

**Introduction: Nostalgia as Proof of Life: A Dossier on Marika Cifor's Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS**

by Cait McKinney and Jack Jen Giesecking

We were just two queers hungry for another way to think about nostalgia, and that's how we arrived here: writing this to you and writing alongside these interdisciplinary scholars of HIV/AIDS. In other words, our inspiration for a dossier on *Viral Cultures* (2022) came from mutually experiencing the book as liberatory. As editors of this dossier who are also archival scholars of late 20th century queer life, we experienced this book as an opening. In Cifor's hands, nostalgia is political: a way of drawing out modes of critique from AIDS responses in the past in service of naming and responding to the structural harms of HIV in the present. Our early scholarly experiences of nostalgia as an epistemology landed us in this structure of feeling. We knew we weren't supposed to touch nostalgia because it felt like a weakness or turn away from serious critique—and we didn't exactly know why. Nostalgia had the structure of something like a "dirty" or deviant secret. Just like queerness. Just like HIV.

This formation of knowing, feeling, and shame is where Cifor's theory of "vital nostalgia," as an AIDS-informed recuperation of this concept, steps in.

In the words of contributor Hil Malatino, vital nostalgia is "a practice of developing an orientation to the past that seeks tactics, strategies, and knowledges that enable worldbuilding otherwise." The vital nostalgia Cifor unfolds in *Viral Cultures* has resonated deeply for the contributors to this dossier, who have also sought out other languages and trajectories for what nostalgia does in their work. Vital nostalgia describes a way of creating and being with AIDS archives that is generative about the present and future, that infuses work with liveliness and being. It is a way of asking hard questions about what is and is not in AIDS archives, about whose lives have been grievable, and about what affective histories of illness, debility, and state-abandonment can show us about present structures of harm and their undoing.

In each of our graduate school experiences of getting to know our respective and also overlapping fields, nostalgia was a low-key "bad" affect: nostalgia meant dwelling too deeply

in the past instead of facing the present and unfolding conditions of structural violence and racial capitalism that shape queer and trans life worlds. Nostalgia and critique were mutually exclusive. Cifor outlines this conventional approach to nostalgia as "politically conservative, self-indulgent wallowing in the past" that is a roadblock to imagining or enacting social transformation (6). Nostalgia must be undone or put aside in order to achieve something like justice, and this felt deeply unsatisfying. And while we were in grad school learning such an approach, we were both becoming steeped more deeply in LGBTQ+ history and our own activism grew with our scholarly commitments.

The work about nostalgia that I (Cait) was being taught in my graduate program in Communication and Culture in the early 2010s was coming out of cultural studies and inflected by Marxism. I remember reading Fredric Jameson's (1991) chapter "Nostalgia for the Present" in the library after photocopying the book my professor had put on course reserve and feeling like "ugh, this feels like work." There were things about these theories of nostalgia that I liked, but I was never convinced by the idea that nostalgia is a kind of false-consciousness about history that simplifies, contains, and periodizes. Because, for queer people there is always an element of work to nostalgia associated with accounting for its poor fit with the phenomena we are working to understand: something else is always going on when we look back with feeling about the past, in order to better understand the present and future. So much of the art I was encountering at that time was taking up the affective relationships queer people had to radical pasts: dyke artists like Sharon Hayes and Zoe Leonard, for example, who were dealing explicitly or obliquely with AIDS as one part of a longer genealogy. Yet the stuff I was being assigned in class couldn't help me account theoretically for what I was feeling and seeing as a queer person.

I (Jack) was in grad school in the late 2000s, in an Environmental Psychology program situated firmly in the geographic Marxism of the CUNY Graduate Center. Contrary to Cait's experience, my advisor pointed happily to the nostalgia dripping from my interviews with lesbian and queer New Yorkers who came out between 1983 and 2008. Each participant marveled, at least in some measure, about a late 1980s/early 1990s moment of queerness that created "community" for them. But my advisor also told me nostalgia was a sticky term to take up, without us diving into why, and I lacked the classroom discussions of "nostalgia"

that Cait was grounded in. Besides, I (still Jack) had the wildly popular concept of Michel de Certeau (1983) and Henri Lefebvre's (1987) versioning of the "everyday" to turn to—which, in retrospect, was a counterbalance to the cis-heteronormative denial of the centrality and import of nostalgia. I (thought I) took up the "everyday" because I was keen on reckoning not just with the spectacular moments of protest that often emerged as oversimplified "gay history" (read: Stonewall and more Stonewall), but the very banal spaces and places that programmatically formed everyday dyke life. I grounded my work in a year's worth of documentary research at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, faced with critiques from feminist mentors that participants in my interviews might not remember their coming out stories. Indeed, these critiques were not from lesbians. My lesbian-queer self wondered: who could ever forget the trauma, angst, hope, despair, and/or relief of coming out? Only in retrospect now—and in our shared stories of denied nostalgia—can we see the 2000s-era fixation on the "everyday" as part of a wider critical disregard for nostalgia: celebration of the mundane present (even when it's past) can reassert cis-heteronormativity and refute queer, trans, and related ways of thinking and being that exist in melancholic longing for others like them.

We only sorted out our own relationships to nostalgia through reading this dossier and having conversations about Cifor's book. So it was intuition that led us to invite scholars from across some of the many fields that *Viral Cultures* touches to write in this dossier: from critical HIV, gender, sexuality, information, and disability studies. The differently positioned responses from HIV/AIDS scholars in this dossier each take up Cifor's vital nostalgia concept with palpable relief for what it offers to their own thinking and their fields. They show how this politically potent concept is fundamental for responding to HIV/AIDS as a present and ongoing experience of chronic illness bound to other structural forms of social vulnerability and their effects: housing injustice, medical racism, the overdose death crisis, amongst other chronic conditions. Turning to AIDS archives offers felt modes of response from the past that are different from the present, but still salient for demanding justice. This is necessary because, as Alexandra Juhasz and dossier contributor Ted Kerr argue in their recent book, *We Are Having This Conversation Now* (2022), AIDS work is fundamentally cultural, and shows us that "time is not a line," a crucial orientation because "we will always have viruses" (Timeline 1; Timeline 2).

Though it is not a disability studies book, *Viral Cultures* takes up Eli Claire's work on *cure* to think about archives as offering remedies to structural oppressions that make chronic illness unlivable, and stand in the way of cultural healing. This aspect of the book resonates for contributors to this dossier working in disability studies: Lisa Diedrich and Emily Lim Rogers, each scholars of health and disability, draw out *Viral Cultures* wider potential for disability studies and feminist science and technology studies (STS). Each author focuses on what Cifor offers for cultural approaches to understanding chronic illness. Diedrich, based in gender and sexuality studies, frames Cifor's construction of archives as *home* for AIDS records: AIDS archives provide shelter, care, and a domestic structure that is more familial than a traditional institution. Diedrich's own forthcoming book, *Illness Politics and Hashtag Activism* (2023), explores illness politics as they are depicted on social media, arguing that discourse about illness often stands-ins for the politics of sexuality, race, and class. By reading Cifor's careful construction of AIDS archives as homely spaces, Diedrich surfaces how domestic spaces are places where disability and illness are figured as everyday political practices, even though they do not necessarily appear as such to the untrained eye. For Diedrich, vital nostalgia is "a form of archival care and intergenerational homemaking," through which pandemic politics can be surfaced.

Rogers, a medical anthropologist, thinks through Cifor's attention to how histories of chronic illness materialize differently when we focus on archives as caring practices. They flesh out the careful collection and maintenance of stories about surviving stigmatized illness as akin to the ways feminist approaches to STS focus on less valued registers of technical and scientific labor such as maintenance and repair. Rogers works on myalgic encephalomyelitis (also known as chronic fatigue syndrome or ME/CFS), a feminized illness disbelieved and rendered invisible by medical industries. Drawing on Cifor's theorizations of archives and care, Rogers shows how ME/CFS is also quite vitally present in lesbian community archives because lesbians were already practiced at naming different embodiments, and responding to state violence and social erasure. Rogers also pushes on the limits of direct-action AIDS activism as a portable model for understanding organized responses to chronic illness more broadly. AIDS activist nostalgia is not totally calibrated to understanding the quieter forms of activism that emerge from an illness characterized by persistent fatigue.

The thread of care also runs deep in Jallicia Jolly's essay, "Transforming the AIDS Pandemic as We Know It," which focuses on the AIDS epidemic that is not over. Jolly's ethnographic, mixed methods American studies scholarly approach to the study of HIV-positive Jamaican Black women's reproductive justice organizing works to center the populations Cifor points to repeatedly in *Viral Cultures*, but a population, she notes, that the large and funded New York City archives she draws from occlude in their focus on cis, white gay men's lives and deaths. The activist, artist, and curatorial project of making AIDS present as a Black experience, a women's experience, and a Black women's experience is the "essential" work of vital nostalgia, per Jolly. Vital nostalgia can be deployed to "redress the denial of culture, knowledge, and care from those who have been long marginalized" and "facilitate perseverance and knowledge building across time and space." By actually giving voice and support, and learning from Black women at the heart of the continuing AIDS crisis, Jolly shows us how we can rebuild our understandings and investments in AIDS in order "to transform narratives and AIDS as we know it."

As much as *Vital Nostalgia* is geared towards how we grapple with AIDS histories, Cifor's emphasis on nostalgia's vitality for the present and future is also taken up by several other authors in their focus on living with HIV/AIDS and its legacies now. Cesare Di Felicianantonio is a social and cultural geographer whose research emphasizes the relationship between HIV and migration. Di Felicianantonio shows how vital nostalgia factors in the ways people living with HIV situate their illness and lives in relation to the past, but more importantly, their collective futures. For example, he details how one informant describes drawing on gay men's sexual cultures from the 1970s to "challenge moralistic and sex phobic discourses" that limit intimacies between queer men and their sexual networks. The past also offers contemporary AIDS activism that is focused on migration language for thinking about structural harm and abandonment, and the imbrication of HIV vulnerability in other systems such as citizenship and housing.

Communication studies scholar Marty Fink is also concerned with how vital nostalgia can be used as a hinge for understanding affect and intimacy between queer men who "came after" what is normatively understood as the temporality of the North American AIDS Crisis. Fink is also a literary scholar who offers a close reading of Zak Salih's 2021 novel, *Let's Get*

*Back to the Party* through Cifor's theory of vital nostalgia, which Fink characterizes as a practice of queer time travel. Fink shows how queer intimacies across generations are shaped by HIV/AIDS. They unfurl Salih's disjointed narrative experiments as formal manifestations of a time-traveling vital nostalgia at play, offering a unique theorization of vital nostalgia as something like queer *form*. Fink's beautiful, lyrical reading of Cifor and Salih shows how vital nostalgia operates as a structure of feeling one can read with.

Like Di Felicianantonio and Fink, science and technology studies scholar Stephen Molldrem and information studies scholar Roderic N. Crooks also write from their various presents to ask what vital nostalgia does for a vision of justice in their fields: for Molldrem, molecular surveillance and bioethics; for Crooks, how communities of struggle work with information. Emphasizing HIV/AIDS as a continually unfolding crisis, they each return to Cifor's adage: "AIDS is still a crisis, and it should be one to you" (14). Like all the authors in this dossier, who are differently positioned in their relationships to HIV/AIDS, to race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and disciplinary (dis)orientations, Molldrem and Crooks grapple with the book via their own positionalities as both researchers and queer men. It's significant that this grappling emerges in dialog, a structure chosen by the authors that models a profound kind of accountability to the theories we choose to reckon with when we think about HIV/AIDS towards a project of justice.

In their essays, activist and writer Theodore Kerr and philosopher Hil Malatino land at a similar juncture: how community work stretches the boundaries of scholarship-activism that AIDS work asks us to be more porous about. In his essay on his artist/activist collaboration for the Urgent Archives public event series, Kerr presents mutually galvanizing and grounding questions that prompt the reader to contend with the use, usefulness, and possibilities of AIDS archives to prevent more AIDS deaths. Nostalgia, in his own art-activism, and in Cifor's book, are central, as he writes:

So much of the archival experience is about the space between what is and what was. Lament is inherent within community work and the archives. With our event, I think we shared a lot, including lament, activating it in a way that I think mobilized us in the moment to keep connecting, collecting, and sharing.

Relatedly, Malatino also connects to the community across a range of geographies—teaching in the classroom, watching TV as a teenager—in his search to find trans relationships, relationality, and self-understanding forever situated in the early years of the AIDS epidemic and hence a world of loss. But such loss could never be the end of what AIDS is, who Malatino is, or who queer and trans people are either. He writes, "Archival revisitations attuned to such lostness reanimate these archives, repurpose them to speak across difference to those still deeply impacted by the ongoing necropolitics of organized state abandonment."

In her reply to this dossier, Cifor opens with, "Generation is ripe for queer genealogy." As we wrote this introduction, it stood out to us that these very different disciplines, positions, and approaches—and generations—are necessary to read Cifor's book because, as her text and these scholars mutually assert, we need thicker, richer ways to think with nostalgia. Vital nostalgia is fueled by very vital archives that are dripping in variations of experience fed by both space and time. This is a vitality essential to living alongside HIV/AIDS, its archives and archiving practices. The term "vital" evokes the sick and dying, the necessary and mandatory, as well as the living and feeling bodies centered in this process: death, chronic illness, and shared practices of survival inform this conception of what it means to feel the past through its archives. This theory of nostalgia doesn't waste ink on what longing for the past distracts us *from*, but rather pushes on the idea of history as a line and foregrounds the roles played by archives and archivists, and the institutions they work within and/or against. AIDS archives are, as evidenced by Cifor, unique collections of records because they are enacted in ways that emphasize the ongoingness of the "past" crisis they evidence. This is how *Viral Cultures* and its discussants point us to new worlds as well.

## References

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