

Transcription

University of Minnesota Press

Episode 39: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS

**Teaser (Marika Cifor):** “I hope that my book showcases some of that unglamorous activist labor and thinks about archives as fundamental to activist work in ways that bring, it leads to, different light onto a group that even gets this disproportionate share of attention. The arc of the book is part of the argument for the ongoing investment of paying attention to AIDS as present and future as much as past.”

**Host Intro:** [Viral Cultures](#) is the first book to critically examine the archives that have helped preserve and create the legacy of existing scholarship on AIDS activism of the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on large institutional archives such as the [New York Public Library](#) and other archives developed by small community-based organizations, this work of archival ethnography details how contemporary activists, artists and curators use these records to build on the cultural legacy of AIDS activism, to challenge the conditions of injustice that continue to undergird current AIDS crises. Positioning vital nostalgia as both the critical faculty and a generative practice, this book explores the act of saving this activist past and reanimating it in the digital age. Today author Marika Cifor is joined in conversation by Ted Kerr, K.J. Rawson and Cait McKinney.

**Marika Cifor:** Hi. I'm Marika Cifor. I'm an assistant professor in the information school and an adjunct assistant professor in gender, women and sexuality studies at the [University of Washington](#). I am located in Seattle. The University of Washington and I want to acknowledge the Coast Salish peoples of this land, the land which touches the shared waters of all tribes and bands within the Duwamish, Puyallup, Suquamish, Tulalip and Muckleshoot nations. And it's my great pleasure and privilege to be here and to be in conversation with some of my very favorite colleagues and collaborators today about my book, [“Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS.”](#) which feels very surreal to even say it exists. I think it started to feel a bit more real when it got a cover and now that I have seen proofs, but it still feels, in some ways, hard to believe that a book actually exists, especially one that feels like it's been so long in the making. This research began in 2015, and I've been just so incredibly lucky to have become a part of these kinds of archives and the worlds and constellations that grow around them. And I'm so excited today to be thinking a bit more about AIDS archives, about these particular archives at the center of my project in particular, and about their larger relationships to LGBTQ and to AIDS historiographies. And I think I just feel incredibly fortunate to be here in this virtual room with three of my favorite thinkers about AIDS and archives.

**K.J. Rawson:** So I guess I'll jump in next. My name is K.J. Rawson. I use he/him/his pronouns. I'm an associate professor of English and women's gender and sexuality studies at [Northeastern](#)

[University](#). I live and work in Boston and central Massachusetts, which is on the land of the Wampanoag, the Massachusett, and the Nipmuc people. I also direct the digital transgender archive, and I co-chair the board for the [Homosaurus](#), which is an international LGBTQ+ linked data vocabulary. It's through that project that I had a chance to first meet Marika, and we've been working closely together since then. But I've been a longtime admirer of her scholarship and her work and her brilliance, and I was so enthusiastic to get a chance to read this book and to participate in this conversation. Ted, maybe I'll pass it off to you.

**Theodore Kerr:** Thank you so much. My name is Ted Kerr. I live in Brooklyn, although you will hear my Canadian accent. I am on Lenape land, and I use he/him/his pronouns. I am a writer and an artist and a teacher at [The New School](#). I'm a founding member of the collective, "What Would An HIV Doula Do," and with my friend and writing partner, Alexandra Juhasz, we have a book coming out in a few months called [We're Having This Conversation Now](#). The cultural times of AIDS and all of those things that I just mentioned are why I think I'm here. I got to meet Marika in person for the first time in a coffee shop on Twelfth Street in Manhattan, and we got to gossip about, and we got to talk about, AIDS archives and intergenerational conversations. So I'm really excited to be a part of [this conversation] today, and I will throw this to Cait.

**Cait McKinney:** Hi everyone. My name is Cait McKinney. I'm an assistant professor in the school of communication at [Simon Fraser University](#) in Vancouver. I also have a Canadian accent. And I am located on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish people, the Squamish, Tsleil-Waututh and Musqueam. I work on media histories. I do media histories of LGBTQ activists, and I look at the ways that activists took up internet technologies in the '80s and '90, so I focused a lot on AIDS activists in that work. I met Marika back when we were both in grad school, and [I] have been so thrilled to follow this project up to this point and to talk about connections between our work and to collaborate. So it's a real pleasure to be here with Marika and Ted and K.J. to talk more about this wonderful book.

**KJR:** I'm going to get us started by bringing us to a particular passage in the book. I want to start us off fairly early, partway through the introduction. The passage that I chose to bring to our attention is about the midway point of the introduction, Marika, where you're really starting to explain the concept of vital nostalgia and offer a theoretical framework that then will inform the rest of the book. So I'm just going to read about a paragraph. It's a slightly long paragraph that explains what this concept is. So you say, "Vital nostalgia, the analytic I develop in this book, names a process of questioning, contending with, and redressing power inequities that continually subject minoritized people to harm and violence that is grounded in a critical activation of a yearning for a past time and the people who occupied it. This nostalgia is vital in multiple senses. It is a vigorous, energetic force that is animate and changeable; it is fundamentally concerned with maintenance and continuance of life and living beings; it pertains to the recording of pertinent data about human lives. Vital nostalgia encompasses the

complicated process of critical interrogation of our present through ongoing relation to the past. This is a nostalgia that emphasizes the longing for the past while also attending to and illuminating the ambivalences, violences, and complexities of that past that continue to dictate life chances. The temporal and affective drag of holding tightly onto the past in such a vital nostalgic practice is about its generative political potentiality for feeling, imagining, and enacting a just and livable now, and a more vibrant future.” I just love that passage. I think it's a good example of the beauty and brilliance of your writing. But it also evokes for me a bigger question about this important concept that you develop and how much you hope that it travels — or whether you think that there is some importance in keeping it specifically tied to HIV and AIDS activism and archives.

**MC:** Thank you so much for that selection. It's incredibly surreal to hear someone read your words aloud, and I feel incredibly honored to be here and to hear that it resonated with you and your thinking. I didn't intend to do a project about nostalgia, necessarily. This work developed from a graduate school rabbit hole, thinking about affect and theorizations of affect and archives. I really thought at the beginning of this project that it would take some kind of inspiration from work like Sara Ahmed's [Cultural Politics of Emotion](#) and that it might look at particular affects in particular archives. It wasn't even intended to be a project about AIDS at its start, but rather one about queer archives and affect. I was fortunate enough to have exploratory funding to do some archival work and to begin having conversations with some of the folks who ended up in this book, and [I] realized, of course — as is the way with research projects, I think — that there was much more to say about one of these kind of archives than probably one book can even capture, and that it was going to do grave injustice to jump around. This wasn't really even a project about different affects as much for me. I think nostalgia is such an interesting concept because it is about affect and emotion, but it's also about memory, which is again something that comes up a lot in archival thinking — which is of course the space I come from. And affect, as this project began — including through my own work — was beginning to have a bigger space and thinking about archives. Actually, very surprisingly to me, there was work that I could find thinking about nostalgia and museums and exhibitions and memorials and other kinds of memory practices and sites and spaces, but very little that dealt with archives and nostalgia. Though I do think that archives are fundamentally embedded in these kinds of practices of nostalgia. AIDS archives deal with a particular nostalgia, but I actually think all archives might have, possibly, nostalgic relationships that can be born of encounters with them or that are embedded in their stories of existence or in which they're parts of these narratives. But I think AIDS, for me, does have something particular in thinking about nostalgia. Some of the work I get to address in the book — like Vincent Chevalier and Ian Bradley-Perrin's poster [Your Nostalgia Is Killing Me](#) from 2013 — of course explicitly deals with nostalgia. But I think even some of the artists and activists and archivists and librarians and curators who are less explicit about nostalgia are still contending with these narratives that are about nostalgia. We're at this interesting moment in the historicization of AIDS that Avram Finkelstein and others in my

project, including Ted, talk about — why we're at this particular juncture. Nostalgia in relation to AIDS also seems significant because AIDS seems like such a strange object for nostalgia in certain ways. Who wants to relive mass death and devastation and pain and suffering? But at the same time, all of these beautiful things that AIDS seems to have given rise to — whether they actually existed or whether we imagined them to exist — are very alluring and I think particularly alluring in ways that are generationally specific and maybe even within generations tied to our own relationships to AIDS activist practices and to AIDS art-making and AIDS archives. So thinking back to your bigger question, I don't think vital nostalgia is necessarily specific to AIDS archives, but I think there are lines of nostalgia here that are particularly obvious and in need of exploration when we're thinking about AIDS. But I'd be very curious to know how this concept might apply to other kinds of archival thinking. Much of my other work looks particularly at queer or at LGBTQ+ archives in other ways, thinking about what nostalgia might look like in those spheres and what a vital nostalgia looks like in those spheres. I've written not nearly as much as K.J. has, but a bit about trans archives. Just thinking about others' work, including Hil Malatino in [Trans Care](#) and others — what might a nostalgia look like in a different space in a trans archive, and what might a vital nostalgia — when we think about the importance of bodies and archives — look like? [I'm] thinking of feminist archiving practice as well. I hope that vital nostalgia is a concept that others can think through and think about where it might be generative or productive to their work. Particularly with archives, I think the document might be a fruitful tool. But of course like all tools that are developed in a specific context, I'd also be very curious to know where the limits of that line of thinking are when it's moved outside of a specificity of AIDS archiving.

**TK:** I'm going to jump in and respond to that really generous question that K.J. offered and then that really beautiful and rich response. To me, when you say “vital nostalgia,” the word “vital” is so important there. It really speaks about survival or survivability. That's what hinges there for me. Even in your response you asked, “who wants to relive mass death and suffering?” For me, in my work, I see the answer as: people who see — even amid all the suffering — hope in what happened at that time. I think part of the nostalgia trip is that it's a time in history where queers are understood to have fought back and won. We can debate what winning means. But I think that's the hook of this. I think vital nostalgia will be helpful to communities who are trying to make sense of a history that is uneven. Times of mass response and times of silence. What's interesting for me, personally, is your book picks up right where I understood that the major tension that I had in my work was: I was born in 1979, and I was born within a community of people who wanted to talk about AIDS in the past, and I wanted to talk about AIDS in the present. And so that is an interesting tension when it comes to vital nostalgia as well. What is the role of nostalgia moving forward? I think that's something that your book offers.

**MC:** Yeah and I think nostalgia, too, is such a fruitful concept, because archives are often read as exclusively past looking, rather than as something that has contemporary important and that

has these future implications. So for me, nostalgia is always fundamentally about what's going on in our present and what kinds of future possibilities we might have. It's also for me a way of reframing those conversations and thinking about AIDS and archiving as contemporary, and as having these ongoing implications — as we continue to live in these multiple AIDS crises — as wants. And in these conjunctions of crises: not just AIDS, but [also] structural racism, COVID-19 — the intersection of all of these different crises and violences that come together when we talk about AIDS.

**CM:** This is so interesting to hear everyone reflect on this vital nostalgia concept that really is the thread that runs through the whole book. You mentioned this a little bit, Marika, a few moments ago, but for me what's so powerful about the vital nostalgia concept is the way it brings in questions of livingness and of illness and of bodies into the concept of nostalgia, but also into archives. I don't think a lot about nostalgia, because I was trained in a cultural studies framework where nostalgia is sort of this bad object. So for me, your book is a chance to return to my own book and work and think: how is nostalgia at play in these community archiving practices? I wonder if you can talk a bit about how this concept helps you think about bodies and illness and disability, and how it's animated a lot of your work even beyond this book? Like you have [\*this great article in TSO\*](#) in 2015 that's about finding a person's hair in an archive. How does this focus on the body and on labor and on bodies and their differences help us to think about and understand activist archiving?

**MC:** Thank you for that, Cait. I'm always interested in things with many of the kinds of queer theorizations we draw on. I'm always interested in bad feelings and how bad feelings come into play. Nostalgia is such an interesting thing that way. It's really been dismissed and derided as this rosy-colored look back, rather than something that can do something productive and generative and something that isn't just politically regressive. I think we can see all the dangers of kinds of nostalgia that are not critical or reflective or vital. I'm always interested, too, in those queer theoretical ways in which we can disrupt those binary notions of what's good and bad and feeling in our relationships, to AIDS histories and queer histories and other kinds of marginalized and minoritized histories. All of my work is, fundamentally, in the archival world, about thinking about things that are difficult to capture, but that [also] seemed fundamental to existence. So I think in the context of queer archives, debatably, what makes us queer is affective orientations towards other people and embodied relationships, and yet those are so fundamentally difficult to capture. What would an archive that contains those things look like? I'm always interested in all kinds of — I think Cait, you and I have this in common in our work — what are [the things that different] kinds of encounters with different kinds of objects provoke? That always comes from a particularly situated embodiment. All of my work is fundamentally about these things that are difficult and nagging to capture in archives or that are provoked by archives. And so nostalgia is one way to get at that. In distinct but parallel ways to what I was saying about LGBTQ archives, AIDS is fundamentally, for many people, an embodied experience. Talking about bodies really

matters. What felt to me like it was missing from some prior theorizations of nostalgia is this really rich literature that looks at it in relation to place and space, and in relation to conceptions of time and temporality, but not so much that looks at it as fundamentally about bodies and people and about the missing people that we're longing for. Those things are, of course, embedded in thinking about notions of home and other kinds of longing for lost places and times. I really wanted to bring this back to thinking about people and bodies and embodied experiences. And I'm always hoping — from my archival studies standpoint — to get us thinking about the kinds of bodies and labor — I think your work and mine again have this in common, Cait — about the kinds of bodies and labor that go into actually doing archival work and into doing information work. I think scholars sometimes encounter these archives without thinking about the stories, about how they got there. Those stories [do] so much [to] shape what's there, what's missing, the kinds of interpretations that we make from it, the kinds of exhibitions and outrage and engagement that happens. And it's a great deal of work. Debra Levine, who was an [ACT UP](#) activist and is a performance theorist, talked so beautifully about how you could follow the lines, in our interview, of who loved whom, to thinking about where archives actually are, especially archives that continue to live outside of institutions. She knew who had whose records, because she knew who loved whom. There [are] these fundamental stories about bodies and feelings and [the] intersection of those things that need attention and care. That's fundamental to what nostalgia can help us to do — to move that thinking about bodies and labor and feelings back into the center of our archival engagements.

**TK:** You're setting me up beautifully for a passage that I want to read from your book that really entertains labor, but maybe from a slightly different point of view. So I'm going to read a little bit further in the book. Not much. For those following along at home, page 44. “The profound vital nostalgic longing for ACT UP that is shaped by the group’s archival representation reflects a desire to contest, disrupt, and refigure the political status quo. Nostalgia for ACT UP as practiced across generations is produced in significant part by a prevailing dissatisfaction with the intertwined politics of mainstream LGBTQ and AIDS movements. ACT UP nostalgia centers around three idealized facets of the group’s practice and impacts: community unity, queer politics, and provocative aesthetics. Each of these facets is counter to the neoliberal assimilationist goals and practices that dominate mainstream LGBTQ politics and organizations, and the nonprofit-industrial complex that constitutes a contemporary AIDS response.” I wanted to read that part because so much of my life is encountering people who are very excited about AIDS history through their initial interaction with ACT UP. It is such a moving and frustrating experience for me sometimes to parse through [this idea]: what does a desire to connect across time with the ongoing practice of ACT UP mean? I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit to us about these different roles that you're playing in the book: as archivist, as demystifier, as reporter, as referee, as unpacker. I think you do such a good job there, but you do it throughout. How do you wear all those hats while also maintaining the livewire of AIDS activism throughout the 20th and 21st century? That’s a loaded bunch of questions for you.

**MC:** I'll try to do justice to that, Ted. I think the answer is: imperfectly. My favorite part of research is — and has always been — the part where you just get to revel in the generosity and the stories of the people who are kind enough to share the work and the things they care so deeply about with you. I know some of your work has addressed this, Ted, and some of your work with Alex as well. There's things here that people needed to say, but they needed space to process and listen and someone to listen to these kinds of stories. There's so much interest and attention to things like ACT UP. But at the same time, people are still dealing with these feelings and experiences and things that they are processing in fundamental ways. People needed different things from me. This is always true in doing qualitative interviewing work. People need to share certain things with you. It's interesting to write a book about archives, primarily interviewing people who were not professional. I interviewed some professional archivists and librarians, but most of the people I interviewed I don't think would consider themselves that. They wanted to tell me all kinds of fascinating and interesting stories — many of them about art and experience and things that didn't make it into my book because they're not about archives per se or AIDS historicization. But part of my goal always — in being an interviewer — is allowing people to have the space they need to share the stories that they wanted to do, that processing. One of the most moving interviewing experiences for me was with David Hirsch who was one of the co-founders — with Frank Moore — of [the] [Visual AIDS Archive Project](#), which is of course then tied to [The Artist + Registry](#), their digital counterpart. When I first began this project, I had wanted to interview David, but I had looked around for him. Alex Fialho, who was at Visual AIDS at the time, looked around for him. No one knew where he'd been since his involvement with the projects ended in the late 90s. But Eric Rheine — one of the other artists I had the privilege to interview, and who was also involved in the early days of the archive project, and who still has a really strong relationship to Visual AIDS — found him. Not for me specifically, but a few years later. I was just privileged, especially [because] some people I interviewed once, briefly, but [with] other people, like David, we spent months and months talking on the phone. I think he needed the kind of conversations we had to happen slowly, and he needed space and time to process things between them. He sent me things. He circled back to things each conversation. Fundamentally, those are the most beautiful moments of doing this work, when someone offers you a piece of their life story and allows you to enter their world. That's fundamentally what's beautiful and difficult about doing this kind of work: allowing people the space they need [and] navigating the differing narratives that people bring to this work. [Regarding] people who were and are involved in AIDS activism, often one of the wonderful things about it is that people have very strong feelings and very strong narratives that they want to share, but those narratives do not always align with the kinds of stories one wants to tell. There's lots of careful navigation, and particularly careful navigation when it comes to thinking about nostalgia. This is a concept that not everyone embraces in the context of AIDS. I think people have seen it do certain kinds of damage and might be resistant to its reclamation — not always — and sometimes for very good reasons. But I think that's part of what's

fundamentally exciting and challenging about doing this work is navigating these different kinds of narratives and experiences. I had some resistance to writing a book about New York and about AIDS in New York and about ACT UP because there is so much tension — as Alex Juhasz and others have written critically about. But at the same time, it seemed impossible not to. The way in which these narratives are being navigated fundamentally shapes the entire narrative of AIDS. You could write an equally interesting book about AIDS archives — and I hope someone does — about AIDS archives in L.A. and Minneapolis and perhaps document rural and other kinds of experiences. Fundamentally this book felt like it needed to happen here, because we needed to navigate these kinds of dominant narratives, and ACT UP is at the center of those. Even the story of ACT OUT is often very selective. It focuses on particular kinds of work. That's where work like Cait's is so important. That highlights the information activism that queer people are doing with the unglamorous labors of activism. I hope that my book also showcases some of that unglamorous activist labor and thinks about archives as fundamental to ACT UP's work, or at least to some folks in ACT UP's work in ways that bring, it leads to, different light onto a group that even gets this disproportionate share of attention.

**K.J.R.** I was going to ask what I think will be a quick follow-up question. I appreciated that Ted asked that question, because it gave you an opportunity to talk more about your methods and methodologies, which you beautifully weave throughout the book. There's no standalone moment where you're like, "here's how I did this study." It's exemplary in the ways that you bring it in and really pull it forward in particular moments. As you were talking about it, it struck me that it was almost a model for a vital nostalgia in the ways that you are supporting conversations even as you are creating the book. It also reminded me of your other work. Thinking about the ethics of care in archiving, I wanted to open up space to ask you what intervention you think this book might be making within the archival profession writ large, and the ways that we approach these really compelling — and sometimes contentious — collections and collecting practices and actors. It sort of opens up a lot of questions, so it's a misleadingly large question, I know. But I have a sense that you probably have an idea that you may not have articulated here. This book is trying to continue some of your other work, which is trying to center community-based archival practices and think more about the ways that they are pushing back at the everyday archiving work and archival field as a profession.

**MC:** Part of what interested me is this relationship between — there's really three archives at the center of this story: — The New York Public Library; NYU's [New York University's] [Fales Library and Special Collections](#), and particularly the downtown collection; and Visual AIDS, on the AIDS archive project. Part of what fundamentally interests me [is that] those, respectively, are a large public library, a private academic institution and a community-based arts organization. I'm always interested in where community archives push up against and live within institutions, and where institutions and community archives meet and converge, and where the practices blend or run up against one another or fundamentally challenge one another. That is



part of this story, too — the relationships, formal and informal, between these different kinds of archives. This book speaks to complex questions that there are no easy answers [for] — though I know everyone wishes there were — about where certain archives belong. Are they better served in major institutions that might have — never enough — but more resources for them? Or are they better served in community-based, community-driven and community-run spaces that often have — [in the] resource-deprived spectrum of the archival world — even less resources, but [that] have these advantages of nimbleness of collecting? I talk about, with the archives project, where these collections are prioritized and where they might be more accessible to people who don't feel comfortable or [who] are unwelcome in major institutional spaces. But at the same time, maybe then [navigating those spaces is] more difficult for folks like me who are academic researchers [and] who are used to navigating those kinds of spaces and perhaps unused to navigating community spaces. And so I think this book navigates that tension. There are interesting things to say, particularly — I think this is another tension we can talk more about; I've talked about this elsewhere in relation to kind of LGBTQ archives — lots of them began as community collections and many of them have become part of major institutions, academic and otherwise, or have these interesting partnerships. Also what's at play here for my library and archives colleagues: this book and all of my work are, I hope, in a paradigm where we're shifting beyond notions of neutrality or objectivity. I hope archivists take away from this [the idea of] thinking critically about the interpretive roles we play when it comes to doing a[n] outrage programming exhibition. The way we showcase these materials was one of my entry points to this project. There are equally interesting AIDS archives elsewhere, but there hadn't been equally interesting things done with them, at least in 2015 and 2016 when this project began. There were other archives doing related collections, doing programming, but none of them had done anything so extensive. That's fundamentally part of what's so interesting to me about this story: the really active role the archivists and curators are taking in navigating these collections and interpreting these collections through exhibitions and other programming through inviting other people in to engage with them and to activate them and animate them in really exciting and powerful ways. There's a statement about the role of archivists and librarians, and there's statements about the ways in which we navigate our relationships to the communities whose records we might hold or might engage with, and how we might do that. I'm hoping my readers who are librarians and archivists — both professionally trained and community and everything [in] between — might take some thoughts about how to ethically navigate those relationships with one another, but also with the people whose lives are implicated in our records. That speaks to some of the work I've done with Michelle Caswell and others in thinking about ethics of care and particularly how those play out in relationships where there are disparate kinds of power at play in the archives.

**CM:** Coming back a bit to the quote Ted chose, which is about ACT UP nostalgia, and K.J.'s question about methods. For me, these first two chapters about ACT UP tell these acrimonious stories about conflict in how this organization is remembered or how it entered the archives at

NYPL. But these are stories I've heard before, and I've heard them before as gossip or online in the time that they were happening. You navigate that acrimony — and what were probably very hard feelings in some of those incidents — through these interviews. You record the story of these archives and the emotion that goes into assembling them. And that's not stuff that, necessarily, people in 50 years would get out of looking at these papers or documentation of these exhibits. For you, as the scholar doing this history, probably in those interviews, [there was] a ton of emotional labor of navigating these debates. People like Maxine Wolfe and Stephen Shapiro and — who you mentioned reliving this discussion about where should the ACT UP archives go — probably in some ways, they're still a bit salty about that. That's a living debate that shapes the activism that people in New York of that generation still do. You do that so well in the book. My question — and this is a question that Ted thought up when we were planning for this talk — is more one about where records go to live out their days, and it's a question about categorization. What does it mean that ACT UP archives are framed as being a part of a gay and lesbian collection — and I said gay and lesbian and not LGBTQ very specifically — and what would it mean to classify AIDS archives in other ways? What stories are occluded through that classification, that framing, and how do you think about that?

**MC:** That's a really important tension, and there's a bigger tension: the context of AIDS. AIDS in the North American context is so fundamentally entangled with gay and lesbian history and with LGBTQ history. I appreciate your attention to the intricacies and differences between those. We're talking about the movement of ACT UP's archive in the early to mid 90's. We're at a moment in which queer studies is emerging and part of this conversation. But really, we're still fundamentally talking about gay and lesbian archives. The tensions that they're navigating in this moment are really about — you can see it reflected in the names of where these collections might go. Also in the people you've highlighted — Maxine Wolf and Stephen Shapiro, in particular — play really big roles in this story of where ACT UP's archives go. So little of that is captured in the kinds of publicly accessible documents where, when you look at a finding aid, there's a short statement about provenance, but it often just lists when the records were donated and by whom. And then you get some other kinds of administrative information about when they were processed and by whom, and if they were reprocessed and by whom. ACT UP's records also have been reprocessed. You don't get the whole backstory. I think for me, that's what I'm always hoping, as an archival scholar, to do is to tell the stories of the archive itself. There are lots of other books and films and exhibitions. They use these records, but not so many that actually tell the story of how those records came to be there. I think those stories of how those records came to be there shapes fundamentally the kinds of stories that can be told with them. And those kinds of narratives of course have deep and ongoing implications for the people whose lives are tied up in those records. So I think here, in the context of AIDS, we're always navigating this tension between its association with gay and lesbian history and with archives. I think gay and lesbian and queer and trans people have played such a fundamental role in AIDS activism that there are real substantive relationships. Maxine Wolf has good reasons why she

thinks her ACT UP papers belong at the lesbian history archive. She sees this AIDS history as lesbian history. That kind of connection is neglected. And just the same, Stephen Shapiro has good reasons why he thinks ACT UP history is New York history, is the history of activism, is not just gay and lesbian history, and that it does a disservice to be framed in that way. And there are equally compelling and legitimate reasons for this history to be contextualized at least, kind of, again, in the caveat that we're talking about North America, in gay and lesbian history, but it also isn't the same. AIDS history is particular, and it's not gay and lesbian history, and that can leave out these other kinds of narratives about people who are not gay and lesbian, about people who have some other kind of identity that might weave in tension. The book kind of very briefly touches on [this], but I think like Julian de Mayo's work with the Latino Caucus and ACT UP really points to these ongoing tensions. Where does the Latino caucus's papers belong? Many of their papers are still in people's homes and attics and basements, closets, under beds. Would they be better served in a kind of Latinx-focused institution? Do they belong in a gay and lesbian institution? In the absence of AIDS-specific institutions for holding these records, where do they belong? And so I think these are ongoing tensions, and I think there's reasons that I, those are the kinds of reasons that I very specifically talk about AIDS archives, but it's also kind of impossible to talk about AIDS archives and not talk about LGBT archives. And even if we think about the way in which the New York Public Library classifies these records is as part of gay, as like AIDS collections, and gay and lesbian collections appear on a kind of list together because if you're looking for one, you might be looking for the other. Whereas at the Fales [Library], they're contextualized as part of art history, the history of art movements in the downtown scene. But that's also fundamentally a story of AIDS but maybe also a fundamentally important story of queer history. And then you have Visual AIDS, where the organizing logic is around AIDS. That I think is the exception, and I think they're one of a few places where that is the fundamental organizing logic. Nelson Santos, who was the executive director of Visual AIDS, really beautifully described what using HIV status as an organizing principle, the way that opens up what their collection can contain in really beautiful and powerful ways. So I think it's a tension that needs to be navigated. Even thinking about where this book belongs — does it belong in LGBT studies? Is critical HIV studies a place that has enough to kind of contain it? I think that's probably where it fundamentally lives, but where does all that work live? There is no conference where all of the critical HIV studies researchers gather. We appear on American studies, we appear on national women's studies, we appear, for me, at information studies conferences as well. So there is no fundamental home, and so we're always navigating this tension in this scholarship and in these collections themselves.

**CM:** So in the last chapter of the book, you take all this work that you've been doing about AIDS archives that are made up of a lot of paper, and you take it sort of to the scene of the internet and social media platforms like Tumblr, RIP, and the way that AIDS activists and artists engaged with HIV/AIDS used those platforms to communicate. You think about the connections between different ideas about virality and the viral, so we use the term viral and virality to talk about how

information circulates online quickly and how it replicates in digital networks. But this is a concept that comes out of and is inseparable from pandemic thinking past and present. Can you talk a little bit about how your book changes as it moves online, and how these archives change as they move online? And what does the internet and digital networks mean for AIDS activists and artists working on and with HIV/AIDS?

**MC:** I think that chapter, especially, is fundamentally indebted to work you've done and work you've done together with Dylan Mulvin on the interwoven histories of AIDS and personal computing and the rise of personal computing in the 90s, and the ways in which AIDS activists have always used any kind of technology at their disposal to do this kind of work. And I think work you've done, Cait, has fundamentally disrupted this idea that these activists were only doing analog work. The kind of work that we think about when we think about ACT UP is typically these large demonstrations, these circulation of like, "we pasted posters." But thanks to your work and others, we know that AIDS activists were using newsletters, they were using BBS boards, they were using all sorts of technologies to do this kind of work. And this book is in part the stories about kinds of technologies that AIDS activists use to do their work and what those mean for the kind of preservation and access to their records. In particular, earlier in the book I talk about video and the ways in which video mediates our relationship to AIDS archives and the way in which fundamental changes in video technologies and editing technologies for video enabled different kinds of documentation by activists. And so I think in a similar vein, I always hope to tell stories about technology that are both about the digital, but are about longer kinds of stories about technologies. So we have analog and digital technologies playing in here. But this is also the story about how these records circulate now, and I think a fundamental way that they do that — especially outside of the academy — is in digital spaces, and that telling the stories of these particular digital spaces like Tumblr, play is so fundamental to how AIDS activists' work has been happening, especially how AIDS activists' work might continue to happen in the future. I think we always need to pay attention to the kinds of platforms and their particular affordances and how they shape and how activists reshape those technologies to do the kind of work that they want to do. This is also to the larger questions about access to records. I think archivists are often very frustrated by the wish that everything could be digital or even the feasibility of everything becoming digital. This book also touches on some of the impossibility — or perhaps undesirability — of that kind of project, or the kinds of ethical questions that might come from putting online records. But the chapter that you ask about, in particular, looks at the ways in which three artists work. They take these records from an earlier time and engage in a practice of either nostalgia to reanimate and rethink and re-envision them into their own practice and to expand, perhaps, the kinds of stories of AIDS that are being told. They do not see themselves necessarily fully reflected within and expand those, but also harness the aesthetic, nostalgic attachment to these earlier activist aesthetics. And we use them to bring renewed attention to AIDS now, something I think we still fundamentally need. And as you hint at in work that you and I have done together, Cait, that story of virus and virality is one that's playing out here, and I

think that's one that gets neglected when we think about notions of histories of the internet, histories of computing, histories of digital technologies. We often don't think about queer people, about people with HIV, about these other kinds of actors. And I think this project is also fundamentally part of those larger efforts to do a digital studies that recenters people who've not always been seen as active actors in mediating technology and making technology.

**TK:** What I love about this talk of the digital is it is exciting and confronting for me to think about in relationship to, you know, one of the most important things within the work of HIV is to make sure that people understand that the virus is a material reality that lives in some people's body and not in others, and there's material reasons for that difference. I think one thing that the book explores [is] this idea of the material realities of archives and how those material realities map alongside the material realities of the communities impacted by HIV, and then what happens when they intersect — not with the medical establishment, but with maybe the library establishment or the university establishment. And then to bring in the digital, then what happens when access changes again and people can feel a kind of ownership or connection to HIV that is — one could argue — somewhat more devoid of material, even though I know people would push back against that. But what happens when, the further HIV gets away from the material, the scarier it is for somebody like me, who, even though I'm HIV negative and deeply committed to making sure that we remember that it's a virus. Maybe it's really interesting to start to circle back and think about, how does vital nostalgia play in maintaining some notion of the physical? Because nostalgia is often spoken about as that song you used to love or that feeling that you have, but I think, and maybe this is the question, is there a sense of the material to you when you're talking about vital nostalgia?

**MC:** Yeah, I think, to our earlier conversation about bodies, I am hoping we're paying attention in thinking about nostalgia to human bodies, but also bodies of records, the kinds of material. I'm wandering, of course, to Ted's point. Also the digital material — we're just not used to thinking about it. We have a harder time envisioning it. We don't always get to see the pipes that run the internet we're on now. But paying attention to nostalgia, I hope, has us thinking always about materiality and its importance. And I think that these artists are all navigating that in different ways. They're thinking fundamentally — even if they're doing digital work — about its materiality. One of the artists I write about in the chapter, Kia LaBeija, and her video piece [Goodnight, Kia](#), is navigating this 90s home video footage and thinking about new footage she's creating and these new and much fancier kinds of digital technologies and showing material difference. Thinking about earlier video technologies exposes the kinds of ones that were perhaps not used to thinking about the kind of contemporary video technologies that are also at play here. I think each of these artists, in their own ways, is navigating questions about materiality in their negotiations of digital platforms and in the way their work circulates even. In Demian DinéYazhi's work, most of it circulates in these instances digitally through platforms like Tumblr, but [the artist] also tells you that you can download these high-res posters and we

paste them again. [Other examples include] projects like Poster Virus, [in] which Ian Bradley-Perrin and Vincent Chevalier's work mostly circulates digitally, but again also circulates in kind of physical posters in space, and so I think a lot of this work fundamentally and explicitly navigates that tension and perhaps draws our attention to the kind of materiality of the digital as well.

**K.J.R.:** So for me, one of the things that this sets up really nicely — and I think the arc of your book works really well in that regard — is that the last section of your book, the epilogue, brings in COVID-19 and really faces that head-on. You really try to hit home on the point that HIV/AIDS is not over. It's not a pandemic of the past, which of course is kind of central to the ways that you talk about nostalgia throughout the book. But when you begin talking about COVID-19 in the epilogue, it really, for me, animated so much of what this book can offer us as readers in this particular moment — though I'm sure when you were initially reading and researching this book, that was not even on the distant horizon. So I'm curious if you might just talk a bit more about how doing this work and undertaking this study, having this long-form space to think about vital nostalgia, helps you approach COVID-19 and sort of sets a different kind of context for the relationship between one pandemic and another.

**MC:** Thank you for that question. I think, yes, as you point to, fundamentally I debated whether — I think as everybody writing a book in this moment — do you address [COVID-19]? Especially a book that in some way has a relationship to the COVID-19 pandemic. Do you address it or do you kind of leave it alone? Are you going to be outdated before it even makes it through [publishing]? In all thinking about COVID-19, there's both this proliferation of scholarship, and we're still in this early moment. How this pandemic will be temporalized is emerging but still an open question. I thought originally that the fifth chapter would be the conclusion — that I would kind of circle around to artistic engagements with the digital. But I think with some various smart readers' feedback, I think it became clear that that was not a conclusion as much as a kind of chapter in and of itself. And for me, it was fundamentally important that the book — in thinking about AIDS as an ongoing crisis, and really as Alex Juhasz and Jih-Fei Cheng and others have written about — it's really multiple crises happening all at once. There are multiple AIDS pandemics happening because we fundamentally have such different experiences and relationships and investments in AIDS that we're really living multiple AIDS pandemics at once. And we're certainly living multiple COVID-19 pandemics at once. I was very invested in the book not having a trajectory that ended with thinking about notions of cure. But the arc of the book itself is part of the argument for the ongoing investment of paying attention to AIDS as present and future as much as past. That's part of my larger kind of arc of investment, too, in thinking about the importance of archives, not as past but as present and future-driven, as well. And so, it became impossible, especially as I was beginning to think about what the conclusion should be. It was kind of early in the pandemic, especially, and I know Ted has thought about this as well and written about this, but there was, in hopes of explaining what

was happening and trying to navigate, something that felt new, that there was this return to thinking about AIDS in this comparative fashion to COVID-19 or this [idea], “oh look AIDS is like this pandemic that we managed thanks to all these great activist efforts to overcome,” and that maybe seems defanged or less scary at least in the North American context. So I think there [were] all these narratives that seemed to be oversimplifying it. It was also an interesting archival story, because I don't think that there was — beyond people who were deeply invested in documenting their own work and the work and lives of their loved ones as activists — I don't think there is this same rush to document things in real time as they unfolded. And I think some of that is about a story again about technology and digital technologies and our larger shift in the archival world to thinking about documenting things as they happen and unfold. But there was this rush of big institutions. Everybody started a COVID project between March and May of 2020, and lots of those projects in their own kind of temporal thing have stopped, but the pandemic hasn't stopped, and so I'm also interested in these kinds of projects of memory making as they happen. And so it became impossible not to talk about COVID and AIDS in conversation with one another because they are being put in conversation by journalists and by scholars and by popular commentators and by AIDS activists and thinkers in this early moment, but also by archives. There's these interesting projects including one I know Ted played a crucial role in — the generation of a zine and an exhibition of the one archives that navigate this kind of tension in interesting and productive ways. Thinking about vital nostalgia here became fundamentally important because how we do COVID memory making, how we put these two pandemics in conversation, is fundamentally important. There are interesting questions for me, too, about the temporalization of COVID. Will COVID go through its own shift from epidemic to endemic time? Are we already doing that? What does it mean for us to live in these multiple pandemics at once? And how do we actually use this renewed attention to AIDS in a powerful way? If anything good can come from another horrifying pandemic, can we actually use that to draw attention to the structural realities that undergird both these crises?

**TK:** To build off that, I agree. I think of archival practice as an activist practice, as many different practices, but also as — obviously — memorialization. Something that a lot of us think about as memorialization is not just naming the people who have died, but it's also naming the practices and the tactics that they used to survive and thrive and even die with dignity. It's interesting to think about pandemic-as-archive, and how is the past going to help us in the present and the future? And that is actually how we show love and respect for the people who died prematurely. So to me that also adds another layer to this word “vital” under “vital nostalgia.”

**MC:** My hope is that people take this book and this moment where we're sitting very obviously in multiple pandemics and give the attention we need to thinking critically about how we do memory making and activism and archiving in this particular moment and of these particular crises but also contextualizing them within these long histories and narratives as I think, Ted,

your work, and Cait's work as well, place AIDS within these much longer trajectories. If we can take some lesson from AIDS archiving, it's to place COVID-19 in these same long structures and to pay attention to its — I hesitate — aftermath and its most critical sense [and] its ongoing implications. I hope we'll do that kind of memory making here as well. I'm deeply indebted to the ways in which some of my other collaborators — Tonia Sutherland and Anna Lauren Hoffmann and Megan Finn and I have a lab in the least formal sense — and [our project there](#) is thinking about long stories of crises. What happens as they unfold? What happens in the wake of disaster? That's where I hope to leave us in this book. What are we at in these conjunctures of pandemics, and where might we go from here? And how might we document and make accessible and do crackable work and curatorial work and thinking differently? Thank you all for all of your thoughtful questions and responses and comments. I am so touched that three of you agreed to do this, and I really appreciate all your work on this as well, Maggie.

**UMP:** Thank you for listening. [Viral Cultures](#) is available from your local bookseller and wherever books are sold.

*This conversation has been edited lightly for clarity.*