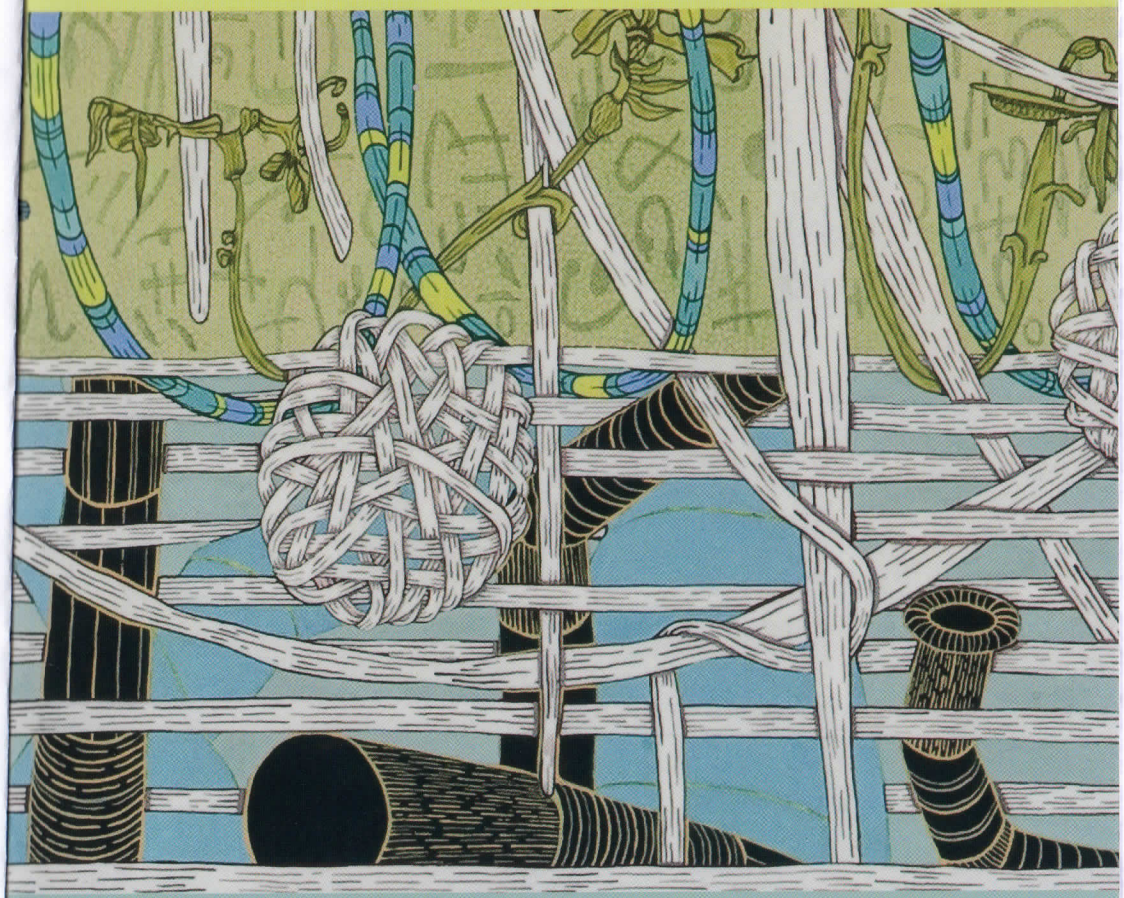
# TIME BINDS

## Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories



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# one. Junk Inheritances, Bad Timing

*Familial Arrhythmia in Three Working-Class Dyke Narratives*

> We are verses out of rhythm,
> Couplets out of rhyme . . .
> — Simon and Garfunkel, "The Dangling Conversation"

In *K.I.P.*, the image of queer "ancestors" not only offers an alternative to reprofuturity by way of a blissful past but also gestures toward the history of visual technology's participation in the making of genealogies and intimacies. Even prior to modern nationalism, people have understood themselves as such and as part of a larger historical dynamic—usually an ascent based on rank, wealth, or other status—through imaging sequence and cumulation in familial terms. They have used narrative tools like pedigrees and legends of their forebears, and visual tools like painted portraits and heirlooms, to represent continuities with unseen others across temporal vistas. Ideas like a noble house, a chosen people, or a superior race, then, all connect microsocial forms like marriage and childbirth to grand narratives of continuity and change. In this production of a generational peoplehood, groups make legible not only themselves but also history thought of, in its simplest terms, as the passage of time beyond the span of a single life.

When visual technologies such as photography and film emerged, they certainly made time available to the senses in new ways: as Mary Ann Doane argues, they both participated in the newly rationalized time-sense of the industrial era and offered ways out of rationalized time by privileging the index, the archive, the gap between frames, and other devices that stopped or "lost" time.[1] Yet as these technologies became available to middling folk, they were often harnessed to and furthered the representation of collective longitude. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, families increasingly "mattered" or both appeared before themselves and came to seem consequential in and of themselves through the visual technologies marketed at ordinary people—daguerreotypes,

snapshots, and eventually home movies.[2] Historically, the photographic media participated in the emergence of a highly heterogendered, middle-class discourse of family. The very earliest mass-marketed photographic technologies, as Shawn Michelle Smith demonstrates, turned away from the public iconicity associated with the painted portrait and toward depicting an elusive psychic interiority, coded as highly feminine. Generally portraying individual subjects and families posed in interior spaces surrounded by household items and furnishings, daguerreotypes celebrated privacy and yet teased the viewer with the voyeuristic pleasure of imagined access to both rooms and souls.[3] They evoked the "timeless" spaces of heart and hearth, the stillness of a domestic life imagined as a haven from rather than a necessary correlate of industrial time.

The technologies that followed may have dimmed the daguerreotype's aura of singularity insofar as they allowed for multiple prints, but their domestic users drew from the conventions of daguerreotypy by privileging homes and family groupings. As Marianne Hirsch writes, after the invention of the Kodak camera "photography quickly became the family's primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation—the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated."[4] Smith contends that by the end of the nineteenth century the photograph of the child, in particular, had become a means of visualizing not just time but the future, and not just any future but one congruent with middle-class aspirations illustrated by poses, settings, and props. Candid, infinitely reproducible pictures of live babies and children replaced the daguerreotype era's cult of dead children, figuring a new congruence between technological reproduction and the saving of the Anglo-American "race," now understood in terms of skin color as well as ancestry. In the hands of ordinary fathers and, increasingly, mothers, domestic photographs "trac[ed] the imaginative trajectory" of the family line toward continued racial purity, physical health, and prosperity.[5] In this way, they inserted the family into, and made the family into an image of, the nationalist march of "progress." In other words, domestic photography helped merge the secularized, quasi-sacred time of nature and family with the homogenous, empty time across which national destiny moved: representations of family made simple reproductive sequences look like historical consequence. The spatial conventions that attended domestic uses of the visual media also contributed to this effect. For instance, the family portrait is often recognizable as such because the subjects are usually posed with the elders at the back (and sometimes even portraits of ancestors on the wall behind them), the children in the front, and an adult male-female couple at the center, flanked by their own siblings or eldest children. Individual portraits of different family members or the same person are often shot or displayed in sequences that emphasize physical likenesses across time, as in the living room display of family members organized top-to-bottom and/or oldest-to-youngest, or of the child posed in front of the same tree once a year.

But as I suggested earlier, queer time emerged from within, alongside, and beyond this heterosexually gendered double-time of stasis and progress, intimacy and genealogy. While the antebellum nineteenth century was marked by a dialectic between sacred, static "women's" time and a secularized, progressive, nominally male national-historical time, the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw a dialectic between "primitive," slow, recalcitrant time and the time of speedy production, rapid distribution, and constant novelty. This ostensible division of mutually informing and co-constructed categories was not only gendered, as before, but now also explicitly racialized and sexualized. The discourses of racial degeneration in criminologists like Cesar Lombroso, and of neurotic repetition in Freud, made it possible to imagine and represent a certain stalling of any smooth movement from past to present, stillness to action, time to history. These discourses foregrounded compulsive returns, movements backward to reenter prior historical moments rather than inward or outward to circumvent historical time. As film technologies emerged in the late nineteenth century, they seemed to materialize the possibility of return that subtended modernity: as Mary Ann Doane demonstrates, the plots of early fictional films such as *Life of an American Fireman* (1903) contained scenes in which the same action was shown twice, shot from different vantage points, to emphasize spatial continuity. Some "actuality" films depicting real events were shown backward and forward, asking spectators to marvel in buildings that resurrected themselves, or glasses that knit their fragments back up. Some were shown in a continuous loop, encouraging viewers to notice different details in each showing. Some early directors enhanced the credibility of the historical reenactments they portrayed by beginning with establishing shots taken on the day of the historical event, returning spectators to the original time and place before launching a reconstruction of the events that took place there. Thus, though film seemed to highlight the irreversibility and linearity of time through the relentless forward motion of the apparatus, it also enabled a kind of mass repetition-compulsion, enabling spectators to

stop time or see it run backward. Whether explicitly correlated with racial and sexual otherness or not, film's ability to manipulate time or to enable historical return resonated with the late nineteenth century's tendency to align blacks, homosexuals, and other deviants with threats to the forward movement of individual or civilizational development.

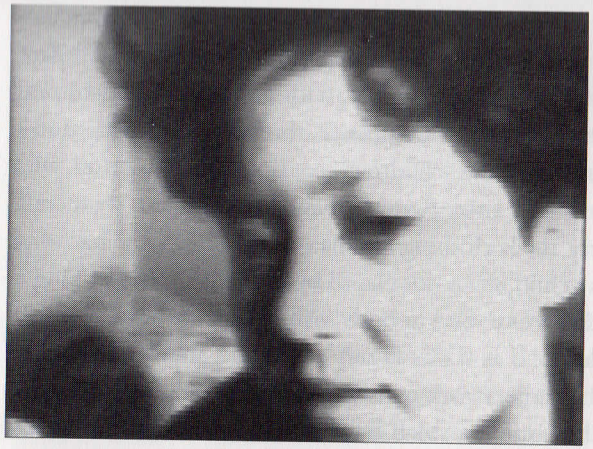
Cecilia Dougherty's independent video *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* (1991) queers family by bringing film's work on time to the level of acting and embodiment. At its outset, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* promises a suture between family and collectivity, representation and reproduction, using the conventions of home video. At one point in this piece, a working-class family sits down to dinner at their home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the week before an election.[6] Among the family members is the protagonist, Jane Dobson (Leslie Singer), who has announced before the story begins, "My name is Jane Dobson and this is my damned story," and who will make her way up from the family dinner table and out of the closet by the narrative's end. But by invoking both the country singer Loretta Lynn's hit "Coal Miner's Daughter" (1970) and the film of the same name (1980), the title of Dougherty's video suggests Jane's complicated relationship to her family of origin. Ostensibly, it signals that her personal history includes a connection to not only extended family but also a collective form of labor and its representational history. In Popular Front, Depression-era portraits by Walker Evans, James Agee, and Dorothea Lange, for instance, coal miners' families have typically registered the progress or regress of an industry and the culture surrounding it; similarly, the lyrics to Lynn's song suggest that her memories of her home at Butcher Hollow preserve a lost way of life. Viewers of *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, then, might expect something magisterial, a female "Up from Wage Slavery" that lends gravitas to an individual life by embedding it in a larger collective drama of gender, sexual, and/or class struggle.

But plain and lumpish Jane is a watered-down version of Lynn's earnestly gritty protagonist, half a century removed from the world of collective organizing that many now romanticize (see figure 2). Thus "granddaughter" ironically invokes a certain de-generation, of which homosexuality is only one aspect in the video. Jane's "damned story" involves not the rags-to-riches progress of a star but the movement from *the* Depression to just plain old depression, and the lesbian awakening of an ordinary young woman who ends up in San Francisco's early 1990s pro-sex queer subculture—neither of which, it might be noted, add up to something as grandiose as damnation in the religious sense of the word.



There is no grandparent with whom we might expect Jane to somehow identify, perhaps even as a source informing her lesbian identity. In fact, the actors are of more or less the same age, with only minimal costuming—the mother's obvious wig and dark lipstick, the father's ill-fitting suit—separating the parents from the "children" (see figure 3). The latter, with the exception of the hippie sister Rene (Amanda Hendricks), wear ordinary late 1980s/early 1990s clothing and haircuts. Though the narrative begins when Jane is a child, she is not played by a child actor but by Singer speaking in a childlike voice, and nobody visibly ages within the story's roughly two decades. It is as if this family cannot go anywhere in time; indeed, much of the camerawork consists of disorienting and claustrophobic close-ups shot inside a small interior, rather than of the action shots and exterior scenes that traditionally align the passage of time with motion and changes in setting. There are no coal mines visible either; and though the election results in the father getting a job as the postmaster of Lancaster, he spends much of his time sitting around a kitchen table with his family members.

Leftist Democrats and Catholics, the Dobsons seem vaguely lower middle class, which is mostly indicated by the few props in the kitchen and by the father's job. But they are visibly untouched by any particular community or industry. These absences lend a certain pathos to the title insofar as they mark the kind of vacuum left behind when mining and other heavy industries are outsourced. Indeed, as if to mark the shift from a manufacturing to a temp economy, Francis, the father (Kevin Killian), says, "I'm the only man in town with two jobs." The other job apparently involves work with the Democratic Party on behalf of prisoners, ironically enough, for Francis imprisons his own family in stereotypically heterogendered expectations justified by his hatred of communism. Given the loss of pater familias here, we might expect the family's women, at least, to display enduring patterns of working-class sociability; we might even wish these patterns into resembling queer bonds in Jane's present or the future. But *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* refuses to excavate the kind of past that might situate Jane and her family in a larger narrative encompassing and correlating both working-class and lesbian identity. As a reviewer writes, "Jane as a subject never really comes through. Perhaps this is the point: she is the absent center of her own life."[7] In this video, time stalls in the failure of a granddaughter to be either a grand representative of her class legacy or a proper daughter—or even, perhaps, a subject at all. Unmoored from the representational logic that sutures biological



**2–3.** Stills from *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*.
Copyright Cecilia Dougherty, 1991. Courtesy of the artist.

reproduction to social history through visual technologies, Jane's biography simply bobs along, inconsequentially.

In short, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* presents a degenerated working-class solidarity, and this sense of loss and absence extends to the very materiality of the video. Repudiating both earnest documentary and Hollywood biopic, Dougherty shot her piece in PXL 2000, popularly known as PixelVision — an extremely cheap camera that records images onto audiotape, available primarily as a toy sold by Fisher-Price between 1987 and 1989. *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* also emerged within a fleeting moment of the late 1980s and 1990s, dubbed the New Queer Cinema, whose



artists and critics were already self-consciously theorizing its own emergence and ephemerality.[8] The term "New Queer Cinema," apparently coined by the film critic B. Ruby Rich, encompassed films that eschewed gay identity as a point of departure or return and instead represented same-sex relations in terms of acts, situations, aesthetics, and unpredictable historical or social collisions.[9] To describe the New Queer Cinema somewhat overschematically, it generally avoided individual coming-out narratives, realistic depictions of urban gay social milieux, and other "expressive" narrative or filmic conventions that would stabilize or contain homoeroticism, correlate particular bodies to particular desires, or reduce erotic practice to sexual identity.[10] And crucially, the New Queer Cinema engaged in what Rich called "a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind . . . a new historiography," about which less has since been written than one might expect.[11] In keeping with the New Queer Cinema's emphasis on the constructed nature of both identity and history, Jane's life is memorialized on the nearly obsolete medium of a cassette tape, the original of which cannot even be played except on a discontinued machine. Portraying a granddaughter who is a bad copy of Lynn's famous daughter, in a medium that is itself considered a bad copy of film, and indeed in a low-quality version of even that medium intended for children, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* is less about descent or legacy than it is about inferior derivations and the inheritance of qualities with no value to middle-class culture. Even in its physical aspect, the video incarnates the clichés that a lesbian is a bad copy of a man, that a queer life leaves nothing enduring, that a working-class subject has, in Rita Felski's words, "nothing to declare."[12]

Insofar as this video follows the generic conventions of a coming-out story, it certainly participates in an earlier identity politics on the level of content. But what is queer about it surfaces in the formal register: materially, a master tape that is destined to corrupt and fade, and structurally, a saga that fails to be anything but utterly ordinary. These elements clearly resonate with contemporary analyses of queerness as a force that distorts or undermines the logic of sequence — at one point in the film Jane says to her brother Jon (Glen Helfland), "I could just stay here, go to Temple, get married, get some kind of office job till I get pregnant . . . why don't I just blow my head off right now?"[13] But the video also refuses to disrupt narrative sequence per se and align dissident sexuality with a simple ateleological postmodernism: scene follows scene in relatively expected ways as Jane fights with her family, leaves home, arrives in a gay Mecca,

comes back to visit Lancaster now and again. Here, queer does not merely oppose linearity. Dougherty herself has stated that she "wanted to make a narrative instead of an experimental piece . . . I'm really sick of artsy videos . . . It looked like film was going to be the vehicle for narrative and video was slated for documentary or experimental work. I thought video was underutilized."[14]

Dougherty's contribution to a queer politics of time is, then, more complicated than mere postmodernism: like Nguyen, she blocks the transformation of time itself into grand historical narrative, especially as this metamorphosis is effected through the progress of a people depicted visually. But she also blocks the transformation of class consciousness into Marxist History-with-a-capital-H, or the proletariat's eventual triumph. By explicitly referencing Loretta Lynn's *Coal Miner's Daughter*, Dougherty suggests how key the trope of heteronormative, ex-tensive kinship is to these two interlocking grand narratives of collective destiny. But her play with the time of heteronormative family life engages an axis of temporal power that cannot be reduced to the generationalized class saga, even if it functions alongside it: *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, despite the diachronic overtones of its title, engages most deeply with the synchronic, or the power of *timing* to effect solidarity.

As with all legitimate groups, families depend on timing. Their choreographed displays of simultaneity effect a latitudinal, extensive set of belonging to one another: in popular rhetoric and imagery, for instance, the family that prays together supposedly stays together.[15] As Homi Bhabha points out in his work on nationhood, these performances of synchrony may seem to consolidate collective life, but the coherence they provide is fragile.[16] Dougherty's disruption of heterotemporality, likewise, appears less as a matter of narrative derangement or antiteleology than as a matter of theatrical and theatricalized decoordination, much like that of the bumbling artisans in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. In *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, the players are neither documentary subjects nor professional actors but amateurs from Dougherty's everyday life (Jane, for instance, is played by the video artist Leslie Singer). The production had no script, and Doughterty's players improvised from a minimal plot outline. Dougherty sketched out a set of sequential vignettes that added up to a story, then gave the players broad descriptions of each scene and index cards with key phrases that she wanted them to use as they acted them out in what appear to be single takes.[17] Much of the dialogue in the video is therefore marked by stutters, mismatches between the tone and



content of sentences, and non sequiturs, as the untrained, unscripted players fumble their way through stilted conversations. In fact, *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* flaunts consciously off-kilter mimicry at perhaps the most celebrated, the most representationally charged, of what Ernest Renan called the "daily plebiscites" that both enact and renew American family life—the shared evening meal.[18] From the privileged vantage point of the voyeuristic dinner guest, we can see how the Dobsons' prosodic and gestural twitches are at odds with middle-class familial habitus.

In a way, the video *is* realistic, for who hasn't sat through family dinners as boring, awkward, and pointless as the ones *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* portrays? But the actors' verbal clumsiness, flat affect, and misfiring of dialogue and interactions constitute what I think of as this video's "queer accent." I mean this phrase to echo and to revise Voloshinov's theory of "multiaccentuality." Voloshinov argues that members of different classes, though they use the same ideologically loaded terms, inflect them differently, with subjugated classes deploying them toward ends that contradict or compete with dominant ones, or stressing subjugated or archaic meanings.[19] This definition departs from the usual spatiotemporal way of seeing accent as a vestige of location in a particular geographical place, as in a Southern accent, or even a discrete historical moment, as in an Elizabethan one. For it implies the *rhythmic* aspect of the word "accent"—its definition as *stress* or, in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "a prominence given to one syllable in a word . . . over the adjacent syllables."[20] In terms of speech, to share an accent with someone is to have similar patterns of not only tone and phoneme but also meter. And accent, as the work of Bourdieu and Mauss makes clear, extends beyond the spoken rhythm of individual words and sentences to encompass kinetic tempos and the prosodics of interactions between people. Accent is part of habitus, that somatic effect primarily achieved in and through conventions of timing that feel like natural affinities. Those who can synch up their bodily hexes and linguistic patterns, who can inhabit a culture's particular tempos with enough mastery to improvise within them, feel as if they belong to that culture (this is why humor, which often depends on physical and/or verbal timing, is so culturally specific and such a marker of insiders and outsiders). Thus a class accent is not simply a matter of manners, as with television shows of the 1980s like *Married with Children*, which featured a family of perpetually broke, gum-cracking slobs yelling at one another. Instead, it is a matter of shared timing. The Dobsons of *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* seem unlike members of a united working

class—and more jarringly, unlike even a family—because the timing of their interactions with one another is so imperfect. Their inadequate mastery over time and timing registers incompetence with and insufficiency to, or perhaps just refusal of, the forms of working-class solidarity and familial intimacy. If the actors quite literally don't know how to act together, the family gives off the impression of not wanting to act "together," even as the mother, Phyllis (Didi Dunphy), whines over and over again, "We'll always be together. We'll always be happy together."

The video's commitment to bad timing, then, queers what might otherwise be its univocally class-inflected accent: perhaps the Dobsons fail to enact class belonging because they fail in the first place to act as a "normal" family. And conversely, perhaps class complicates what would otherwise be a more recognizably lesbian accent. Singer's acting certainly gets better in the San Francisco scenes, which perhaps inadvertently suggests that queer life fits Jane, and she fits it, a bit better than life with her family of origin. But this too gets complicated by a wholly different subplot: on her arrival in San Francisco, Jane finds not pure bodily liberation but, tellingly, chronic pain in her joints. Her brother Jon has already said that the two of them should "blow this joint" and get out of Lancaster, but Jane finds instead that her own articular surfaces are covered with mysterious cysts. While the soundtrack plays a recurrent riff, "If you wanna move, then move over here," Jane learns from her doctor (Ramon Churruca) that her movement will always be limited. This bodily condition, in turn, metaphorizes her inability to become a fast-paced, sexually blasé urban dyke; for instance, in a later scene, Jane is forced to call her nonmonogamous lover Victoria (Claire Trepanier) for help with food and chores, and Victoria impatiently scolds Jane for messing up her other dating plans by expecting her to come immediately. Later, when Jane's doctor asks after her chronic pain and she replies "I think I'm just getting used to it," he is pleased. "Ahhh . . . that's good progress," he intones. "You have to learn to live like that." Ironically, a commitment to stasis becomes the sign of Jane's progress.

Unbound from traditional working-class history, Jane finds herself equally unjoined to queer modernity. In the video's last scene, in which Jane is house-sitting and a neighbor (Amy Scholder) brings up some misdelivered mail, Singer reverts to the mistimed, babbling stiffness of the early dinner scenes. Several times, Jane offers up the lame joke that the postal carrier must be on drugs: his lunch hour, she says, must be "a burrito and a joint." And that is where the video ends: with a coincidental,



promisingly flirtatious encounter facilitated by an inept mailman who seems to be a caricature of Jane's father, and with Jane, who is out of synch with both her working-class background and her newfound "community," and then set adrift into what may or may not be a new plot.

*Coal Miner's Granddaughter* suggests that familial timing implicates both class and sexual relations. Purportedly the fulcrum between the biological and the social, the cyclical and the historical, family is the form through which time supposedly becomes visible, predominantly as physical likeness extending over generations—but also, Dougherty suggests, as natural likeness in manner, or orchestrated simultaneities occurring in the present. Following these insights, this chapter excavates a model of simultaneously queer and class-accented "bad timing" in two other works of art by lesbians who were, like Dougherty and her protagonist, born to working-class mothers, though my two texts focus on the mother-daughter relationship as a distilled version of family. One of these texts is Diane Bonder's short video *The Physics of Love* (1998), which portrays a daughter so alienated from her housewife mother that she cannot grieve her mother's death and is therefore melancholically fixated on the Hollywood mother-daughter melodramas of the 1940s and 1950s.[21] The other is Bertha Harris's novel *Lover* (1976), which portrays five generations of women who loop back upon one another in time to touch in erotic ways.[22] Unlike Dougherty, for whom the temporality of "family" does not differentiate along gendered lines, Bonder and Harris depict characters who are unable either to comfortably occupy or to fully repudiate their mothers' legacies. These characters are also ambivalently situated vis-à-vis their mothers' modes of keeping time, which turns out to be a matter of both class and (gendered) sexualities.

These two texts emerged roughly twenty years apart and like *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* were the product of low-budget, independent, queerly collaborative scenes. *The Physics of Love* was funded, shot, edited, and distributed by the late Diane Bonder, who was part of the loose network of independent lesbian filmmakers emerging on the East Coast in the early 1990s; like Dougherty's work, Bonder's has had very few public showings, predominantly at festivals and curated shows. *Lover* was originally published by Daughters, Inc., a small feminist press specializing in avant-garde novels, and still has only a cult following and little scholarly attention despite its reissue by New York University Press in 1993. Though Harris's and Bonder's texts are in different media, they share a commitment to interrogating the temporal logic of family

and, correspondingly, the familial logic of their own particular historical moments. For Bonder, that moment is, though only implicitly, a queer "renaissance" that privileged an impossible-to-complete rebellion from the maternal figure, one predominantly available to middle-class lesbians.[23] For Harris, that moment is lesbian-feminism, with its romanticized, middle-class ideal of conflict-free relations between women, emblematized by mother-daughter love. Like *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*, these two works are less about lesbian or queer "history" per se than about the timing of lesbian and queer lives. They are about exploring the ideology of familial intimacy (and its converse, the privileged subject's complete refusal of family) as class-marked temporal phenomena within which less privileged queers stumble, and departing from which they might find new ways of being.

Both *The Physics of Love* and *Lover* are more self-consciously anti-narrative than Dougherty's piece, and each features one or more non-sequential storylines as well as various misalignments of what is ordinarily synchronized in its particular medium. *The Physics of Love* (hereafter *Physics*) uses the Newtonian laws of motion as the dominant visual and verbal motif for failed intimacy. *Physics* features an original musical score that is constantly interrupted by nondiegetic snippets of sound—a scratchy recording of Frank Sinatra singing "Something's Gotta Give," a fragment of dialogue from an old western, recitations of plot summaries, beeps, ticks, rattles. Its image track juxtaposes, repeats, and abruptly cuts between several kinds of footage, including snapshots, home movies, stills from motion studies, images on a television set, and title cards. Thematically, the film works by accreting the same few scenes and visual tropes: a wrecking ball hitting a building, water moving over cards imprinted with phrases, twirling three-dimensional miniatures of household appliances, hands performing domestic tasks, laundry blowing in the wind. Harris's novel *Lover* is as formally fragmented as *Physics*. This novel tracks the movement of an interrelated group of women toward the rarified status of "lover." *Lover*'s governing aesthetic principles come from the visual arts rather than from the tradition of the novel: "*Lover*," writes Harris, "should be absorbed as though it were a theatrical performance. Watch it. It is rife with the movie stars and movies of my childhood and adolescence . . . *Lover* has a vaudeville atmosphere."[24] Though the novel may be peppered with allusions to Hollywood and Wagnerian opera, vaudeville is the more apt metaphor for its arrangement: *Lover* features a cast of characters who do not so much develop as simply enter and exit, appear and reappear, telling stories and performing scenes set in different times. It has no overarching plot but instead cuts between several storylines in nonchronological order, stacking them atop one another and weaving in fragments from saints' lives and philosophical musings from various narrators. In both of these works, formal experimentation takes place against an exaggeratedly heteronormative temporalized discipline, figured by the mother-daughter relationship.