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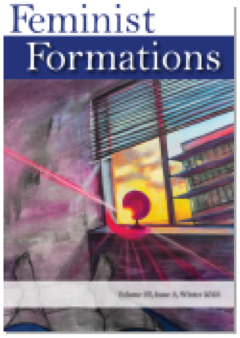

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“Towards an AIDS ARCHIVE”: Homesickness and Homemaking in Marika Cifor’s *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS*

Lisa Diedrich

Full disclosure: I was one of the reviewers of Marika Cifor’s (2022) monograph *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS* for University of Minnesota Press. Thus, I have had the pleasure of reading earlier versions of the manuscript before reading the book in print in the present moment—the present moment being, literally, the cusp between 2022 and 2023, entering the fourth year of the COVID-19 pandemic. I begin by noting the multiplicity of my own readings of different versions of Cifor’s manuscript and now book to indicate the multiple temporalities and spaces in which I have encountered Cifor’s work and its subject: AIDS, AIDS activism, and AIDS activist archiving. In thinking with and contributing to this dossier about Cifor’s work, I want to document these “affective encounters”[1] as a kind of memory work in progress. I first situate Cifor’s project in relation to other work, including my own, on the early days of AIDS and AIDS activism in the United States, and then focus on aspects of *Viral Cultures* that struck me in my most recent reading, generated by Cifor’s discussion of nostalgia and her formulation of the concept “vital nostalgia.”

Cifor describes nostalgia as an “historical emotion” and charts its shifting meanings from the original coinage by German physician Johannes Hofer in the 17th century as a “psychopathological disorder” linked to the feeling of homesickness. She discusses how, since the 1970s, nostalgia has come to be interpreted as an “apolitical, regressive, and ahistorical” emotion. I want to draw out something that is not so much explicit in, but infuses, Cifor’s analysis, and affected me on this reading through what felt like, for me, a very literal encounter with the word and concept *homesick* in relation to AIDS archives.

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Home. Sick. What Cifor's work helped me realize is that AIDS archives create a kind of home for illness and illness politics. Even more so, her work articulates an understanding of activism in general, and activist archiving in particular, as a practice of homemaking in response to loss.

Backwards and Forwards "Towards an AIDS ARCHIVE"

When I first read *Viral Cultures*, I immediately grasped it as making a crucial contribution to conversations happening now about the early days of AIDS and AIDS activism in the United States and how we remember (and forget) and document (and fail to document) that period in the present and for the future. Activist-artists Alexandra Juhasz and Theodore Kerr (2022) have coined the term "AIDS crisis revisitation" to describe a concept and practice they locate in film, media, and art produced beginning in the mid-to-late 2000s, which shows a forgetting as much as a remembering in recent work on the early years of AIDS in the United States. My own work grapples with illness and disability in action in particular times and places. In my book *Indirect Action* (2016), I explore the multiplicity of the conjunction illness-thought-politics in what I called the "prehistory of AIDS" through an array of subjects: queering the origin story of AIDS activism by recalling its feminist history; exploring health activism and the medical experience; analyzing psychiatry and self-help movements; thinking ecologically about counter-practices of generalism in science and medicine; and considering the experience and event of epilepsy and the witnessing of schizophrenia. I concluded my analysis with a discussion of an "afterimage" of early AIDS and AIDS activism in the present by comparing and contrasting how past forms of treatment activism are "screened" (both made visible on film and blocked from view) in the films *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) and *How to Survive a Plague* (2012). The "afterimage" I take up is ACT UP's phrase and campaign "Drugs into Bodies," as well as the repercussions of its success in the present, exploring how pharmaceutical treatments have become, in the United States, the most common, and often the only, "solution to any and all problems—medical, psychological, and social" (2016, 16).

In *Viral Cultures*, Cifor posits activist archiving as one antidote to this reductive focus on pharmaceutical cures, describing AIDS activist archiving beginning in the late 1980s and continuing in the present as a more "holistic cure for the ills that trouble HIV-positive bodies" (121). Archival work as care work is both object and method of Cifor's analysis. Indeed, I would argue that one of Cifor's most important contributions is methodological, as she practices archival ethnography at several AIDS archival sites in New York City—the New York Public Library (NYPL), New York University's (NYU) Fales Library and Special Collections, and Visual AIDS. She interviews activists who participated in ACT UP in the late 1980s and early 1990s about AIDS archives and archiving practices; archivists in the present collecting, cataloging, and showcasing the

AIDS archive for diverse communities; and several activist-archivists about the relationship between archivist and activist identities and practices.

In Chapter 3, for example, Cifor discusses Visual AIDS's *Frank Moore Archive Project* as providing an archival cure: that is, a "remedy for artistic death, critical care for HIV-positive artists, and curing, preservation, and curation that ensure the archives' endurance and accessibility" (114). Cifor discusses the original meaning of *curator* as a religious/spiritual figure entrusted with the care of souls; "[c]uration is grounded in the provision of care, whether for objects or people. From the start, early members [of Visual AIDS] recognized curation's potential in caring for and working towards a holistic cure for their community" (138). Cifor explains that Moore and David Hirsh had initiated the Archive Project in 1994 in concern for a double loss: of artists dying of AIDS and the potential disappearance of their artwork after their deaths. In one of many moving moments in *Viral Cultures*, Cifor describes "encountering [Moore's] words in the quiet reading room [at Visual AIDS] in 2016, and each time I have read them since, I am struck by the simple power of Moore's concluding line: 'Towards an AIDS ARCHIVE'" (125; capitalization in the original). Cifor encounters these words in an archive as part of a project on AIDS archives and activist archiving and, in doing so, she acts as a relay back to Moore's archive project and forward towards AIDS, AIDS activism, and AIDS activist archiving in the present and future. In this way, *Viral Cultures* itself continues this process of moving towards an AIDS ARCHIVE as an ongoing project of homemaking.

Archival Acts of Homemaking

Cifor's concept and practice of vital nostalgia creates the conditions of possibility for a variety of archival acts of homemaking in response to loss that are now collected in *Viral Cultures*. My own preoccupation with homemaking is at least partly inspired by Susan Fraiman's book *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (2017). Fraiman explains that her strategy is "to decouple domestic spaces, figures, and duties from a necessary identification with conservative 'family value'" (3). She challenges the conservative reading of the desire for domesticity offering instead "nonconforming versions of home" and "alternative homemakers" (4). I should also note that at the same time as I was reading Cifor's book for this essay I saw a retrospective of Nan Goldin's work, "This Will Not End Well," at the Museet Moderna in Stockholm, Sweden, and not long after saw Laura Poitras's documentary film about Goldin, *All the Beauty and the Bloodshed*, both of which show Goldin's obsessive photographic documentation of her "extended family of friends," many of whom would die of AIDS. It seemed to me that, although Cifor doesn't discuss her work, Goldin too is practicing vital nostalgia as a kind of homemaking in her work.

Cifor's introduction opens with two art-activist examples of the "significance of AIDS records": the "queer dyke art-action collective fierce pussy's text-based artwork" *For the Record* (1) and the Visual AIDS Archive Project and its 1995 "broadside-cum-recruitment poster by William Cullum [that] insists, in all caps, 'LET'S KEEP A RECORD'" (16). Cifor explains that "*Viral Cultures* takes this AIDS archival milieu as its subject" (17). She challenges a commonplace misreading of archives as "conceptualized in the popular imaginary as static, always about the past, and dead, over, or at least irrelevant" (17). She notes that this popular misconception of archives is "much like HIV/AIDS," which is also often perceived as in the past and over and done with, even though AIDS continues in the present, as does AIDS activism. Cifor argues instead that "archives are vital and relevant forces, 'time machines' that let us bridge past, present, and future" (17). *Viral Cultures* intervenes in the consignment of AIDS to the past by becoming its own AIDS archival milieu—a record of records, as well as a record of record-keeping as practice of care, bridging past, present, and future.

This brings me to nostalgia and Cifor's theorizing of the concept and practice of vital nostalgia. As Cifor explains, the impetus for her project was partly a feeling among a younger generation of queers, including Cifor herself, who felt a longing for AIDS activism, as best exemplified by ACT UP and its radical politics and aesthetic style, that stands in stark contrast to the mainstreaming and neoliberalization of contemporary LGBTQ+ politics and the focus on campaigns supporting relatively conservative causes like marriage equality and gays in the military. For me, this nostalgia for a certain kind of activism—direct action, in-your-face politics, combined with a sense of belonging to an embattled community—goes along with an origin story of AIDS activism that says AIDS activism, and all health activism, began with the founding of ACT UP in 1987. This origin story is then often followed by the charting of a trajectory from politicization to depoliticization in the present to (a hoped for) repoliticization in the future.

In formulating vital nostalgia, Cifor draws on Svetlana Boym's important work distinguishing two kinds of nostalgia. Cifor explains the difference between restorative and reflective nostalgia, quoting from Boym: "Nostalgia can problematically be 'restorative,' aspiring to the perfect 'transhistorical reconstruction of a lost home,' or other space. Alternatively, nostalgia can be 'reflective,' thriving in the ambivalence of longing itself." (2022, 28; Boym 2001, xvii). In these two definitions of nostalgia, Cifor, following Boym, offers contrasting ideas about what home is and does temporally and spatially. In restorative nostalgia, home is a conservative space that is or ought to be reproduced wherever we go. In reflective nostalgia, home is an activity, a doing, and is oriented towards the future as well as the past. In theorizing vital nostalgia, Cifor draws out the ways that longing for home is "deeply political and socially engaged" (2022, 28). Thus, we have an idea of home and homemaking not as site of and means for the reproduction of conservative values but as a force for social change and site of radical politics and care. With this concept and practice of homemaking in mind, I now turn to several examples of homemaking documented in *Viral Cultures*.

"I just want to go back to that room"

Cifor's first chapter looks at the controversy surrounding Vincent Chevalier and Ian Bradley-Perrin's 2013 poster *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!*, arguing that "the poster makes in its curation a critique of AIDS commodification in digital media" (35). Cifor tracks the "heated critical conversations *Your Nostalgia* sparked among multiple generations of AIDS activists" on social media and later at the New York Public Library "for a discussion convened around the poster and the impassioned responses to it" (36). *Viral Cultures* continues the circulation of the poster (reproduced in black and white on p. 36) and makes space for further discussion and impassioned responses. In describing the nostalgia felt by many former ACT UP members that was expressed in this controversy, Cifor notes that what they long for is "not just the persons who have been lost"; they also long for the physical spaces in which activists gathered regularly (43). Cifor writes that, "These spaces are the object of a 'yearning for home' among these former participants," and she quotes Theodore Kerr of Visual AIDS sharing with her that one of his colleagues, an artist and ACT UP member, would frequently say, "I just want to go back to that room," meaning the room at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in New York where ACT UP meetings were held (43). This is vital nostalgia as a feeling of homesickness, with home as a space enacted through AIDS activism. In this image of the room, home is not a conservative, private space, but a communal, public space made through political activism and/as care work.

Cifor provides a close reading of *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me!*, arguing that it "contends with ACT UP nostalgia within the setting of a teenager's bedroom," whose walls are covered with "archival images, art, and advertisements that consciously translate and remix 1990s' digital aesthetics" (51). The action and intimacy of the ACT UP meeting room as a kind of home is replaced by an empty bedroom that some have interpreted as commodifying and domesticating ACT UP's politics and activist aesthetics. In contrast to this dismissive interpretation, Cifor contextualizes *Your Nostalgia* across multiple temporalities and spaces of AIDS activism by interviewing Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin about their decisions regarding the overall composition of the poster and their method of selecting images contained within it (56–57). Cifor provides insight into the complexity of their decision-making:

> Each design choice carried layers of AIDS referents. The bed's inclusion was requisite to the poster's bedroom setting. Moreover, though, its presence reflected the creators' conscious evoking of early AIDS portraits and mainstream media exposure. These images of AIDS, which come to constitute its meaning, almost inevitably depicted gay men in beds—as Chevalier remarked, "On their deathbeds, in the hospital bed, in their own beds." The men in these images were "surrounded by family, and friends, and stuff." (57)

I quote at length from Cifor's discussion of the poster's many layers of referents because, for me, what is demonstrated is a multiplicity of both images of activism and ideas of home. What is also demonstrated through Cifor's intergenerational conversations about the poster is her role as a relay between the AIDS activism of the late 1980s and early 1990s and the present and between the direct-action politics of ACT UP and digital art activism of Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin.

Cifor's chapter on the *Your Nostalgia* poster ends with a discussion of the follow-up in-person event to the controversy that circulated on social media, organized by Visual AIDS at the New York Public Library. Cifor writes, "The event aspired to create a physical space that mirrored the ACT UP room at its best, a space open to conflict and configurations of empathy, inviting participants to bring their 'confusion, criticism, anger, joy, will, and love' in order 'to work through and share' in collectivity" (65). This desire to re-create the room is homemaking in action across multiple temporalities and spaces. What circulates from the ACT UP meeting room to the bedroom in *Your Nostalgia* to an event at the ACT UP archives at the New York Public Library is a yearning for activism as a kind of home—something to be made in the present not preserved as a repository of the past. Inevitably perhaps, Cifor reports that the event at the NYPL was not entirely successful in bridging generational divides. And yet, as Cifor understands, the point is not some final resolution—a nostalgic reconstruction of a lost home (the ACT UP meeting room of the late 1980s and early 1990s reconstructed at NYPL in 2014)—but something more vital and ongoing that "crucially creates a much-needed space for imagining a different future" (68).

"Seeking an archival home"

Cifor notes that *Viral Cultures* is the first book to "showcase archivalization as central to ACT UP's organizing" (71). She emphasizes that AIDS archives are "[l]ike any other home," providing a space of belonging but also potentially of conflict and exclusion (73). She traces a compulsive desire to archive from the earliest days of AIDS and AIDS activism[2], as a sort of memory work that sought to document lives cut short and a community devastated, but nonetheless fighting back. Her interviews with ACT UP members and archivists—and ACT UP members who are official or unofficial archivists—wield poignant stories of archives still kept under beds and in private homes, not public institutions (78–79).

Cifor also tells the fascinating story of how ACT UP had to leave their workspace in Manhattan in 1995 and "needed to decide very quickly on the 'most suitable archival home' for their records" (84). There was discussion during a single Monday night ACT UP meeting between two options, the New York Public Library and the LGBT Community Center National History Archive, with NYPL ultimately winning the day. As Cifor shows, the divide was generational, as some of the older generation of activists "feared that the security, accessibility, and particularity of the ACT UP materials 'would be lost' in the NYPL move" (87). Cifor also shows a gendered component to the move. She relays a story from activist archivist Maxine Wolfe about how, in packing up the workspace, some of the men in ACT UP were selective in what they wanted to save—making sure to pack up all the Treatment and Data Committee work, but willing to leave behind lots of other stuff. This connects with my earlier point about the focus on "drugs into bodies" at the expense of other approaches.

In her account of the move, Cifor shows that negotiations between ACT UP and the NYPL continue into the present and that "caring for ACT UP, as well as its records, requires critical engagement from both activists and archivists" (98). In a very moving account of what this critical engagement looks like in practice, Cifor describes a die-in on October 4, 2013, on the opening night of the NYPL exhibition, *Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism*. She writes that, "ACT UP/NY activists, some of whom created or were the subjects of the records on display, performed their die-in in their archival home to make the point that 'AIDS IS NOT HISTORY' and that it is dangerous to memorialize it as if it were" (98). In the arc of Cifor's analysis, we move from images of men dying in hospital beds or in their own beds at home, as described in the previous chapter by Chevalier in his discussion of the images curated in *Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me*, to activists dying-in in ACT UP's archival home at the NYPL. This performance of dying-in in the archive demonstrates vital nostalgia in action as a kind of homemaking through activism that creates a performative bridge between past, present, and future. Still dying. Still dying-in.

"We are instead invited into the domestic"

I have not at all done justice to the breadth, depth, and affective force of Cifor's analysis of activist archiving in the age of AIDS. I haven't even delved into one of my favorite chapters, "Undetectable: Liminality and Archival Exhibitions in the Age of Survivability." This chapter offers a beautiful reading of an exhibition, *Not Only This, but "New Language Beckons Us,"* curated by Andrew Blackley at NYU Fales's Tracey-Barry Gallery in 2013, as a site for the making of intergenerational queer kinship by pairing contemporary queer artists with artists in the archive. I leave that for you to encounter on your own in Cifor's text but also in the archive at NYU.

I want to close with one last example from *Viral Cultures* of homemaking as an activist and archival response to AIDS. This final example is from Cifor's last chapter, "Going Viral," which explores how AIDS archives are mobilized in digital cultures and on social media and resonates with my own recent work on what I call #IllnessPolitics.[3] My project explores illness and disability in action on social media, analyzing several popular hashtags as examples of how illness figures, conceptually and strategically, in recent US politics. I demonstrate how illness politics is informed by, intersects with, and sometimes stands in for, sexual, racial, and class politics. The project is connected to a growing body of work, including *Viral Cultures*, that explores forms of health activism and disability and illness politics as central, not peripheral, to both mainstream and radical politics, as well as work on the dynamic intersection of media and health practices. Illness- and disability-oriented hashtags serve as portals into how and why illness and disability are sites of political struggle.

In her last chapter, Cifor focuses on the work of three young queer artists, Jess Mac, Kia LaBeija, and Demian DinéYazhi', who use digital tools to create "alternative AIDS archives" as a kind of illness politics (196). Keeping with my exploration of homemaking as a political theme that infuses Cifor's analysis, I conclude with an image of home in LaBeija's film *Goodnight, Kia*, which Cifor describes as a "digital mobilization of [LaBeija's] personal AIDS archives" (197). LaBeija is a long-term HIV survivor, having contracted the virus through perinatal transmission. LaBeija's mother, Kwan Bennett, who died when LaBeija was 14, is at the center of *Goodnight, Kia*. Cifor argues that *Goodnight, Kia* "reconstitutes through vital nostalgia not just a departed childhood and mother but also the lost environs of LaBeija's first home" (208). As *Goodnight, Kia* documents, Kwan Bennett was an AIDS activist and activism was a part of LaBeija's upbringing and homelife. AIDS activism was brought into the home and LaBeija was raised by and among activists. By incorporating the "lost environs of LaBeija's first home" as captured in home movies digitally remixed into contemporary footage, Cifor argues that LaBeija "centers a distinctly BIPOC vision of what AIDS space was" (208). Cifor contrasts this to other spaces of activism; she notes that LaBeija's "film does not feature the widely represented street protests or ACT UP meeting rooms of mainstream AIDS films. We are instead invited into the domestic" (208). Here, then, is a remediation that demonstrates the domestic not as a conservative space but as a key site of activism. Through her art, LaBeija shows how her personal AIDS archive is both domestic and political. The home movies she remobilizes digitally show alternative homemaking in action brought into the present by LaBeija's art-activism.

Marika Cifor practices vital nostalgia as a form of archival care and intergenerational homemaking. *Viral Cultures* itself becomes a kind of archive of and home for illness and illness politics, one that is ongoing in the present of COVID-19 and, yes, still, AIDS. I have sought to document some of my affective encounters with the archive Cifor gathers in *Viral Cultures*. Now it's your turn to continue the process of working towards an AIDS ARCHIVE.

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Notes

1. In their book *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies* (2020), Cait McKinney argues that "Archives provide present and future generations with access to information as an affective encounter with the past" (20). See also, Cifor and McKinney's collaboration, "Reclaiming HIV/AIDS in Digital Media Studies" (2020).

2. This is similar to, and influenced by, feminist archival practices beginning in the 1970s, as Cifor shows in her conversations with Maxine Wolfe about the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA), and McKinney documents in more detail in Information Activism (2020).

3. Just before writing this piece, I submitted my manuscript *Illness Politics and Hashtag Activism* to University of Minnesota Press for their Forerunners series, which publishes shorter books that exemplify "thought-in-process scholarship, where intense analysis, questioning, and speculation take the lead."

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