity to "celebrate our progress," but framed Denim Day 1979 as an event intended to "promote awareness" rather than as a protest (@virginia_tech). In practice, people representing the university minimized the institution's participation in the oppressive response to Denim Day (students were "ridiculed and abused" but the institution declined to say by whom [@virginia_tech]).

The institution admitted that discrimination happened in the past, but it was quick to use Denim Day Do-Over as proof that the university made progress towards its goals of equality for all community members. Centering such an event around the university's reputation (and its purported improvements) takes focus *away* from the LGBTQIA+ community to create a progress narrative. A progress narrative has a happy ending (*it used to be bad here, but now it's fine*), and the allure of this rhetorical choice is that it produces good feelings. As Ahmed wrote, we are encouraged to accept the actions of an institution and its agents, particularly when our expressions of discontent might disturb institutional happiness (2012, 146-147). However, when commemorative events center institutional happiness, it is likely they will flatten the very experiences they claim to center.

The archives and the still-living queer alumni exceed this progress narrative. They remind us that the "real story" is far more complicated and nuanced than a linear, straightforward movement into an ever-improving future. These stories are worth telling, even if (perhaps especially when) they make us uncomfortable. If we respond to discomfort by *listening* rather than rushing to respond, we allow ourselves the space to see new and surprising connections in the archives.

"We Knew They Hated Us, We Just Did It Anyway": Denim Day 1979

In this section, I invite you to listen with me to the GSA's student activists. These students, as you will see, clearly understood their position on campus and articulated a carefully thought-out response to the homophobia they experienced. Denim Day 1979 was months in the planning (Kelly), and GSA representatives knew what the likely response would be. Nancy Kelly, then-president of the organization, said as much (with a smile) in her 2019 interview with VT archivists: "we knew they [straight students, faculty and administration] hated us [the GSA], we just did it anyway."

Campus erupted. After the event, the *Collegiate Times* ran the headline "Jeans Noticeably Absent" (Fischman); retailers in Blacksburg claimed to have sold out of corduroy pants (*Timeline*). Students wrote in to complain about the GSA's choice of denim. Junior Tony Pirrone asked the GSA why they chose "the Tech uniform" and accused the organization of being "so worried" that they "wouldn't get support" that they felt a need to "claim those who were possibly uninformed of this 'stunt' and accidentally wore denim" (2). Earle McMichael, Kevin Squires, Walter Nelson, and Sue Betterly wrote that it was "not fair to play on people's preference to wear denim" and wrote that they hoped "most other normal people" did not support Denim Day or gay rights (2). Mike Comper was offended by the "dress games" (4) he accused the GSA of playing, and Nancy Howe chided them for their "stupid tactic" (4). A group of engineering students went further, requesting that gay students be moved to an "alternative lifestyle dorm" which "should be painted pink making it easily recognized and avoided by people of the 'normal lifestyle'" (6). They closed their letter with a threat: "Then again, maybe a better solution is for the gays to just stay in the closet and consider themselves lucky" (6). But Denim Day 1979 was never about showing or getting support; it was about who belonged on campus and who was allowed to take up space. The defensive responses highlighted here illustrate fear about sharing space with people we deem "not like us."

GSA members did not remain silent in the face of criticism. Several wrote in to explain Denim Day from the organization's perspective. Steve Noll and Beth Benoit offered particularly noteworthy responses, to which I will now return. Steve Noll, alumnus and GSA member, stated plainly in his letter that "[t]he aim of denim day was not to get a headcount of our supporters" but rather "an exercise in oppression – this time for the perpetrators" (4). He continues by refuting accusations made against the GSA in the letters to the editor discussed above. He turns accusations of the GSA "imposing our ideals on the general public" on their head by accusing "that same general public" of "consistently and cruelly impos[ing] its standards of oppression and inequality on non-male, non-white, non-straight citizens since our society began" (Noll 4). Noll refused to accept shame from his peers and argued passionately that values are "infinite in variety and no less valid than those norms straight society clings to with such tenacity and in such hypocrisy" (4). He framed queerness as a "vital and basic… aspect of life," which the GSA forced into view by comparing their struggles with queer identity to "deciding what pants to wear" (4). Through this framing, the GSA made a powerful argument about the humanity of queer people and their right to love and be loved.

Beth Benoit claimed to be the originator of the idea, and clarified that "[t]he people involved in planning Gay Awareness Week[1] did not pick denim because they were afraid they wouldn't get enough support for gay rights: denim was chosen because it is the student uniform. And therein lies the point" (4). The GSA chose denim, in other words, because it was *normative*; as an act of protest, Denim Day gave the "uniform" at Virginia Tech a different meaning, forcing straight students to grapple with their choices in ways they were not accustomed to doing. Benoit describes the purpose of Denim Day as "mak[ing] people think… about not being able to do something as natural to them as putting on a pair of jeans in the morning" (4). She chastised her peers who became angry, writing that she was "just as angry, if not a thousand

1 The larger slate of events, of which Denim Day was only one part, was called Gay Awareness Week.

times angrier" that queer people are considered "sick" and unable to express "mild displays of affection" without being othered (4). She framed queerness as "the right to love another human being" and told her straight peers in no uncertain terms to examine their privilege (4). Benoit fiercely defended the GSA's choice of denim and stated in no uncertain terms that the very point of the protest was to cause discomfort.

As Kelly's statement that "we knew they hated us" indicates, the GSA did not expect that better treatment would result from their actions. Many, in fact, recounted their lives on campus becoming *less* safe. Nancy Kelly was followed by a car full of young men who threw a brick at her and then chased her on foot (Kelly). Scott Beadle, another GSA member, was ridiculed in the dorm showers; he and Nancy Kelly both had their dorm room doors set on fire (Beadle, Kelly). Yet, as Noll's and Benoit's letters indicate, and as fellow GSA member Andrew Alvarez also discussed, better treatment was never the point of Denim Day.

In his interview for the Denim Day 40th Anniversary collection, Andrew Alvarez explained how Denim Day changed the trajectory of his life. Alvarez stated that he was "raised by a military family. My father was a lifer. He was a Marine and Catholic and Cuban, and I was the first-born son. So I had a lot of baggage that I had to throw off" (2). During this time, said Alvarez, "the whole activism thing, that period was survival" which became a part of "stepping into my own identity" (2). As he saw it, "the day itself was less dramatic than the night before when we had to put the flyers underneath the doors" (Alvarez 13). Though Alvarez "fully expected to be verbally accosted, maybe physically," there were only "a few guys" who even opened their doors (13). Promoting the event changed him; he explained that "the person that walked outta that building was a different person than started this process" (13). For Alvarez, "[w]hatever happened that week was sort of anticlimactic because I felt so empowered by the act of just being out and letting people know about this event that, of course, pissed people off because they only had jeans" (13). Alvarez foregrounded "how I felt when I left that building, like I would never again feel like I had to apologize. That I had every right to be there" (13). Through Denim Day, Alvarez learned to accept his identity as a gay Latino. The act went far beyond counting supporters, or pissing people off–it gave queer students the courage to take up space and to use their platform to call out intersectional oppression.

I view Denim Day 1979 through the lens of what Jonathan Alexander, Susan Jarratt, and Nancy Welch called "unruly rhetorics." Unruliness is a "rhetorical tactic" that "pays conscious attention to framing" and to "bodies engaged in political action" (Alexander, Jarratt, and Welch 12). Unruly behavior like Denim Day 1979 "interrupt[s] existing norms of political debate and discussion," in this case to protest homophobia on VT's campus (12). Further, "some bodies in particular contexts are prone to being constituted as unruly," a fact which members of the Gay Student Alliance used to their advantage (Alexander, Jarratt, and Welch 13). As the examples above show, GSA members crafted, quite purposefully, an event that would disrupt the status quo at Virginia Tech. GSA members knew that participating in Denim Day would draw negative attention to them, but they took that risk to fight for basic respect. Though Denim Day was banned for 40 years after 1979, since the 2019 Do-Over, VT Pride Week always includes a Denim Day–a time for LGBTQIA+ Hokies to remember the queer students who fought for their rights almost half a century ago.

Rhetorical Attendance in the Archives

Given the tendency of institutions to create progress narratives, archivists and archival scholars have a responsibility to pay close and careful attention to the materials in the archives. As cultural rhetorics scholar Jennifer Sano-Franchini argues, this work takes time; for that reason, she foregrounds the need for "slow scholarship" in the archives (25). Through slow scholarship, Sano-Franchini, Hyoejin Yoon and Therese Monberg argued, we can find "overlooked histories" (8). Rearticulating these histories is a process of creating "alternative institutional memory" (Monberg, Yoon, and Sano-Franchini 9); these memories reveal the complexity of institutional histories and thicken histories in productive ways by giving space to voices silenced by progress narratives.

To hear these voices, we must first learn how to listen. As Krista Ratcliffe suggested, listening is rhetorical–and rhetorical listening "signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture" (1). This, she argued, is a productive and necessary challenge to "the logos that speaks but does not listen" (23). In her book *Relocating Authority*, Mira Shimabukuro expanded rhetorical listening with the concept of rhetorical attendance. Rhetorical attendance is a model "of the deeper forms of intersubjectivity reception" which require "stretching toward with mental vigilance, with physical readiness, with intent" (Shimabukuro 21-22). Attendance is not passive, but "requires an explicit awareness and mention that culture and experience inform our decisions about when to ask questions and when to say silent, about how to contemplate the implications of our work and anticipate the feelings of those with whom we stand" (Shimabukuro 27). Attending in this way requires sustained energy and attention. As Shimabukuro wrote, we must "look, listen, and look again" in order to "attend to the no-shows, to the what is not said" (28). To attend is to *go over again* in order to reorient towards discordant notes, complicated causality, and previously unheard voices.

To do rhetorical attendance in the archives, then, we should center the unexpected–the dissonances we encounter when we access archives. We should ask what those discordant moments have to do with the cultures in which we live. Shimabukuro considered two questions central to rhetorical attendance: "what tells us something is missing? How do any of us know it's more complicated than that?" (14). To find answers, we must "[attend] to the social position of the archive, an active site of remembering and forgetting" (Shimabukuro 31). Archives, in other words, are not neutral, but culturally inflected and always changing. Conceived as rhetorical attendance, archival work is "a complex interacting array of knowledge still being collected, still being shared, still being redistributed back to the people whose material lives served as the source of that knowledge" (44). The materials in the archive and the material lives they represent always exceed our expectations in ways we cannot predict until we encounter them. The materials we find may surprise us, and they are likely to complicate any attempts at a simple overarching narrative.

Rhetorical attendance gave me a way to refine my thinking about these materials, to come back to them always asking "what *haven't* I seen yet?" As a practice, it is generous, reflective, and centered in care

towards the people whose lives are represented (in small scale) by the materials in the archives. Rhetorical attendance helps us slow down in the archives so we can take sufficient time to understand the stories being told. We should not assume that rhetorical attendance gives us the "real" or "full" story; rather, it complicates the narrative, drawing our attention to struggles, silences, and open questions. In these places, we can find a reflection of who we are as people, good and bad, messy and complicated, and trying to hear each other over the noise. How we shape the materials we find into stories is ultimately up to us as scholars, but taking time to do slow scholarship allows us to give the people represented by those archives the patient attention they deserve.

I began this project in 2019 and it was completed in 2023. In other words, I had plenty of time to encounter (and re-encounter) the materials in the Denim Day archives. During that time, I came to know the members of the 1979 Gay Student Alliance in particular ways. I admired their wit and the courage with which they went about their daily lives after drawing an outsized amount of attention to the tiny town of Blacksburg, Virginia. Their presence on campus at the Do-Over called back to a worse time in history, but knowing where we came from can be a way to change where we go. Like dandelions, the GSA found a way to thrive in poor soil. Their struggles, their determination, and their ultimate victories stand out as stories of hope. Too, they are stories of not allowing the limitations of today to circumscribe the possibilities of tomorrow.

Questions to Center Rhetorical Attendance

Below, I offer a set of questions to help us practice rhetorical attendance in feminist archival studies work.

- What claims do these materials make, and which cultural logics support those claims?
- In what different ways could this event be remembered? How many different perspectives can you identify in the archives? How might these perspectives affect your viewpoint as the writer?
- How does our own culture inform our experience and interpretation of the materials in the archive?
- How do we identify a gap in the archives? How do we know something is missing? Where we find gaps and silences, what rhetorical, material, or cultural circumstances attend them?
- What embodied experiences do we bring to, and have within, archives and public history events?
- Where do we experience discomfort when we attend to our materials? How can that discomfort help us gain a new perspective on the archive?
- How and where do we find difference, misunderstanding, and uncertainty in the materials? If we highlight that story, how does the narrative change?

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