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‘Your Nostalgia is Killing Me’: Activism, Affect and the Archives of HIV/AIDS

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‘Your Nostalgia is Killing Me’:
Activism, Affect and the Archives of HIV/AIDS

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Information Studies

by

Marika Louise Cifor

2017
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

‘Your Nostalgia is Killing Me’:
Activism, Affect, and the Archives of HIV/AIDS

by

Marika Louise Cifor

Doctor of Philosophy in Information Studies
University of California, Los Angeles, 2017
Professor Michelle L. Caswell, Chair

Nostalgia has long been dismissed and derided by scholars and popular commentators as a pointless and self-indulgent wallowing in the past that stands in the way of social change in the present and for the future. In this archival ethnography, I examine the critical potential of nostalgia as recorded and produced by archives documenting 1980s and 1990s HIV/AIDS activism in the United States. I argue that critical nostalgia, an ethical mode of critique grounded in the bittersweet longing for a past time or space, is a productive lens at every moment of collaboration between HIV/AIDS archives and the AIDS activist communities they document and serve. I present case studies using materials culled from the New York Public Library’s Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York University’s Fales Library and Special Collections, and Visual AIDS, a community-based arts organization committed to raising AIDS awareness through visual art, assisting artists living with HIV/AIDS, and preserving artists’ legacies. Using these case studies, I show that critical nostalgia shapes the ways in which we
record and remember in, with, and through archives. With attention to the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability, my inquiry focuses on the historical development of these collections, the connections of activists to their materials, and archivists’ relationships to the communities implicated in their records. I also analyze contemporary activists’ and artists’ creative use and reuse of these archival records to produce knowledge, provoke dialogue, preserve legacies, and support ongoing movements to end HIV/AIDS. These archives, which often center gay, white, middle class men, translate the past in and for the present, shaping collective memories and dominant historical narratives. Such memory practices and narratives in turn shape future possibilities. An analysis of the data collected through ethnographic fieldwork resulted in the rich description of these phenomena that is fundamental to the project of building theory around the concept of nostalgia. The nostalgias produced and reproduced by these archives and their materials infuse and constrain present HIV/AIDS activism, cultural productions, and the lives and life chances of those living with HIV and AIDS. This dissertation demonstrates that archives and critical nostalgia in combination are an essential means to reflect on the past in the contextualized manner necessary to for fostering communal identity and direct action in the present and future. Ultimately, a responsible and ethical scholarship and activist archiving practice must harness critical nostalgia to actively engage and to serve the archives constituencies with an eye to the present and future.
The dissertation of Marika Louise Cifor is approved.

Jonathan Furner

Anne J. Gilliland

Kate Eichhorn

Michelle Caswell, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2017
This dissertation is dedicated to my participants and to all who fight.
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VITA
Marika Cifor

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2012 Master of Science in Library and Information Science. Simmons College.
2012 Master of Arts in History. Simmons College.
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SELECTED PUBLICATIONS


**SELECTED AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS**

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Chapter One: Introduction: Nostalgia, Archives, and AIDS Activism

Introduction

On March 11, 2016, while attending former First Lady Nancy Reagan’s funeral and in the midst of resounding praise for Mrs. Reagan’s leadership on a range of causes, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton commended Reagan for her leadership in confronting HIV/AIDS. Clinton told newscaster Andrea Mitchell,

… it may be hard for your viewers to remember how difficult it was for people to talk about HIV/AIDS back in the 1980s. And because of both President and Mrs. Reagan — in particular Mrs. Reagan — we started a national conversation when before nobody would talk about it, nobody wanted to do anything about it. And that too is something that I really appreciate with her very effective, low-key advocacy. But it penetrated the public conscience and people began to say, ‘Hey, we have to do something about this too’ (Clinton in Nichols 2016).

Clinton’s compliment was met with an uproar because President Reagan, despite activists’ urgent and loud calls for action and many thousands of deaths, did not sign a document contending with HIV/AIDS until the end of 1985 and he did not mention either HIV or AIDS publicly until 1986 (Brier 2011, 80). Reagan did not give a speech about HIV/AIDS until May 31, 1987, a point when an estimated 20,849 Americans had already died and 36,058 more had been diagnosed with the virus (White 2004). Nancy Reagan too refused to respond or act in any public way (Nichols 2016). For many, especially AIDS activists and others in the LGBT community, who remember the Reagan administration as a time of deadly indifference to a growing and deadly plague, Clinton’s comments provoked familiar feelings of anger and frustration. She faced a swift and fierce backlash, and issued a contrite apology for her comments within a matter of hours. The following day, Clinton expanded on her apology in an essay posted online. She wrote, “To be clear, the Reagans did not start a national conversation about HIV and
AIDS...that distinction belongs to generations of brave lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, along with straight allies, who started not just a conversation but a movement that continues to this day” (Clinton 2016). Clinton then went on to detail her policy plans for fighting HIV/AIDS, including putting more money into research and efforts to limit the cost of life-saving drugs (Ibid).

On January 20, 2017, the website and Twitter account of the White House Office of AIDS Policy disappeared, leaving a perfunctory placeholder in their stead. The notice “Sorry, the page you’re looking for can’t be found” symbolized a present absence, glaring and blinding, that is likely to be emblematic of national HIV/AIDS policy for the next few years. As these two recent political events demonstrate, it is clear that the responsibility to insist on the urgency of HIV/AIDS work, to remember its legacies, to point out its sprawling net of casualties, and to confront its racialized, gendered, and classed erasures will fall—yet again—on the shoulders of activists, persons living with HIV/AIDS, artists, and researchers. To be certain, the urgency to resist the rhetoric that “AIDS is over” is not new. The AIDS crisis, as activist and writer Sarah Schulman has shown, expedited a “replacement of complex social realities with simplistic ones” (2012, 36) and nurtured ongoing processes of gentrification, displacement, homogenization, assimilation, and upward wealth redistribution that manufacture consent through systemic and material foreclosures of possibilities for dissent (Cifor et al. 2017).

In the more than three decades since AIDS was first identified and entered the realm of public discourse, it has become far more than a biomedical event. The HIV/AIDS epidemic has generated a vast body of representations and an even greater collection of experiences, affects, knowledge, and activism to be documented. A vital part of AIDS cultural activism according to AIDS media scholar Roger Hallas is the “imperative to build an archive of AIDS knowledge
otherwise neglected, marginalized, suppressed, or forgotten” (2010, 431). Archival projects have been developed globally to collect, preserve, and make accessible political, artistic, and medical knowledge about HIV/AIDS. Archives have become vital social institutions responsible for the transformation of the living memory surrounding HIV/AIDS into institutionally constructed and sustained commemorative practices. Despite widespread recognition of the significance of archival documentation of HIV/AIDS activism in the United States in 1980s and 1990s, this topic was previously unexplored through empirical qualitative research.

My study examines the critical potential of the emotions and memories that are recorded and produced by archives documenting 1980s and 1990s HIV/AIDS activism in the United States. Looking at the relationship of the present to both the past and the future, I study a series of archival collections and collaborations between activists, artists, and archivists. These materials are culled from the New York Public Library (NYPL), the Downtown Collection at New York University (NYU), and Visual AIDS, a New York-based community arts organization committed to raising AIDS awareness through visual art projects, exhibitions, assisting artists living with HIV/AIDS, and preserving artists’ legacies. I argue that critical nostalgia, an ethical mode of critique grounded in the bittersweet longing for a past time or space, is a productive lens at every moment of collaboration between HIV/AIDS archives and the AIDS activist communities they document and serve. Critical nostalgia shapes the ways in which we record and remember in, with, and through these archives. This study is situated in archival studies, a subfield of information studies, that examines the practices, theory, and history of records as “persistent representations” of human activity that travel across space and time (Yeo 2007, 315), and the roles of archives in society. It draws on literatures on archives, nostalgia, temporality, memory, affect, and HIV/AIDS historiography. With attention to the intersections of gender,
sexuality, race, class, and ability, my inquiry focuses on the historical development of these collections, the connections of activists to their materials, and archivists’ relationships to the communities implicated in their records. I also analyze contemporary activists’ and artists’ creative use and reuse of these archival records to produce knowledge, provoke dialogue, preserve legacies, and support ongoing movements to end HIV/AIDS. These archives, which often center gay, white, middle class men, translate the past in and for the present, shaping collective memories and dominant historical narratives. Such memory practices and narratives in turn shape future possibilities. An analysis of the data collected through ethnographic fieldwork resulted in the rich description of these phenomena that is fundamental to the project of building theory around the concept of nostalgia. The nostalgias produced and reproduced by these archives and their materials infuse and constrain present HIV/AIDS activism, cultural productions, and the lives and life chances of those living with HIV and AIDS.

The archives of 1980s HIV/AIDS activism and their multiple roles in the present merit a critical examination at this particular juncture for a few significant reasons. First, AIDS is (re)emerging as a significant focus for scholarship and memory projects, as will be evidenced by a review of literatures on the history of and cultural productions inspired by the HIV/AIDS and its activism, as well as the events including exhibitions and public programming series to be examined in this study. Second, the materials from the early years of the AIDS crisis are becoming ever-increasingly decontextualized and commodified in the present. This is evidenced by the circulations of decontextualized archival materials and artworks from the height of the crisis online, particularly on social media platforms. Finally, this project is needed while AIDS continues to impact so many lives. In the United States alone approximately 1.2 million people are living with HIV, 50,000 new infections take place every year, and an estimated 659,000
people have died from AIDS related causes since the beginning of the epidemic (CDC 2016a). It is also important to note that while men who have sex with men remain affected to a disproportionate degree, new infection rates and a lack of access to vital healthcare and other resources remain starkly unequal across lines of race, gender, and socio-economic class, with black, Latino, transpeople, and the economically disadvantaged bearing the burden most heavily (CDC 2016b).

**HIV/AIDS and its Activism: A Short History**

The terms human immunodeficiency virus infection (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) are used to describe the broad spectrum of conditions that are caused by HIV infection. While its circulation in the United States actually began in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Kerr 2016; Worobey et al. 2016), the medical community first identified AIDS in 1981. It was found in Los Angeles and New York City among gay and bisexual men who were diagnosed with previously rare opportunistic infections. These infections, Kaposi’s sarcoma and pneumocystic pneumonia, generally affected only those whose immune systems had been severely compromised. Later that year, as word of a deadly new disease spread through urban gay communities, *The New York Times* first reported the possibility of an emergent epidemic under the headline “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals” (Altman 1981). While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognized AIDS in 1981, its cause and means of infection were still unknown. The medical community also believed that there could be many more unknown cases of AIDS. A toxic mixture of paranoia and scientific ignorance created a widespread panic about AIDS in the United States that reigned throughout the early years of the crisis. The reactions of politicians and the media amplified these characteristics, leading to a
popular hysteria, an embrace of fear-driven suspicions, and the shunning of entire groups of people. In its early years AIDS was frequently identified in the press as gay-related immune deficiency (GRID). While it was not then and is not now a virus affecting only men who have sex with men, the association of HIV/AIDS with the LGBTQ community was and remains important.

In the early 1980s, in the face of widespread and far-reaching neglect, stigma, and discrimination from the government, the media and other institutions, and as the death counts related to AIDS rapidly rose, gay and lesbian communities organized in response. They formed what would be the initial wave of AIDS activism. Many urban gay communities were predominately white, due to racism, homophobia, and widespread racial and class segregation (Royles 2014, x). This segregation meant that the first AIDS service organizations arose largely from inside the social networks of white gay men, and they were staffed mostly by white volunteers, supported with white donors’ funds, and oriented around the needs of a white clientele (Ibid). In turn, the visibility of these early organizations reinforced the view that AIDS was a white gay men’s disease, even as doctors in the early and mid-1980s found cases of the disease among hemophiliacs and intravenous drug users, as well as the heterosexual partners and children of those affected (Ibid). It is these majority-white AIDS service organizations, while caring for those affected by AIDS and holding vigils to honor the dead, who formed the public face of AIDS and AIDS activism. Meanwhile, the epidemic also raged in communities of color,

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1 The CDC identified what it termed the four high-risk groups for HIV as the four Hs: homosexuals, Haitians, heroin addicts, and hemophiliacs (Gonsalves and Staley 2014, 2348). It recommended banning all of these groups from making blood donations in 1983 (Washington 2010). These groups also represent those most frequently shunned in this period, namely gay men, intravenous drug users, and communities of color.
where it was even less visible to the media and therefore the general public, to policy makers and,
as historian Dan Royles notes, in many cases to “communities themselves” (Ibid, x-xi).

By the mid-1980s AIDS related deaths in the United States had surpassed 20,000 (Gould 2009, 4). A substantial number of those dead and dying were gay and bisexual men. The ever-growing death toll was in large part responsible for the shift in AIDS activism that took place in this period (Ibid). In 1986 and 1987 oppositional groups emerged from gay and lesbian communities, arguing that confrontational direct action was urgently needed to fight AIDS. These responses were also provoked by the political climate of the 1980s and early 1990s in which an unprecedented set of repressive tendencies converged, including the rise of neoliberalism under Reagan, the growth of Christian fundamentalism, and the institutionalization of novel forms of governance of populations at the level of the body (Weiner 2012, 106-107). Activists staged dramatic protests against the lack of a significant governmental, corporate, and public response to AIDS. ACT UP, the most-well known of these oppositional groups, was formed in March 1987 in New York City, and quickly expanded to more than 80 city-based chapters across the nation (Gould 2009, 4). AIDS activists aimed to do more than just save the lives of the most vulnerable populations, they also sought to influence culture, medical research, public health policy, and to correct other injustices. Building on the precedent of the 1970s feminist health movement, ACT UP and other activist groups mobilized a movement grounded in oppositional biopolitics (Weiner 2012, 106-107). They designated new sites of intervention, including mass media, pharmaceutical companies, the art world, medical schools, and government agencies. These activists educated themselves and others about pharmaceutical research and development, testing protocols, and alternative forms of treatment. They also successfully contested policies restricting access to healthcare, housing, social services, and
informal modes of discrimination and stigmatization. Under these conditions, activists navigated relations and contradictory affects including rage, care, ambivalence, mourning, and desire. AIDS activist groups intervened in nearly every aspect of the AIDS crisis to tremendous effect. AIDS activism as understood here encompasses both the dramatic public protests to effect policy change and garner support, attention and service, the provision of care to people with AIDS, and prevention education efforts. AIDS activists did whatever they could to ensure each other’s survival. What this looked like before even the most privileged of persons had access to Highly Active Anti-Retroviral Therapy (HAART) in the 1980s and early 1990s was vague. The literal caring for those with AIDS involved the daily and often extended labors of “making innumerable hospital visits, providing emotional support, negotiating our wholly inadequate and inhuman human care and social welfare systems, keeping abreast of experimental treatment therapies” (Crimp 1989, 15). All of these labors were performed while coping with monumental loss and in many cases the need to monitor and make treatment decisions about their own health, or in the face of great anxiety about their own health statuses (Ibid). Service has not been traditionally understood as a form of activism, however, in the case of HIV/AIDS, service provision was itself a political act. For this reason, “activism” here encompasses the complex and diverse responses of those who organized to stop the spread of AIDS in their communities and across the globe.

Nostalgia and AIDS Archives

Deeply embedded in and canonized by archives, the forms of nostalgia examined in this study are at once political, aesthetic, social, and personal, shaping the experiences, documentation, understandings, commodifications, and memories of HIV/AIDS and its activist movements. Nostalgia describes the condition or the feeling of bittersweet longing for a time or space that is
past. It is a particular set of relations to time and space that are “related to a way of living, imagining and sometimes exploiting or (re)inventing the past, present and future” (Niemeyer 2014, 2). As Svetlana Boym in her influential book, *The Future of Nostalgia*, asserts, “Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective” (2001, xvi). The past is shaped by the present’s needs. The way in which the past is desired in the present also has a “direct impact on the realities of the future” (Ibid). Nostalgia for the past, and its interlinking with the present and imaginings of the future, may be public or private, individual or collective. Nostalgia is well theorized as a companion to social and technological progress (Ibid). The literature on nostalgia is rich and encompasses a wide range of topics, methodological approaches, and crosses a number of disciplines. Disciplines that have engaged in rich study of nostalgia include history (Lasch 1984; Lowenthal 1989; Fritzsche 2001; Shircliffe 2001; Matt 2007; Roth 1991), sociology (Davis 1977; Duyvendak 2011; Nash 2012; Keightley and Pickering 2006; DaSilva and Faught 1982), anthropology (Ange and Berliner 2014; Berliner 2012; Rosaldo 1989; Metcalf 2012; Bissel 2005; Ivy 1995; Schneider 2000; Graburn 1995), literature and literary criticism (Boym 2001; Atia and Davies 2010; Matt 2011; Ladino 2012), gender, sexuality, and feminist studies (Coontz 1993; Huang 2006; Doane and Hodges 1987; McPherson 2003; McDermott 2004; Eichhorn 2015; Stewart 1984; Huffer 1998), geography (Radcliffe 1996; Legg 2004; Bonnett 2016), psychology (Routledge et al. 2011; Wildshut et al. 2006), business and management (Loveland et al. 2010; Holbrook 1993; Goulding 2001), communication and media studies (Niemeyer 2014; Grainge 2002; Marcus 2004), and education (Tannock 1995; Mitchell and Weber 1999). Work on nostalgia in museum studies comes closest topically to addressing archival nostalgias (Simine 2013; Sodaro 2013; Wilks and Kelly 2008). In particular, Silke Arnold-de Simine’s *Mediating Memory in the Museum* (2013) interfaces
between memory studies, trauma studies, and museum studies offering a model of how to consider nostalgia in cultural heritage institutions and through exhibitions. Neither information studies nor its sub-discipline of archival studies have previously engaged with nostalgia in spite of significant scholarship on closely related concepts of temporality, memory, affect, and identity.²

It was a Swiss physician, Johannes Hofer, who in his 1688 medical thesis first coined the term nostalgia (Anspach 1934). Nostalgia is a composite of two Greek roots: “nostos” meaning to return home and “algia” meaning pain. The formal identification of nostalgia as a medical condition named the preexisting phenomenon of homesickness, which at the time was associated with exiles and particularly with displaced soldiers stationed far from their homelands. Its origins are also found in the German of concept of “Heimweh,” the condition of homesickness (Starbronski 1966; Spitzer 1999, 89). Naming nostalgia as a condition meant that medical professionals opened the popular phenomenon for rational inquiry and possibly even a cure. The sufferer of nostalgia was characterized as manic with longing. Nostalgia’s symptoms were varied and included loss of appetite and desire for drink, hearing voices or seeing ghosts (Boym 2001, 3), fever, and gastric illness (Starbronski 1996; Boym 2001, 2-5). It was a condition with significant similarities to paranoia, however the object of the sufferer’s mania was not a perceived persecution, but rather an intense longing (Beck 2013). It was also closely related to the condition of melancholia, however it was distinct in its attachment to a specific object or place (Ibid). By the mid-19th century there was consensus in the medical field regarding nostalgia’s basic attributes. It could strike across age, gender, nationality, and profession. That

² A search for “nostalgia” and “archives” in databases of LIS literature revealed the use of the term “nostalgia” in this literature, however examining the articles revealed no substantive engagement with the term or its critical meanings.
which could provoke its onset included: an overly lenient education; “disappointed ambition”; a mountainous homeland; masturbation; the eating of “unusual food”; and love, especially “happy love” (Roth 1991, 11-12). It was described as “melancholic,” “debilitating” and even “sometimes fatal” and was triggered by the associations of memory (Spitzer 1999, 90). These associations variously included the sounds, tastes, smells and sights that might remind individuals of the homes and homelands they had left (Ibid). Some even theorized that this might have a physiological origin, “a pathological bone,” however such searches came to no avail (Boym 2001, 7). Another doctor described nostalgia as a “hypochondria of the heart,” which thrived on its very symptoms (Ibid). Nostalgia from the 17th until well into the 19th century was understood as a curable condition. Some such as 18th century French physician Jourdan Le Cointe believed nostalgia should be treated by “inciting pain and terror” (Ibid, 4). While others proposed that opium, leeches, warm emulsions, or a journey to the Swiss Alps might soothe the afflicted (Ibid, xiv, 4). The highest success in cures was found in a return, or at least the promise of one, to that which was familiar and local to the patient. If a full return were not possible, prescriptions included visits from relatives or persons with the same accent, and the tastes and sounds that evoked memories of the homeland. By the end of the 19th century, nostalgia, despite physicians’ best efforts, began to evade cures as the object of longing became larger than personal history, instead turning into a more collective sense of loss that defied geographical constraints.

While nostalgia was largely the province of doctors in the 17th, 18th, and into the 19th century, it also emerged as a cultural and literary mode. As such it became the purview of poets and philosophers. It was through such work that the object of nostalgia widened from a longing for other places to include a longing for departed times. The meaning of nostalgia had been fully transformed and extended beyond that of a psychopathological disorder by the end of the 19th
century. Historian and geographer David Lowenthal describes this shift as nostalgia’s move “from a geographical disease into a sociological complaint” (1975, 2). Though the absence or removal from home and homeland remains one of the most studied manifestations of nostalgia, it came to define, in this period and our own, a more general and abstract loss.³ Nostalgia was thus transformed from a treatable sickness to an incurable state of mind. The nostalgic state of mind signifies absence and loss that can in effect never be made presence again except through the imperfect tools of memory and the “creativity of reconstruction” (Spitzer 1999, 90). Slavic studies scholar and leading theorist of nostalgia Boym describes the nostalgia that emerged from this transition as sentiment, “the mourning of displacement and temporal irreversibility,” as at “the very core of the modern condition” (2001, xvi). She argues that as a “historical emotion” nostalgia’s transformation was about both the dislocation in space and the shifting conceptions of time (Ibid, 7). Modern understandings of nostalgia are dependent, in Boym’s articulation, on “the modern conception of unrepeatable and irreversible time” (Ibid, 13). It was in this period that an effort to make the past known and knowable that nostalgia began to be institutionalized in museums and memorials (Ibid, 15).

Scholars have widely and sharply critiqued the practice of nostalgia, and the societal effects of nostalgic memory and feeling. In the 1970s and 1980s historians and social critics often interpreted nostalgia to be apolitical, regressive, reactionary, and ahistorical (Hilderbrand 2006, 307). In particular many Marxist theorists denounced nostalgia as “reactionary,” “escapist,” “inauthentic,” “unreflexive,” and as either a “simplification” or outright “falsification” of the past (Ibid). For example, historian Christopher Lasch described nostalgia as a “betrayal of history” and described its adherents as “worse than…reactionary,” as “incurable sentimentalist[s]”

³ For more on nostalgia as a defining characteristic of the postmodern age see Stewart 1984; Hutcheon and Valdés 2000; Jameson 1991.
who were both “afraid of the future” and “afraid to face the truth about the past” (1984, 65). Historian Robert Hewison argued that nostalgic memory was a tool of the “heritage industry” and was a form of “spurious…uncreative… miasma” (Hewison in Lowenthal 1989, 20). Philosopher Raymond Williams (1974) framed nostalgia as an opiate with far-reaching dysfunctional consequences for society. Nostalgia in his view enticed people to take refuge in an idealized version of the past as a means to avoid a critical examination of and engagement with their present. Thus nostalgia impeded social change by lulling people into an acceptance of the status quo (Ibid). This tenacious resistance to nostalgia also carries into feminist theoretical and artistic projects (Eichhorn 2015). Such scholarly reactions to nostalgia were not without valid foundation in light of what has been termed the American “nostalgia craze” of the 1970s and 1980s. This “craze” has been widely interpreted as a reactionary response to social changes of the 1960s and a part of a rightward political shift (Hilderbrand 2006, 307). The predominately negative coding of nostalgia is also understandable in the context of modernity which foregrounds linear notions of time and progress, which nostalgia powerfully disrupts.

From the 1990s to the present, a growing body of scholarship on nostalgia has instead asserted that is has “critical potential” (Atia and Davies 2010, 181). Nostalgia is understood across these works as complex and potentially productive in building and sustaining cultural heritage and identities. Boym’s assertion about the complexity of nostalgia’s simultaneously “retrospective” and “prospective” nature in relation to the past, present, and future is central to this work (2001, xvi). Sociologist Maurice Halbwachs’ (1992) scholarship has also been foundational for much of this work. Halbwachs framed the concept of nostalgic memory as an “escape from the present.” However he argues that nostalgia’s escapist tendencies are one of its greatest virtues (Ibid, 103-113). Nostalgia, as Halbwachs conceived it, frees people from the
constraints of time, thereby permitting us to selectively emphasize positive experiences and aspects of the past. Writing on Halbwachs, sociologist Suzanne Vromen describes nostalgia’s presentation of the past in direct relation to the present and argues that it enables a “pleasantly sad dialogue” to take place between them (1993, 77). As a “retrospective mirage” constructed in the present through hindsight, nostalgic memory in Vromen’s view thus serves a significant comparative and animating purpose (Ibid). Nostalgia selectively takes objects and feelings from the “world of yesterday” and turns it into a model for creative inspiration and possible emulation in the present (Ibid). Boym established a distinction between different types of nostalgias. She argues that there are broadly “restorative” nostalgias that aim at the perfect and “transhistorical reconstruction of a lost home,” and “reflective” nostalgias that thrive in the ambivalent condition of longing itself (Boym 2001, xvii). Reflective nostalgias also do not seek to actually reconstruct or restore that which is past (Ibid). Much of this work emphasizes that through the object of its longing nostalgia has generative creative or radical potentiality.

The establishment of a link between the self in the present and the image of the self in the past through nostalgia plays a significant role in the construction and continuity of individual and collective identities, communities, and social movements (Davis 1979, 77; Wilson 2005). Boym writes, “Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (2001, xvi). Nostalgic memory and feelings can thus become a source through which communal cultures and new collective memories that meet societal and individual needs can be constructed (Spitzer 1999, 92). Nostalgia helps to develop the feeling of being part of a group or community (Tierney 2013). If, as Nadia Atia and Jeremy Davies write, “‘nostalgia’ names the particular emotion or way of thinking that arises
from a deeply felt encounter between our personal continuities and discontinuities, then nostalgic emotion might be nothing less than the felt awareness of how identity is entangled with difference” (2010, 184). Feminist media scholar Kate Eichhorn has recently articulated how nostalgia’s temporal shift “opens the possibility for a radical [feminist] politic that appears committed to longing for both real and imagined versions of the past as it is to futurity” (2015, 253).

Much has been written about HIV/AIDS and cultural memory (Crimp 1988, 2002; Struken 1997; Hallas 2009; Cvetkovich 2003; Castiglia and Reed 2012). The connections between nostalgia and queer activist pasts, including activism around HIV/AIDS have been briefly explored (Hilderbrand 2006; Juhasz 2006). These connections have been made primarily by former and current AIDS activists, and in relation to cultural productions of the 1980s and 1990s, particularly video art. Roger Hallas, an activist and media scholar, has written extensively about AIDS cultural productions. He describes how it is the loss of AIDS cultural activism that “so many gay men and lesbians mourn when they lament the absence of discussion about AIDS—for instance the empowering mutuality of ACT UP demonstrations, the graphic art of collectives like Gran Fury and General Idea, the complex installations of Felix Gonzalez-Torres, or the politicized performance art of Ron Athey and Tim Miller” (Hallas 2009, 8). Marking the occasion of AIDS 25th anniversary in 2006 GLQ included an “AIDS Cluster special section” (Román 2006). Within this section queer film theorist Lucas Hilderbrand (2006) writes about what he terms “retroactivism” in describing his own nostalgic admiration for ACT UP and its cultural productions. He, like I, grew up queer in the age of AIDS but was not of the generation to have been a part of such queer activist movements at their height. Hilderbrand describes how his own view on such an activist past is “romanticized” and yet, in spite of its limitations,
nostalgia deeply informs his political and sexual identities (Ibid, 303). ACT UP activist and feminist media scholar Alexandra Juhasz in the same section argues that when mixed with video, like those used in her experimental documentary *Video Remains* (2006), nostalgia can become “substantial and productive” (2006, 321) Video nostalgia allows her to refigure time and feeling in response “to personal losses that in so doing becomes collective and potentially productive of new feelings and knowledge that might lead to action” (Ibid, 321-322). Juhasz’s work is emblematic of arguments for the critical productivity of nostalgia. Gender studies scholar Julian Gill-Peterson (2013) extends these earlier efforts to make a temporally explicit argument. He argues that there has been a “mutation of the temporality of HIV/AIDS in the United States from epidemic time to endemic time — the biopolitical distribution of life and death capacities across populations — as a critical noncoincidence of the present with itself” (Ibid 279). This temporal shift means that our present moment is “out of joint” separating two generations (Ibid).

What I term “critical nostalgia” in this study names an ethical mode of critique grounded in the bittersweet longing for a time or space that is past. It is a particular desiring of the past that is just as much about the present. Scholars in a number of fields have previously employed the term “critical nostalgia,” however thus far it lacks a standard definition and usage across fields (Cashman 2006; de Szegheo Lang 2015; Dinshaw 2011; McDermott 2002). Anthropologist Ray Cashman identified how “nostalgia can be critical in both senses of the word” (2006, 137). First, he writes that it is can be “critical in an analytic sense” when deployed for an “informed evaluation of the present through contrast with the past” (Ibid, 137-138). Second, Cashman writes that nostalgia can be “be critical, in the sense of being vitally important” when used as a inspiration for actions directed at building a “better future” (Ibid, 138). This study builds on both Cashman’s usages of critical nostalgia and expands the ethical potential of this term to catalyze
actions of substantial “moral weight” (Ibid, 138). Drawing also from cultural studies, critical
nostalgia in this study builds on Boym’s theorization of “reflective nostalgia” (2001, xviii, 49).
Similarly to reflective nostalgia, critical nostalgia does not call not for a revival or recreation, nor
does it mark a desire to actually relive the past. It in fact acknowledges the limitations and
dangers of such projects. Critical nostalgia reaches beyond reflective nostalgia in the extent to
which it is both deeply political and socially engaged; it is a mode of coherent critique that
demonstrates more self-consciousness in its awareness and holds more strategic potential for
action than reflective nostalgia allowed for. It also emphasizes, unlike the earlier work, that
nostalgia’s critical capacity does not simply reside in the “content, author, and audience of a
nostalgic narrative” but rather it that it is a part of “the structure of nostalgia itself” (Tannock
1995, 456). This is a nostalgia that emphasizes the longing for past time and space while
attending to the ambivalences and complexities of that past.

I assert that critical nostalgia is most useful as both an individual’s affective relationship
to a community and a community’s affective relationship to time. For individuals and
communities critical nostalgia is a shared language, a feeling, and above all a critical practice for
people in the present moment to express what is disappointing, absent, frustrating, or threatened
in the present, and to examine the contemporary utility of the past. Unsettling the present through
such critique can open crucial space for making it less restrictive and more livable, especially for
those marginalized subjects to whom many spaces have been historically closed. Critical
nostalgia simultaneously draws on that past, real or imagined, to imagine, to find, and to
construct a different and more just future. It thus opens the past as a space to identify and deploy
sources of agency, identity, community, affect, and satisfaction that are lost in the present. As a
temporal relation, critical nostalgia allows for the self-aware, the complex, the selective, or the
strategic retrieval and use of the past. In its disturbance of linear and chronological ordering of life and being, nostalgia names a non-linear relationship between past, present, and future, blurring lines between them. This contradicts modernity’s temporal emphasis on unending supersession and progress forward beyond currently existing conditions or circumstances (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 920). It thus prevents attempts to impose seamless, simple, and inevitable chronological narratives (McDermott 2002, 4). This temporal mode recognizes that forward progression and a clean break with past losses is an often impossible, and sometimes undesirable, standard to achieve. Modern understandings of time also dismiss the value of active dialogue between past and present. Critical nostalgia centers such dialogue as it is about the process of reflecting on history and the passage of time. Altogether, critical nostalgia offers multiple through-lines. It explores how to live in multiple times and places at once; this simultaneously presents ethical and imaginative challenges. This is a nostalgia in which critical reflection, the feeling of longing, and action for social change are not oppositional approaches.

A critical nostalgia proves a unique lens from which to explore contemporary issues of identity, politics, and history (Ange and Berliner 2014, 1). Nostalgia, according to Atia and Davies in their editorial introduction a special issue of Memory Studies on nostalgia, offers a particular way of “shaping and directing historical consciousness” (2010, 182). They assert that nostalgia is unique in the sensory depth in which it correlates place, time and desire heightening awareness of time, places and possibilities that “are at once integral to who we are and definitively alien to us” (Ibid, 184). Nostalgia allows for “a negotiation between continuity and discontinuity: it insists on the bond between our present selves and a certain fragment of the past, but also on the force of our separation from what we have lost” (Ibid). Engaging with nostalgia offers the promise of a deeper, and more critical and ethical engagement with archival
stakeholders, memory, temporality, and affect in archival studies, offering possibilities for transforming theory and practice. Nostalgia is understood here as complex and potentially productive in building and sustaining cultural heritage and identities, and as a tool for social and political action. In the archives, the past is both present in its material traces and yet no longer fully accessible, making them a powerful trigger for nostalgia on personal and collective levels. Archives are thus an important subject and site for the study of nostalgia. I ground theoretical work on critical nostalgia firmly in empirical research on HIV/AIDS archives in this study. The study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. How is nostalgia recorded and produced by archives that document HIV/AIDS activism from the 1980s and 1990s through their archival apparatuses?
2. How do the materials in HIV/AIDS archives infuse and constrain the present of HIV/AIDS activism and its cultural productions?

**Methodological Approach and Research Design**

The method for this study is archival ethnography. The study is grounded in data collected in 2015 and 2016 through fieldwork, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and observation. It examines a series of archival collections and collaborations between activists, artists, curators, and archivists. The materials analyzed are culled from the NYPL, NYU, and Visual AIDS. Archival ethnography is a form of ethnography, a method of qualitative field research and naturalistic inquiry. Ethnography is the in-depth exploration, examination and description of cultures and societies that form a fundamental part of human experience (Murchison 2010, 4). Ethnography offers a number of epistemological advantages, these entail accounting for the complexities of documents and human behavior including naturalism; thick
description; knowledge of multiple points of view, including those of research participants; the ability to inquire into areas of human experience such as affect, emotion, and memory; and inductive research practices. Ethnography is a process grounded in collecting data in the field through a “commitment to a first-hand experience and exploration of a particular social or cultural setting” (Atkinson 2001, 4). Through collecting data in the field, by being out among the subjects of one’s research, becoming immersed in their milieu, and seeing events and activities, this research seeks to identify, analyze, and articulate the “insider” (emic) perspective of the social phenomena (Gorman and Clayton 1997, 3) in question. Archival ethnography is a particular type of naturalistic inquiry in which data collection takes place through interviews, document analysis, and observation within archival environments in order to gain an understanding of the social and “cultural perspective of those responsible for the creation, collection, care, and use of records” (Gracy 2004, 337). Archival environments are broadly defined in this study to include “any social space where the creation, maintenance, or use of archival records forms a locus of interest and activity” (Ibid). Archival ethnography also offers an expansive notion of the types of data that can be collected on archival processes and practices. It is appropriate to studying the practices of artists, activists, curators, and archivists in relation to HIV/AIDS archives as it allows for archival practices to be examined in “direct relationship to the communities of individuals who generate, accumulate and preserve documentary evidence” (Gracy 2004, 335-336). Archival ethnography enabled my analysis of the social, cultural, political, and aesthetic dimensions of records, the systems that produce and maintain them, and the ways that they are used and reused by archivists, activists, curators and artists. This study has resulted in a rich description of phenomena that is fundamental to the project of building theory around critical nostalgia. Deeply embedded in and canonized by archives, the forms of nostalgia I explore are at
once political, aesthetic, social, and personal, shaping the experiences, understandings, and memories of HIV/AIDS and its activism.

For this study, the three research sites were selected for the prominence and breadth of their collections on 1980s and 1990s AIDS activism and its cultural productions, the significant contemporary programming and other creative use of the records undertaken, and their meaningful connections to one another. Purposive sampling was used to select participants at each research site. Such a sampling frame is used to “access people, times, settings, or situations that are representative of a given criteria” (O’Reilly 2012, 44). The primary criteria for participants’ selection was their affiliation with one or more of the research sites and their high level of involvement with creating, developing, caring for, using, or reusing the archival collections in question, or their substantial involvement in public programming that involves relevant archival materials at the one or more of the research sites.

My first research site was the New York Public Library (NYPL). Archives and manuscripts have been central to the NYPL’s mission from the very start. Former Governor Samuel J. Tilden bequeathed the bulk of his fortune in 1886 to “establish and maintain a free library and reading room in the city of New York” (NYPL, “History”). In 1895 the Tilden Trust joined with the private Astor and Lenox libraries to form the NYPL (Ibid). Both the Astor and Lenox libraries had been centers for the collection and use of scholarly research materials. The Astor Library, opened in 1849, was a major collector of books for both reference and research (Ibid). The Lenox Library consisted primarily of its founder’s personal collection of manuscripts, rare books, and Americana (Ibid). It was those two collections that formed the foundation for the NYPL’s major research units. The NYPL now holds nearly 10,000 archival and manuscript collections that together make-more than 50,000 linear feet of material in a wide range of
formats. Fifteen Divisions now hold these materials. The collections are open to all researchers and are widely used as well for public programming and outreach. The Manuscripts and Archives Division is the Library’s largest Division and was a primary site for this project. It holds more than 100 collections that the Library identifies as “pertaining to the history and culture of gay men and lesbians, and to the history of the AIDS/HIV epidemic” (NYPL, “Gay and Lesbian Collections”). They have done significant collecting around LGBT civil rights movements and organizations, particularly in New York City from the 1970s to the present (Baumann 2015). They began collecting materials from AIDS activists in the late 1980s (Bowling 2015). Their collections include many of the most prominent individuals and organizations engaging in AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s including ACT UP/New York, Gay Men’s Health Crisis, Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, People with AIDS Coalition, and Gran Fury (NYPL, “Gay and Lesbian Collections”). The value of the NYPL’s collections has been widely recognized by scholars. Roger Hallas (2010) asserts that the archiving of queer AIDS media started in earnest in the mid-1990s when filmmaker, activist, and archivist Jim Hubbard took on the massive project of the collection, description and preservation of AIDS activist videos in a project funded by the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, a nonprofit that aims to preserve artists with AIDS work across media forms. This collection at NYPL’s Manuscripts and Archives Division includes approximately 650 tapes of completed works and raw footage created between 1983 and 2000. It is largest collection of AIDS activist videos worldwide (NYPL, “Inventory”).

In 2013 and 2014 the NYPL engaged in a significant exhibition and public programming series focused on AIDS activism, largely drawing on its own collections in this area. The exhibition, Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism, showcased posters, pamphlets and
artifacts from the 1980s and 1990s from their collections of organizations and individuals pivotal to the AIDS epidemic. Running from October 2013 to April 2014, it contended with topics that included shifting perceptions of people living with HIV, safer sex and needle exchanges, mourning, healthcare activism, and the contemporary realities of HIV and AIDS. Independently and in collaboration with Visual AIDS, the NYPL also engaged in a public programming series related to the exhibition. This series included film screenings, a series of artist workshops for young adults, a collaborative project by twenty artists, writers, and activists to create site-specific installations in four library branches, as well as more traditional panels and workshops. At the NYPL, I interviewed library staff members as well as artists, activists, and curators who created, developed, or participated in the collections and exhibitions and other programming done around them.

The Downtown Collection at the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University was my second research site. The Downtown Collection was founded in 1993 and documents, through more than one hundred collections, the art scene in New York City’s SoHo and Lower East Side neighborhoods from the 1970s through the early 1990s. These are art scenes that “radically challenged” and transformed “literature, music, theater, performance, film, activism, dance, photography, video, and other art practices” (NYU, “The Downtown Collection”). The Collection includes personal papers of many prominent artists, filmmakers, writers and performers; the records of art galleries, theatre groups, and art collectives; and collections relating to AIDS activism. Library Director and Founder of the Downtown Collection, Marvin Taylor, described how the broad ranging forms of works and practices of creation challenge traditional classification and preservation practices. He writes,

Downtown works undermine the stability of the discourse of the library, which, with its classification schemes, processing rituals, and economic modes for assessing historical or
literary value, stands as the cultural system par excellence that reifies, legislates, represses, normalizes, and creates the possibility of what can be known, who can know it, and how it will be preserved (Taylor 2002, 45).

In collaboration with Visual AIDS, the Downtown Collection has been the focus of a number of important exhibitions held on site at the Fales Library and across New York City. At NYU, I interviewed staff members regarding the Collection and their collecting and programming practices around HIV/AIDS. I also interviewed a curator and a number of artists, writers, and activists who have worked with the materials related to AIDS activism in the Downtown Collection to develop creative works and public programming.

My third research site was Visual AIDS. Visual AIDS is a New York-based community arts organization founded in 1988 and committed to raising AIDS awareness through visual art projects and exhibitions, assisting artists living with HIV/AIDS, and preserving artists’ legacies. It is one of the most significant community-based institutions documenting the work and lives of artists with HIV/AIDS. Their archival engagements are conceptualized as part of their activist mission. The Visual AIDS’ Archive Project was co-founded by David Hirsh and Frank Moore in 1994 (Visual AIDS, “Archive Project”). In the face of the mounting losses of artists, Hirsh and Moore and their collaborators realized that there was also a danger of losing the visual record of the works created by these artists (Ibid). The Archive Project sought to document, preserve, and make accessible the work of artists affected by HIV/AIDS. The Artist+ Registry, launched in 2012, contains digitized copies of the Archive Project’s analog slides as well as new works (Visual AIDS, “Artist+ Registry”). The archives are a service to the organization’s artist members as well as to activists, curators, and scholars, and are a unique historical and educational resource for the larger public. The cultural productions born of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s included within their archives have become a focal point for contemporary
nostalgia from participants as well as another generation of artists, activists, and scholars. Visual AIDS has developed public programming in collaboration with other institutions including both the NYPL and NYU. Their work with NYU includes the 2013 exhibition Not Only This, but 'New Language Beckons Us' which was composed of archival materials from NYU’s Downtown Collection and newly commissioned texts from contemporary artists and writers. These pairings sought to voice concerns at the contemporary intersection of art and HIV/AIDS. With the NYPL, Visual AIDS was a formal and informal collaborator on programming associated with the Library’s Why We Fight exhibition. This programming included a series of teen workshops, the Undetectable Collective, and the panel on “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!” At this site I interviewed current and former staff members, as well as founders and key players in the development of the Archive Project. I also interviewed curators, artists, and writers who have participated in the public projects and programming series the organization runs.

This study looks at these three sites in New York City from 2015 to 2016. Over the course of a year and a half, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with archivists, librarians, non-profit staff members, activists, artists, and curators involved with my research sites in order to understand the sites’ archival collecting and practices, public programming and other outreach strategies, as well as each of the participant’s own use of and relationships to the collections in question. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 29 participants. The interviews took the form of a guided conversation, always encouraging participants to openly express their thoughts and attitudes. Each interview was conducted in a single sitting in a setting of the participants’ choosing, these included offices, artists’ studios, homes, and cafes. The interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to three hours. Most

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4 A detailed protocol for interviews including topics, questions, and probes follows in Appendix A.
participants were interviewed only once, with the exception of Jason Baumann at the NYPL and Marvin Taylor at the Fales. Both Baumann and Taylor are key figures in the development of their collections and were interviewed first during the early stages of the project and again one year later. The number of participants interviewed at each research site varied. Of the 29 interviews completed: 15 participants were affiliated in some way with the NYPL, 6 with NYU, and 8 with Visual AIDS. Some participants were affiliated with more than one of the sites. The number of participants interviewed at each site varied due to the scale of each of the institutions, the scope of their programming, and the number of participants involved in collections and programming discussed. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission from the interviewee and transcribed in full or in part by either by the researcher or by Scribie, a paid transcription service.

My fieldwork also included document analysis, a form of qualitative research in which documents (broadly defined) are examined by the researcher to identify and interpret patterns in the data. I then gave voice and meaning to those patterns and employed those materials as support for my research, in conversation with other collected data. As anthropologist Annelise Riles describes it, “to study documents” through ethnography is to take the document as simultaneously “an ethnographic object, an analytical category and a methodological orientation” (2006, 7). This study views documents as far from neutral, examining the document as that which “reflects, transforms, distorts and otherwise mediates” both the meaning and elements of its contents (Hull 2012, 253). The documents analyzed in this study include archival records, statistical data, and scholarly and popular sources. Archival research at all three sites was an important component of this project. I devoted a significant part of fieldwork hours to engaging in archival research to ascertain a deeper understanding of the collections and to better
understand their use, how the descriptions of materials reflect the contents of the archives, and AIDS activists’ documentation strategies and productions. Having a deep understanding of the collections themselves was essential to examining and analyzing their subsequent use and reuse by archivists, artists, curators, and activists. I also examined contemporary documents created by artists and activists that use or otherwise engage with archival materials from the 1980s and 1990s. Such documents included contemporary visual artworks, activist materials, digital exhibitions, and other related resources. I also followed and carefully read press releases, social media postings, and general news about these sites and their documentation of HIV/AIDS activism and display of archival materials. These documents were used to supplement, verify, or further illustrate issues raised in interviews, observations, and other data collection.

Ethnographic observation was also used to collect data in this study. According to Murchison, observation can be used to open “avenues to important types of information hard to obtain or access” (2010, 41). For the purposes of this study, observation is defined as the process whereby the researcher creates and sustains a many sided and substantive “relationship with a human association in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding of that association” (Lofland and Lofland 1995, 18). This understanding is achieved by the researcher deeply immersing themselves in the setting in order to “investigate, experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur” in the research setting (Ibid). During the research period, I participated in social events that were held by my research sites that promoted their archival resources documenting HIV/AIDS. I attended art openings, toured archives and artists’ studios, attended film screenings, went to panel discussions and a poetry reading, examined archival records in the reading rooms and office spaces, and shared meals with

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5 Observation was done using the observation protocol included in Appendix B.
participants. I also followed social media conversations that connected activists, artists, and archivists to one another. Observation was used to gain a deeper understanding of the archival environments, the sites’ events and outreach activities, and the archival practices of each of the research sites.

All of the data collected through fieldwork was analyzed using an ongoing and iterative coding process that can be best understood as an “inductive and emergent process in which the analyst is the central agent” (Ibid, 181). My first step in the process of data analysis was to evaluate the volume of interviews, documents, observations, and field notes in order to determine the appropriate balance between them. Coding was done both by hand and using the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo QSR International. Documents, transcripts, and audio recordings were coded for analysis. Coding is understood here to be “the process of categorizing and sorting data” into “shorthand devices” that will be used to “to label, separate, compile, and organize data (Charmaz 1983, 111-112). Inductive codes were developed by the direct examination of the data itself through the use of guiding questions (Lofland and Lofland 1995, 186). These questions included: What is this? What does it represent? What phenomenon is this an example of? What do I see going on here? What are people doing? What is happening? What kinds of events are at issue here? Once the initial coding was completed it resulted in a list of inductive codes. I turned my attention to that list, which “itself become an object” of study (Ibid, 192). I reviewed the full list of inductive codes generated in order to determine “which topics and questions are being treated more than others” (Ibid). It is at this stage in the coding process that less productive codes were eliminated and the focus narrowed to a selected number of more productive and useful codes. The process of coding was emergent, which means that new codes were developed during the data collection and analysis, while others were further elaborated or removed altogether.
This study followed general ethical guidelines for qualitative research with human subjects. The identities of participants are revealed in this study per human subjects approval (IRB#15-000737).

Chapter Layout

This study is structured as a series of interrelated and interdependent chapters. The lens of nostalgia shapes its structure. The study begins with nostalgia’s relationship to home and the ethics that it creates in archival contexts, it then moves to a nostalgic longing for an AIDS activist past in the present, then to the (in)curability of nostalgia, and finally it turns to the ways in which nostalgia’s non-linear temporality in turn shapes archival temporalities. Each individual chapter contains a case or series of short case studies that illustrate the contributions of nostalgia to the study of HIV/AIDS and its archives. Each chapter also includes a review of relevant literatures. A list of references is included at the end of each chapter. Together these chapters provide a thick description of HIV/AIDS archives, their records, creation, development, use, and reuse by archivists, artists, and activists at the three research sites. This rich description is fundamental to the project of building theory around nostalgia.

Chapter One: “Introduction: Nostalgia, Archives, and AIDS Activism” provides basic information regarding this study including research questions and methods used to address them. This chapter also offers short introductions to the history of HIV/AIDS and its activism in a United States context and to nostalgia. It also addresses the documentation of HIV/AIDS activism in archives.

Chapter Two: “Home/Not Home: ACT UP, Ethics, and Ongoing Relations” employs home as a lens to examine the life history of a single archival collection. That collection, The
ACT UP New York Records, now held by the New York Public Library, provides the case study for this chapter. I trace the development of the collection from its start as the result of ACT UP activists’ self-documentation processes in the 1980s and 1990s to its current use by librarians, archivists, and activists in public programming, including exhibitions and community outreach. Home as a lens offers archivists an ethical orientation to their work that is grounded in a feminist ethics of care. A feminist ethics of care approach ensures archivists’ ethics are grounded in ongoing affective relationships to record’s creators, record’s subjects, and to larger communities (Caswell and Cifor 2016). Archivists need to reconceptualize the archives as a community’s home for their materials and memories. In its first two centuries nostalgia was treated with prescribed acts of medical care. Similarly, archival work includes its own prescribed acts of care. In order to create and sustain the archives as a home not only for AIDS activists’ records, but also for that community, archivists are beholden to a certain ethics of care. Home as a lens extends also to activists looking to the archives as a space of belonging. Like any other sort of home, archives can provide such a refuge. However, they are not free of conflict, exclusion, or complexity. In its contemporary usage nostalgia describes a general sense of loss, encompassing time as well as space. The status of the Library as a home for the records is such a site of contestation and negotiation. Activists in caring for their materials do not cede control over their history and narratives, which are central to their collective memories and communal identity. It is by being attentive to an ethics of care formed through critical nostalgia that archivists can build and maintain productive and responsible relationships with the communities implicated in their records. The focus on ethics in this chapter emerges both from archival literature and from interdisciplinary scholarship on the nostalgia. This chapter also contributes to archival studies a
rich understanding of activists’ documentation processes and ongoing relationships to their materials that inform archival theory and practices in relation to these materials.

Chapter Three: “‘Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!’ ACT UP Nostalgia, Historical Narratives and their Meaning in the Present” examines nostalgia for ACT UP. This chapter builds on life history of the ACT UP/NY Records completed in Chapter Two. It takes as a case study the poster, “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me! The poster includes a photograph of an ACT UP action amongst other images of AIDS activism and cultural production. It sparked heated and critical conversations between multiple generations of AIDS activists that extended from social media to the halls of the New York Public Library, and which foreground the fraught legacies of ACT UP/New York (ACT UP/NY) and of the AIDS crisis on a broader scale. In this chapter I argue that considering how quotidian aspects of daily life were affected by both HIV/AIDS and the activism created in response to it is crucial in understanding the desire for a collectively imagined, more socially engaged and communal past. Nostalgia for ACT UP does not mean that anyone actually wants to revive or relive the death, discrimination, and mass destruction that marked the height of the AIDS crisis in the United States. But nostalgia for ACT UP’s brand of direct action AIDS activism, both on the part of those who participated and by younger generations who did not, has become a common language through which people express their disappointments and frustrations with the shortcomings of attention to AIDS, and of activism more broadly, in the present. Nostalgia is a memory practice that is in part mediated and formed through archival materials. Tracing nostalgia in the present is necessary for archivists to continue to contextualize archival materials so that ACT UP records do not just become flattened and commodified objects. Intervening to provide such context, regardless of realm, is an important function of archives and is part of the ethical responsibility of the archivist. This chapter makes
an important contribution to emergent scholarship on HIV/AIDS and its activism by developing the concept of an ACT UP nostalgia.

Chapter Four: “The Cure: Nostalgia, Affect, Preservation and The Archive Project as Cure” takes as its starting point the concept of the cure. Nostalgia was for much of its history understood as a curable ailment, but in its contemporary figuration it evades any such cures. HIV/AIDS activism has similarly been focused on the search for a cure for the virus that remains elusive. This chapter takes as its case Visual AIDS’ Archive Project and the Artist+ Registry. The archives in both its digital and analogue form, is the result of activist efforts, motivated in part by affective relations, to work towards a cure. The development, form, use, and reuse of these archives are discussed in sections that reflect the multiple understandings of cure at play, including as a fix, in relation to care, as a preservation process, and as limited in the face of an incurable epidemic. This chapter addresses nostalgia as a component of activist archiving. I argue that nostalgia, a means of looking to the past, is part of a holistic understanding of the “cure” as it offers a path forward for the impacted community utilizing archival approaches to access, preservation, and care as a way to heal and to survive. This chapter contributes new understandings of the motivations for activist archiving as well as the potential affective and memory impacts of such practices.

Chapter Five: “Undetectable: Representation and Temporality in Archival Exhibitions” addresses temporality in relation to archival programming and outreach. Undetectable names the reduction of the presence of HIV in the blood below the point of measurability through biomedical intervention. It is a focal point in contemporary discourses on HIV/AIDS in culture, activism, science, and public health. As a status it produces and reproduces concerns of temporality, in/visibility, presence and absence, contagion and transmission, and the body and
embodiment. Undetectability has radically altered discourse around HIV/AIDS to include more of the future, instead of just the present and past. While such a temporal reorientation could be employed to render nostalgia irrelevant in the discussion, the cases here demonstrate that this is not the case. This chapter employs undetectability as the point of departure to consider representation and temporality in contemporary exhibitions of archival materials documenting AIDS activism and cultural production from the 1980s and 1990s. It looks at three such exhibitions at or in collaboration between my three research sites. It also considers the commissioning of new creative works inspired by and utilizing these archival records by artists, writers, and activists within these exhibitions. I assert that nostalgia has actually always been about the present and future as well, and in fact continues to be critical for archivists through curatorial strategies to serve the HIV/AIDS community ethically and productively. This chapter contributes to literature on the role of archives in constructing and mediating temporality and to emergent scholarship on archival exhibitions and public programming.

Chapter Six: “Conclusion: Towards a Critical Nostalgia” draws together the work of the previous chapters. It articulates the implications of this study for fields including archival studies, memory studies, cultural studies, and gender and sexuality studies. It is organized topically around the contributions made by the study. These contributions include the development and use of a critical nostalgia, the conceptualization and introduction of undetectability, developing an activist archiving practice grounded in an ethics of care, enhancing understandings of archival outreach and public programming, and articulating anew the gendered dimensions of AIDS archives and historiography. The chapter also gestures towards future research directions.

Nostalgia has long been dismissed and derided by scholars and popular commentators as a pointless and self-indulgent wallowing in the past that stands in the way of social change in the
present and for the future. This dissertation contends that rather than nostalgia being antithetical
to scholarly research, to archival work, or to activism for social change, that it is crucial to all of
these practices. I argue that critical nostalgia, an ethical mode of critique grounded in the
bittersweet longing for a past time or space, is a productive lens at every moment of
collaboration between HIV/AIDS archives and the AIDS activist communities they document
and serve. Archives, like nostalgia, are frequently conceived beyond the field as dusty, outmoded,
and focused solely on outdated if fondly recalled elements of the past. This dissertation project
demonstrates that archives and critical nostalgia are an essential means to reflect on the past, and
are required to carry on in the present and future through the construction of communal identity
and direct action. Ultimately, a responsible and ethical activist archiving practice must harness
critical nostalgia to actively engage with and serve its constituencies with an eye to the present
and future.

**Study Limitations**

There are limitations to what knowledge can be gained from this study due to its methodological
approach. The data collected using archival ethnography cannot be used to articulate causal or
generalizable relationships. Ethnographic data is always contingent and grounded in the
particular context of the research setting, including the time, place, and people involved in the
study. The limits of archival ethnography are significant when it comes to reliability. There are
also inevitable risks that the researcher’s presence changes the natural phenomenon under study.
Although the conclusions of this study cannot be used to claim causality, the descriptive and
interpretive assertions can be used to inform future research and practice. The goal of the study
was to construct a rich description of the phenomena under study and to build theory.
Rigor was ensured in this interpretivist study by working iteratively throughout the research process. A qualitative approach to validity has also been described as “resonance,” meaning “the capacity to speak to the degree to which the work makes sense to others who inhabit or study the world examined” (Punzalan 2013, 85-86). This study achieved such resonance through a number of factors detailed below. I draw on the four criteria developed by Egon Guba (1981) for assuring trustworthiness when using qualitative research methods. Guba maps each of these four criteria to positivist conceptions of validity. The first, credibility maps onto internal validity. To achieve credibility I had a prolonged engagement at each of the research sites. I was persistent in observations, triangulated source materials, and collected secondary and other reference materials (Ibid, 80). The second criterion, transferability, maps onto external validity and generalizability (Ibid). To achieve transferability I developed thick descriptions and did purposive sampling of participants. Dependability, Guba’s third criterion, maps onto reliability (Ibid). To achieve dependability in this study I used overlapping methods and created an audit trail of my work. The fourth and final criterion, confirmability, maps onto objectivity (Ibid). In order to achieve confirmability I triangulated and practiced reflexivity throughout the research process.

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Chapter Two: Home/Not Home: ACT UP, Ethics, and Ongoing Relations

“AIDS is really a test of us, as a people. When future generations ask what we did in this crisis, we're going to have to tell them that we were out here today. And we have to leave the legacy to those generations of people who will come after us. Someday, the AIDS crisis will be over. Remember that. And when that day comes—when that day has come and gone, there'll be people alive on this earth—gay people and straight people, men and women, black and white, who will hear the story that once there was a terrible disease in this country and all over the world, and that a brave group of people stood up and fought and, in some cases, gave their lives, so that other people might live and be free.”—Vito Russo, “Why We Fight” (Russo 1988).

Introduction

Nostalgia emerged to name a deep longing for a distant home in the 17th century. While the object of nostalgia’s longing has widened, a bittersweet longing for a lost home or homeland remains significant to understanding nostalgia as a concept and practice. Through the lens of home this chapter examines the life history of a single archival collection, the ACT UP/New York Records. I follow the context and meaning connected to the records through their creation, processing, exhibition, and use from 1987 to 2016. Home as a lens offers archivists an ethical orientation to their work that is grounded in a feminist ethics of care. A feminist ethics of care approach ensures that archivists’ ethics are grounded in ongoing affective relationships with record’s creators, record’s subjects, and larger communities (Caswell and Cifor 2016). The ethical approach developed in this chapter requires archivists to reconceptualize the archives as a community’s home for their materials and memories. In its first two centuries nostalgia was treated with prescribed acts of medical care. Similarly, professionalized archival work includes its own prescribed acts of care for records. In order to create and sustain the archives as a home not only for AIDS activists’ records, but also for that community, archivists are beholden to a
certain ethics of care in their work. Home is a lens of equal significance to the activists who created and are the subjects of these records, as what they are seeking through donation to and ongoing relations with archives is a space of belonging. Like any other sort of home, archives can provide a space in which to live and to belong, a refuge. However, like other homes archives are not free of conflict, exclusion, or complexity. In its modern usage nostalgia describes a general sense of loss, encompassing time as well as space. The status of New York Public Library (NYPL) as a home for the ACT UP/New York (ACT UP/NY)’s records is such a site of contestation and negotiation. Activists in caring for their materials do not want to lose control over their history and narratives, which are central to their collective memories and communal identity. It is by being attentive to an ethics of care formed through critical nostalgia that archivists can build and maintain productive and responsible relationships with the communities implicated in their records.

Care is a feminized concept and home is a highly gendered space. Home typically refers to “one’s place of origin…a familiar setting and a congenial environment as the abiding place of affections as well as an establishment that provides residence, care, refuge and rest for people” (Bozkurt 2009, 19). It is the “most frequently used expression of self-location, self-placement or self-position” (Ibid, 13). Home is widely employed as a signifier of belonging. The resonances of this concept with emotional, social, spatial, and political facets of belonging are significant in this chapter. Home in this view is more than an individual perception. The realm of the home, or the domestic sphere, from the 19th century onward has been represented socio-culturally in the United States as a space where activities not predominantly associated with men and the public sphere take place. The domestic space has been defined by its oppositional position and has been powerfully linked with women’s identities and experiences. Home has therefore been understood
as a retreat from the public and was connected with femininity, care, emotionality, and decoration (Fitzgerald 2006). Geographers Alison Blunt and Ann Varley (2004) argue that “home” is not a fixed, bounded, and confined location, but rather that home is a concept that is intimately connected with everyday practices, material cultures, and social relations. In this chapter an engagement with home thus calls for a consideration of gender in archiving, the use of a feminist ethics of care to reconceptualize archival ethics, and a consideration of the archives as a set of practices, cultures, and relations.

This chapter draws on my archival research at the NYPL and on semi-structured interviews conducted with current and former members of ACT UP/New York (ACT UP/NY) and with NYPL employees in 2015 and 2016. The chapter begins by tracing three sets of literature. The first body of literature on home establishes nostalgia’s historical and contemporary relations to the concept of home. Second, literature from archival studies on “archiving activism” is examined. This section includes a review of the small literature on the particularities of archiving HIV/AIDS. The third section of the literature review turns to scholarship on archives in and as homes. A feminist ethics of care as developed in archival studies scholarship is also addressed here. The focus on ethics in this chapter emerges both from archival literature and from scholarship on nostalgia. Together these diverse literatures provide the theoretical and contextual foundation for examination of the ACT UP/NY Records that follows. The case examines the complicated and conflicted longing for the stability, preservation, and legitimacy offered by an enduring archival home. It begins with self-documentation of their work as practice of care by ACT UP activists. The contested move of ACT UP/NY’s records from their workspace to the New York Public Library, its current home, is then examined. The move of that collection into a major public institution sets up the examination of the complex
relations of NYPL and the AIDS activist community. Through two key events in 2013 and 2014 I examine the ongoing relationships of the NYPL’s librarians and archivists with the AIDS activist community as well as the activists’ relations with their materials and memories.

**Literature Review**

*Nostalgia: A Longing for Home*

The object of nostalgia’s longing was originally confined to a departed home or homeland. Nostalgia as coined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in his 1688 medical thesis is a composite of two Greek roots: “nostos” meaning to return home and “algia” meaning pain (Anspach 1934). Home is therefore embedded deeply in nostalgia’s origins as well as its contemporary meaning. Nostos, a homecoming or homeward journey is an important theme in Greek literature including epic, tragedy, and Hellenistic poetry. Classics scholar Marigo Alexopoulou (2009) argues that the theme of nostos is significant in ancient Greek literature as it reflects the prominence of such journeys in ancient Greek life. Nostos is traced by classicists in particular relation to the return of Odysseus and the other Greek heroes of the Trojan War, as narrated in Homer’s *Odyssey*. Alexopoulou also points to the crucial importance in classics literature on the marked inability of a nostos, the person who has departed and seeks to return home, to ever actually return successfully to that same home that they had departed from (Ibid). The relation of longing and the impossibility of return manifest again here as a central theme of nostalgia.

The formal identification of nostalgia as a medical condition in the 17th century also has origins in preexisting understandings of the phenomenon of homesickness. In particular it is linked to the German concept of “Heimweh,” from “heim” meaning home and “weh” meaning “woe” (Starobinski 1966; Spitzer 1999, 89). Hofer developed nostalgia in order to name the
condition that he saw afflicting Swiss mercenary soldiers. These were soldiers who were involved in foreign-armed conflicts and were affected deeply by their longing for their far-away homes and homeland. The soldiers’ state of distress was leading to desertion and was linked with a number of physical illnesses. In the medical discourse that emerged from the 17th through the 19th centuries, the sufferer of nostalgia was characterized as pathological in the intensity of their longing. By the mid-19th century there was consensus in the medical field as to nostalgia’s basic attributes. It did not just affect male soldiers stationed far from home; it could strike across bounds including age, gender, nationality, and profession. That which could provoke its onset included background, such as a mountainous homeland or a “lenient education.” It could also be provoked by acts or feelings in the present such as masturbation; the eating of “unusual food”; and “happy love” (Roth 1991, 11-12). The associations of memory could also trigger it. These associations variously included the sounds, tastes, smells and sights that might remind individuals of the homes and homelands they had departed (Spitzer 1999, 90). Nostalgia from the 17th until the mid-19th century was understood as a treatable and even as a curable condition with proper medical intervention. By the end of the 19th century, nostalgia, despite physicians’ best efforts, began to evade such cures as its object of longing became larger than personal home and history. Nostalgia began to name a larger and collective sense of loss that defied simple geographic and spatial constraints. It was in the 19th century that an understanding of nostalgia emerged as a cultural and literary mode, and as such it became the purview of poets and philosophers. It was through this work that the object of nostalgia widened from a longing for other places, for a home or homeland, to a broader longing for departed times as well. Despite the widening and abstracting of object of nostalgia’s longing, the absence or removal from home and homeland remains one of the most studied manifestations of nostalgia.
Nostalgia has an ethics. Ethics are understood here to encompass “the rules of human conduct and relationship to others” (Boym 2001, 337). Nostalgia and ethics are both intertwined in relations. Boym identifies two forms of nostalgia: “restorative” and “reflective.” Restorative nostalgia takes itself disturbingly seriously in its proposal “to build the lost home” again (Ibid, 17). The later form, reflective nostalgia, emphasizes longing in conjunction with critical thinking. It “combines estrangement and human solidarity, affect and reflection” (Ibid, 337). Reflective nostalgia thus encourages a critical scrutiny of memories and longings as a part of the project of representing and relating to the past in its complexity and totality. Boym writes, “the ethics of reflective nostalgia recognizes the cultural memory of another person as well as his or her human singularity and vulnerability” (Ibid). In Native Nostalgia Jacob Dlamini (2010) forms his argument as practice of such “reflective nostalgia.” Part memoir, part scholarly text, the book is a response to South Africa’s past and present. Dlamini is a black South African who grew up under apartheid. He disrupts hegemonic versions of the past and contemporary state-sponsored projects shaping communal memory that assert the presence of only negative memories for black South Africans in the country’s repressive past. In Dlamini’s text nostalgia operates in two ways, as a longing, embedded in critical reflection in the present, for a lost home, as well as a longing for a “specific” and a “problematic” “time and place in South African history’ (2010, 152). He focuses on the loss of community, a place of belonging and mutual care, which he experienced in that time and place. The ethical implications of nostalgia “relate to remembering as act, the purposeful adoption by individuals and communities of strategies to preserve specific memories of events and people and the conscious decision not to rehearse particular past occurrences, not to commemorate certain people” (Coullie 2013, 199). Ethics is tied closely to caring as Avishai Margalit argues, “At its best caring enhances a sense of belonging. It gives the other a feeling of
being secure in having our attention and concern” (2002, 34-35). Shared memories are crucial to holding such caring relations with others (Ibid, 8). There is such an ethical obligation to remember critically as part of caring for both known and unknown others. These acts of remembering through nostalgia are vitally important to what Dlamini terms the project of the “imagination of alternative futures” (2010, 207).

_Dwelling in the Archives: Archives, Homes, and Relations of Care_

In the archival literature home is a significant concept. Archives are often described and conceptualized as the final and enduring “home” for their collections. In _Archive Fever_ Jacques Derrida (1996) traces the meaning of “archive” back to its root in the term “archaeion” in Greek. An archaeion, he writes, was

…initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the _archons_, those who commanded…On account of their publicly recognized authority, it is at their home, in that _place_ which is their house (private house, family house, or employee’s house), that official documents are filed…It is thus, in this _domiciliation_, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret (Ibid, 2-3).

Derrida’s etymological tracing of “archive” highlights its spatiality. The archive is rooted in both the transition and the overlap between private and public spaces, between the domestic and public spheres. The relationship of archives to space, both public and private, has been a frequent subject of scholarly concern in humanities work on the archive. In this vein sexuality and trauma studies scholar Ann Cvetkovich writes, “the history of any archive is a history of space, which becomes the material measure and foundation of the archive’s power and visibility as a form of public culture” (2003, 245). Public and private are frequently presented as dichotomous, however as queer theorist Michael Warner writes these two spheres in actuality are frequently
“intermingle[d]” (2002, 27). Warner cites a number of examples to support his assertion noting how “a private conversation can take place in a public forum, a kitchen can become a public gathering place; a private bedroom can be public and commercial space, as in a hotel; a radio can bring public discussion into a bathroom and so on” (Ibid).

Feminist scholars including Anjali Arondekar (2009), Antoinette Burton (2003), and Cvetkovich (2003) have asserted that the archive is a gendered space for dwelling. All three scholars utilize the archives as both a metaphorical device and as an actual physical space. In both Arondekar’s and Burton’s work on women in colonial India the archive is conceptualized as a gendered home and as a site of cultural production. In the context of the contemporary United States, Cvetkovich explores the emotionality of the archives as a home and as the site of production of lesbian public cultures. She links her theoretical work on the archive to archival institutions including the Lesbian Herstory Archives (LHA). Scholars of gender and sexuality continue to make significant linkages between the archive and the home. For example, Martin Manalansan (2014) extends ideas of the archive to the setting of undocumented queer immigrants’ households in New York City. He uses ethnographic fieldwork “to understand how seemingly chaotic and disorderly household material, symbolic, and emotional conditions are arenas for the queer contestations of citizenship, hygiene, and the social order” (Ibid, 94). For these feminist scholars the archive is a form of home that disrupts any possibility for neat distinctions between public and private spheres.

Literature in archival studies often utilizes home as rhetorical device to describe archives including as “houses of memory” as well as archival processes (Bastian 2003, 88; Cook 2013, 95). Home is linked to the concept of belonging in this literature as well (Wong 2015). The process of arranging records during archival processing is called “rehousing.” In this literature
archives are also linked with homes in a more literal sense. Community archives have often been and continue to be located within private homes. For example, the Working Class Movement Archives, located in a private residence in Salford, England, is included within Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Sheppard’s (2009) survey of UK community archives. Germany’s Bewegungsarchive, or “social movement archive,” are another example, they are a network of publically accessible and community-based archives and libraries found in squats that emerged as part of a late twentieth century squatting movement (Ford 2014; Leach 2009). In his work with genocide survivors, anthropologist Hariz Halilovich (2014) highlights the importance of the few surviving family photographs and other archival records held within the diasporic homes of his Bosnian refugee participants. Such records enable Halilovich to study how these persons perceive, experience, and deal with the many missing personal records and material evidence of their histories. He also examines how in these home archives the community (re)creates their own records and memories in order to reassert their “erased” identities (Ibid). Archival scholar Rebecka Sheffield (2014) has explored the potential of the home space as a new form of community archive. In her project, “The Bedside Table Archives,” Sheffield uses the home as the site for the production of a collection of records on women’s queer homemaking practices. This is an intervention that calls attention to the absence of lesbian voices in public archives and the “exceptionalism of established lesbian and gay archives” (Ibid, 114).

In particular, members of the LGBTQ community have often founded and built LGBTQ archives within the space of their private homes. As feminist ethnographer Danielle Cooper posits, such archives have and continue to be located in private homes because of the systemic barriers that LGBTQ persons and communities as well as the information by and about them have historically faced within mainstream institutional settings (2016, 261). For example, the
LHA was originally located in the apartment of its founders Joan Nestle and Deborah Edel on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. While noting the LHA’s subsequent move to a more public location, Cvetkovich argues that the LHA continues to an example of “semipublic” space (2003, 245). Cvetkovich draws on Michael Moon for her theorization of “semipublic” space writing to assert that LGBTQ archives are examples of such spaces, “insofar as their existence has been dependent on the possibility of making private spaces—such as rooms in people’s homes—public” (Ibid). As many scholars have noted, the LHA continues to actively foster a home-like environment in its current location in a historic brownstone in Park Slope, Brooklyn (Caswell and Cifor 2016; Cooper 2016; Corbman 2014; Cvetkovich 2003; Narayan 2013). The LHA also includes an upstairs apartment housing a caretaker, and the interior design and policies of the archives focus on maintaining a warm and inviting atmosphere for visitors (Narayan 2013).

Trans-identified scholar K.J. Rawson’s personal narrative of using a number of LGBT archives, including the grassroots and home-based Sexual Minorities Archives, demonstrates that a spatial analysis of archives that attends to issues of “environmental accessibility” is significant for understanding LGBT archives and to making them accessible to diverse stakeholders (2009, 126).

The setting of the private home not only poses particular opportunities, but also challenges for LGBT archives. Cooper notes that while locating collections within private homes avoids certain forms of insecurity and offers particular forms of user experience, that home settings are often also uniquely “vulnerable…because the possibility of eviction, reliance on donations and the possibility of fires and floods” (2016, 263).

Home in an archival context also evokes the relation of care in the archives and archivists’ responsibility for both records and to archival stakeholders. Care is a feminized relation and is one closely associated with home spaces. I assert that archives and archivists have complicated
and meaningful relations and responsibilities to stakeholders. Michelle Caswell and I (Caswell and Cifor 2016) have called for the adoption of a feminist ethics of care throughout a series of archival relationships. We argue that an ethics of care is an inclusive and apt model for envisioning and enacting social justice in archival contexts. An ethics of care emphasizes relationality and points to the responsibilities raised by such connections (Ibid, 28). We proposed four interrelated shifts based on radical empathy in archival relationships, including those between archives and records creators, between archivists and records subjects, between archivists and records users, and between archivists and larger communities implicated within their records (Ibid, 25). Applied to archives a feminist ethics of care approach conceptualizes archivists “as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility” (Ibid, 24). Here I develop a case exemplifying such affective relations and ethics at play between NYPL staff and records creators, records subjects, and larger communities. I also extend that understanding of an affective responsibility to archival relationships to those between records creators, in this case ACT UP activists, and the subjects of their records, the other records creators in their milieu, and the broader communities implicated in the records.

Archiving Activism, Archiving AIDS

Activism describes those practices which are used to challenge injustice, discrimination and oppression in order to create and sustain a more just environment for all, both within archives and in wider society (Wakimoto et al. 2013, 295). Following Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander (2015) in their introduction to a special issue of Archival Science on “Archiving Activism and Activist Archiving,” I contend that the literature on activism in archival studies falls broadly into
the two categories named in their title. This section briefly examines the literature on archiving activism as it provides significant conceptual groundwork for this chapter, including insights into the labors of my participants and into archival practices as forms of activism, particularly for outreach and programming. As Flinn and Alexander define it, “archiving activism” describes “an archivist or archival institution, whether formal or independent,” who “act[s] to collect and document political, social movement and other activist groups and campaigns” (Ibid, 331).

Activist collections are found in the archives of communities, universities, and governments. The literature on “archiving activism” focuses both on the creative and innovative archival processes for working with these materials and the particularities of documenting political, human rights, and social movement activism engaged in by individuals, groups, and organizations.

The archival initiatives launched in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s that emerged from, as a response to, and engaged with the histories of women, the working-class, gay liberation, and civil rights (Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009) are foundational to the practices of and the literature on “archiving activism.” Activists in these movements frequently used and generated archival materials as sources for “documenting” and commemorating “past struggles and violations of rights, as resources to support ongoing claims for justice and healing, and as tools for understanding the past in order to influence the present and the future” (Flinn and Alexander 2015, 330). These archival projects were an important means of self-definition and representation, identity building, and empowerment for historically marginalized groups (Flinn and Stevens 2009). In their description of the rukus! archive, a black LGBT community-based archive in the UK, Flinn, Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd write about “the personal and individual dimension” of that archives’ collections as an attribute they share with many other community archives documenting activist work (2009, 79). It is difficult in many cases to
distinguish between the individual and the organization’s records. The authors found that while there are significant collections of organizational papers in these archives, much of their content is due to the personal collecting of one or two central individuals involved in the movement (Ibid).

Increasingly the collections of many archives include material culture originating in social movements. This means that the activities of collecting, organizing and preserving such materials are relevant across archival forms. The relations between activist movements and the institutions archiving their materials are complex. As Alycia Sellie et al. suggest these collections of activist material “do not always develop from an affinity between the institution and an activist group” and the process of archiving these materials “does not automatically signify that this collecting establishes a relationship between the archive and the community that it draws materials from” (2015, 456). There is both the possibility of mutually beneficial relationships for activists and archives, and of contentious interactions between the archives and communities whose records they hold (Ibid). When problematic these relationships can troublingly invoke or maintain the legacies of oppression, colonization, and displacement.6

Along with more traditional forms of activism—demonstrations, petitions, and educational initiatives—archiving is increasingly becoming a part of many activists’ practices. Susan Pell notes that such practices are particularly visible in “less institutionalized and horizontally organized movements” such as Occupy Wall Street (2015, 34) and Black Lives Matter. Activists are documenting and archiving all kinds of records of protest events, social media dialogues, creating oral histories, and assembling resources. Based on her ethnographic research at the 56a Infoshope Archive and Southwark Notes Archive Group, Pell argues “that

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6 For examples of such problematic relationships between archives and constituencies see Bastian 2001; Maynard 2009; Wareham 2001.
autonomous, activist archives reaffirm the archive as a key site of political power, yet at the same time they subvert the archive’s role as a tool of domination. By collectivizing knowledge production and operating as spaces of empowerment, these archives radicalize the politics of the archive and point to possibilities for democratic politics more broadly” (Ibid, 35-36). The archives is a key player in the pursuit of social justice while it figures significantly into knowledge production practices. “Activist archives” share many characteristics with community-based archives, both provide local, autonomous spaces for diverse and divergent historical narratives and cultural identities to be built and sustained (Sellie et al. 2015, 454). As Sellie et al. define them in their work on the Interference Archives, activist “archives not only honor specific communities but also forge new relationships between parallel histories, reshape and reinterpret dominant narratives, and challenge conceptions of the archive itself” (Ibid). They describe activist archives like theirs as “function[ing] at the intersection of multiple and diverse communities, connecting disparate nodes within a broader network of social actions and creating a new community in and through the process of building and maintaining the archive” (Ibid, 465). These archives reflect and enact their community’s politics.

There are a few articles available on archiving and its concerns in relation to the papers of particular activists and movements. Much of this work deals with the particularities of archiving feminist activists and movements. These include Maryanne Dever (2014) and Margaret Henderson’s (2013) writings on the project of archiving Australian feminist activist Merle Thornton’s papers. Dever argues that the case of Thornton’s papers challenges formal distinctions between personal papers and organizational records. It is only within her papers that much of the material on the events and organizations in which she was involved exist (2014, 29). In a recent article Kate Eichhorn (2014) examines three contemporary feminist zine collections
and their surprising rejection of digitization as either a short- or long-term goal. The reasons articulated by the archives include the zines’ materiality, the relations of the zines’ context in respect to the archives’ larger collections of feminist and women’s history, and the importance of the archives as authorizing and legitimating forces for activist movements (Ibid, 23). This work counters much of the discourse in archival literature on digitization as a desired goal for contemporary archival practice. Employing the feminist concept of “safe space” as a lens, archivist Lisa Darms and ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Keenan (2013) examine the Riot Grrrl Collection, held at New York University’s (NYU) Fales Library & Special Collections. They argue that “safe space” was vitally important in the movement and extend it into the archives to explore how the concept is enacted through issues of collection building, for donors and researchers, and in the tensions between the desire for access to activist history and the requirements of archival preservation (Ibid). This work demonstrates the potential for activist collections in more traditional institutional repositories to be informed by and in continuing relation with the communities documented.

This chapter contributes vitally to the literature on archiving activism, extending it to the use of records by activists and artists to further their political and social efforts for change and justice. In a recent article Alexandrina Buchanan and Michelle Bastian describe a collaborative research project around local food activism, using their findings to illustrate how “traditional” archival materials that are not explicitly activist in their origins or selected for such purposes can powerfully affect participants. They, in turn, demonstrate how these archives aid participants’ developments of more “imaginative and creative” activist practice (2015, 441). While the content of archival materials matters for activists, their form and use is as significant. Here I build on Buchanan and Bastian’s examination of use and reuse by activists, and further their initial efforts
to engage with affect as a motivation and result of activist work engaging archives. For individuals and groups who seek to politicize their social identities and publicize collective issues, it is clear that archives can be a vital tool in their work. Archives are unique spaces towards the building and mobilizing of collective knowledge and memories of political struggles that can be put into action in contemporary campaigns (Pell 2015, 38).

In writing on LGBT archives and archiving, archival scholars and practitioners have pointed to the significance of collecting around HIV/AIDS. In her ethnography of the BC Gay and Lesbian Archives, Cooper (2016) points to the significant role this archives has had in preserving information associated with the AIDS crisis in Vancouver. One of her interviewee’s, a researcher at the archives, identifies our present moment as a “tipping point,” stating that while “the unique part of the epidemic is that everyone who was there in the beginning is now retiring, they’re dying, they’re moving so we were at a tipping point of losing all that stuff…” (Ibid, 280). In an article on the value of gay male pornography and erotica for archives Marcel Barriault (2009) highlights the unique documentation of the AIDS crisis that pornography provides, drawing on the collections of the Canadian Gay and Lesbian Archives. He argues that AIDS had a significant impact on gay porn production with studios quickly realizing the high-risk levels of gay men, subsequently making a concerted effort to educate viewers through the graphic depictions of safer sex (Ibid, 238). AIDS also shaped the aesthetics of the performers, a novel concern “with what lay hidden beneath the surface translated into the need to depict clean, healthy bodies” (Ibid, 239). The former popularity of hirsute bodies gave way to smooth ones that allowed the viewer visual access in order to see for themselves that there were no visible signs of AIDS on the body. Pornography thus documents an otherwise undocumented aspect of the gay male experience and provides entrée to important information on how the gay
community responded to the advent of AIDS (Ibid). Darms (2009) looks at objects in David Wojnarowicz’s papers that were acquired by NYU in 1997 after the artist’s AIDS related death. Among these objects are those contained in wooden box with a sliding lid that the artist repurposed from a citrus container with a simple strip of masking tape on which “Magic Box” is written in marker. The box contains numerous small items including toys, photographs, crystals and stones, jewelry, postcards, and feathers. Darms suggests that this Magic Box and its slow disintegration in the archives are a reflection of Wojnarowicz’s work, and notes that while it is often “about loss and death, and his activism was born of rage in the face of disappearances on the scale of an epidemic” (Ibid, 154). Activists Ajamu X and Topher Campbell (X et al. 2009) discuss their work with rukus! in relation to HIV/AIDS and black gay experiences. They see their archival work as simultaneous acts of mourning and celebration. Campbell says,

part of my impetus [for founding rukus!] was a political relation to AIDS and HIV because a lot of people had died in the nineties. A lot of histories were being lost or forgotten. But I think within the Black experience, to which slavery was so integral for so long, there is a level on which pain and memory are very interlinked. This pain, the pain of lived experience is not recognized, and so there’s a need to hold it, and store it, and keep it as precious. It’s not recognized because there’s no language, which allows it to be so. If I think about the way in which we Black people are described and prescribed in the Western canon, it doesn’t allow for the kind of space that rukus! has, a space which is owned by us (Ibid, 284).

He continues,

Within this space, the personal is really important. These are very personal endeavours. What that might mean, somebody else has to interpret, because we’re too deep in it. But people have died. People have died, or been killed, or been forgotten or ignored. Some very fascinating, interesting people in a culture which, for lots of different reasons – not just racism, but class and poverty – has denied their existence. It can be very painful to go on about that. So there is going to be some kind of mourning, or trauma, or pain involved in the public examination of all this (Ibid).

Campbell sees the archive as a significant means to work towards “publicly acknowledging the pain and helping people come to terms with it” (Ibid). His reflections also point to the
significance of the archival use of these materials—a distance required to even understand what is happening in the archives. Campbell offers a rare intersectional approach to archiving HIV/AIDS and a critical reflection on affect in relation to those processes. The extant literature on archiving HIV/AIDS is compelling and speaks directly to topics shared by this study including affect, the use and reuse of archival materials, and the intersections of HIV/AIDS with race, class, gender, and other categories of difference.

The ACT UP/NY Records: Formation, Home, and Ongoing Relations

In this case I turn to both literal and figurative concepts of the archives as home. I begin with an examination of ACT UP/NY activists’ unusually extensive and self-conscious documentation of their work as it was taking place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It is these documentation practices that formed what would become the ACT UP/NY Records and a series of related archival collections. These materials were held at the group’s “workspace” as well as across a wider network of private homes of records creators and subjects. The documentation activities studied took place from the group’s founding in 1987 until 1996 when the collection lost its first home. It was in that period of turmoil that the ACT UP records made the contentious move to the New York Public Library, their current archival home. The ACT UP/NY Records are a significant component of the Library’s larger collecting efforts around AIDS and its activism, particularly in New York City. This case charts the archival life of those materials and the ethics of the relations between activists, archivists, archives, and larger communities through the Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism exhibition and programming series in held at the Library in 2013-2014.
ACT UP was formed by a group of concerned individuals who gathered at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in New York City in March 1987. ACT UP/NY quickly became one of the most powerful groups in AIDS activism and, at its height, included thousands of members (Greenberg 1992). ACT UP did and still does describe itself as a “diverse, non-partisan group of individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis” (ACT UP NY, n.d.). The group fights for medical research and treatment, legislation, policies, and attention from the media, scientists, officials and policy makers, pharmaceutical companies, and general public with the goal of bringing an end to the virus, while also mitigating loss of health and lives. ACT UP activists:

- marched, chanted, advocated, researched, died-in, kissed-in, lampooned, negotiated, blocked traffic, videoed, testified, occupied, zapped, held political funerals, needle-exchanged, went to jail, distributed condoms in high schools, housed homeless PWAs, infiltrated Republican parties, Cosmopolitan, CBS and PBS, and took stands at international AIDS conferences, Shea Stadium, the NYSE, White House and Independence Hall, the FDA, NIH, and CDC, the RNC and DNC, Burroughs-Wellcome, St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Grand Central Station, Cook County and Los Angeles County Hospitals, and the Golden Gate Bridge (Morris 2012, 50).

ACT UP’s numerous demonstrations and actions were often engaged in what Crimp (1988) terms “cultural activism,” transforming both the representation and the discourses surrounding AIDS. Their demonstrations were often image-driven and theatrical, and were designed in the context of the televisual culture of late twentieth century to attract both media and popular attention. This attention was crucial to their cause (Burk 2013; Foster 2003). These new tactics of cultural activism included public poster campaigns, documentaries and public access television shows produced by people living with HIV/AIDS, and theatrical demonstrations such as die-ins and kiss-ins.⁷ ACT UP formed into city-based chapters each of which was non-

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⁷ Many of the these images were produced by groups that were allied with but not identical to ACT UP, like Gran Fury, Fierce Pussy, and the Silence = Death Project.
hierarchical in organization. Much of ACT UP’s work was done in affinity groups, committees, working groups, and caucuses devoted to particular identities or topics. Actions and proposals were generally brought to groups, committees and caucuses before coming to the full floor for a vote at the “General Meeting.” In New York City general meetings were held every Monday night at the Center where they are still held today. At each meeting ACT UP/NY members shared announcements, information on actions in development, follow-ups on previous actions, and operational requests. The group was at its peak of both membership and activity during the late 1980s and early 1990s. By 1996, ACT UP/NY faced serious internal divisions over tactics, its relationship to both the AIDS and lesbian, gay, and queer movements, and financial issues. It also faced a declining membership due to death and activists’ burnout (NYPL 2008). 1996 also marks the start of a new era in the AIDS crisis where a combination of new treatments and greater access to them made it possible for some to live long-term with the virus. This shift contributed to the perception that there was a diminishing sense of crisis and urgency. While it did not act alone, ACT UP undoubtedly played a significant role in transformation, through bodies, words, and graphics, of the meanings, visibilities, and experiences of AIDS (Morris 2012, 50). The group had significant impact on the development of and access to HIV/AIDS treatment and prevention, its politics and politicization, and its lived realities across realms both personal and political (Ibid). In New York ACT UP still exists as a small, but active organization and continues to fight against AIDS through direct action.

The “Impulse to Archive”

Many within ACT UP were struck with what former member and performance studies scholar Debra Levine (2016) calls “the impulse to archive.” As my interviews show many activists saw
themselves, as both records creators and records subjects, as responsible for documenting their activities, strategies, and relationships with other activists. Many of them framed this work as an affective responsibility to others with whom they were close and to the larger communities impacted by HIV/AIDS. These ethical relations of care meant that they sought, through formal and informal efforts, to document their work and to ensure the long-term preservation and care of those materials. To find the impulse to archive to such a great extent among activists during the height of their activities, I contend is highly unusual. Many other activist movements have not considered documentation and archiving as part of their central mission, explicitly or implicitly.\(^8\)

The experiences of my interviewees attest to a high level of self-awareness about the actions of documentation, and to the significance of formal and informal documentation efforts as part of their role as activists. Former member Maxine Wolfe (2016), an activist in a number of leftist causes since the 1960s, says, “ACT UP was the first time that, in any activism that I was a part of, the people in the group itself were very aware [that] they should document their own history.” Wolfe, was no exception, she “picked up every piece of paper there was on the back table [at the General Meeting] every week” (Ibid). She also “kept anything that I organized, I kept papers, including arrest records and lists of people who showed, who attended, people who went to actions...” (Ibid). Similarly, artist and former member Avram Finkelstein (2016) described how he “realized it might make sense to grab copies of everything” at ACT UP meetings and at the actions in which he participated. The literature on the back table at each Monday night meeting, that both Wolfe and Finkelstein collected from, offered up in former member Bill Dobbs’ words an “incredible cornucopia of news” (2006, 39). The table was always piled high with stacks of

\(^8\) There is evidence that a shift may be underway to include archiving as a part of activist activities. Susan Pell notes that such practices are particularly visible in “less institutionalized and horizontally organized movements” such as Occupy Wall Street and Black Lives Matter (Pell 2015, 34).
literature, including guides to the New York AIDS community that ranged from updates on clinical trial to new age lectures. There were also personal testimonies, often about friends who had died (Strub 2014, 202-203). In addition to collecting for posterity, many activists have described picking up whatever looked appealing from the literature table and then sending the most interesting tidbits to friends around the country (Ibid, 203). Finkelstein (2016) described being highly aware that this kind of print material circulating in ACT UP was “fugitive” and could and would easily disappear. For him creating “an archive under my bed” was motivated by “a personal impulse” directed at “saving this material” (Ibid).

ACT UP/NY’s notable self-documentation activities can be attributed to a number of factors including member’s professional backgrounds in media, arts, and academia, the affective relations among members, innovations in video technology, an overwhelming sense of mortality, and gendered experiences. Wolfe (2016) observed that those leading the documentation efforts “were mostly the younger people” and that “a lot of them were people who were in media.” Similarly, Levine (2016) noted the predisposition towards documentation of the many artists involved in the group. She said “many artists are very, very attuned to making sure that their work is preserved in some way that can get seen later on, so I think that quality in ACT UP was inherent in a lot of people” (Ibid). Another long-time activist, Alexis Danzig (2016), also noted the important influence of “image makers” to documentation efforts, “…these were mostly people who had come out of art school with a rich awareness of how you need to control images to be able to control what version of reality wins.” The other volunteer activities of many ACT UP members also crucially shaped their keen awareness of the need to document for posterity the activist work that they were engaged in. Wolfe, Danzig, and some of the other lesbian members of the Women’s Caucus were simultaneously involved with ACT UP and the Lesbian Herstory
Archives (LHA). Both Wolfe and Danzig credited the LHA with influencing their documentation strategies and awareness of the significance of self-documentation by activists. ACT UP and the LHA as Danzig (2016) put it were both “very much about ownership and about community.”

Self-documentation in ACT UP reflected the affective connections between ACT UP activists. Scholars including Cifor (2016), Cvetkovich (2003), Deborah Gould (2009; 2012), Craig Gingrich-Philbrook (2012), and Levine (2010; 2012) have noted the power and potency of affective connections within the group and the ways in which affect figures into the significance attributed to ACT UP. It was affective ties that led many to the group and kept them coming back. As former member and filmmaker Jim Hubbard (2016) said, “AIDS was a public and political crisis, but it was also a personal crisis. So everyone who was working on AIDS in a political way had a personal reason for doing so.” That personal connection, often with those who were sick, dying, or who had died of AIDS related causes, drove some members to document and to collect materials on those that they cared deeply about. In describing the myriad collections that exist today on ACT UP in home spaces rather than within institutional settings, Levine (2016) said, “I know who has what because I know who loved whom.” She continued, “that is literally how collections happened. Some people collected everything, but some people collected or kept things of the people in their affinity groups, the people that they loved” (Ibid). Levine cites the example of Aldo Hernandez who collected and still has artist Ray Navarro’s records. Hernandez had dutifully cared for the materials in the years since Navarro’s 1990 death, however he had not looked at them. On the occasion of Levine’s visit in the mid-2000s he had had to break open the lock to get into filing cabinet in his home where he had closed away the materials for safekeeping.
ACT UP’s prolific self-documentation was shaped by technological innovation in the late-1980s. Shifts in video technology brought opened new and broader possibilities for who and what was being documented (Beeching 2001; Boyle 1992; Lette 1994; Videomaker 2011; Willett 2009). Hubbard (2016) had “been filming the gay community since 1978 and often I would be the only person with a camera there [at an action], there wouldn’t even be still cameras.” He noted a shift “starting in ’87, and even more so in ’88 and ’89, [with] the introduction of Video8 and HI8, suddenly there is this profusion of cameras, all of a sudden there is this small, easily portable, relatively high quality video camera that was affordable” (Ibid). The extensive use of video has its roots in 1970s “guerilla television,” which had already demonstrated the accessibility, cost effectiveness, and ease of distribution of the format for a wide range of strategic uses (Weiner 2012, 105). ACT UP was one of the first activist groups to make such extensive use of home video technologies for a range of documentary, educational, and legal purposes (Hilderbrand 2006, 303). Technological shifts meant that activists brought their video cameras, as Wolfe (2016) said, “everywhere. Any action we went to someone was documenting it, visually…” She laughed and continued, noting that she was doing the same thing only with paper materials (Ibid). The rise of inexpensive video technology allowed for the “responsibility” (Danzig 2016) for documentation to be widely distributed among members. Early in her time in ACT UP, through her work with the DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists) collective, Danzig shot video at demonstrations. She again pointed to the technological affordances that made such documentation possible, “It was really simple you bought a camera for a 1000 dollars and you put in a little tape and you filmed things. There wasn’t very much to it. It was a moment when the technology was accessible and ubiquitous. And you bought a monopod and held it up at a demonstration and you filmed stuff. And if you were lucky you know you caught some
interesting stuff” (Danzig 2016). That novel ubiquity and accessibility of video technology is as she says, “why there is so much footage from those days” (Ibid). The camera served a purpose in demonstrations as well; its presence could deter violence at the hands of the police and video provided a means for activists to review their mobilization strategies and performances (Weiner 2012, 105-106).

The particular temporal conditions of the early years of the AIDS epidemic (Gill-Peterson 2013) are also an important factor in ACT UP activists’ self-documentation. As Levine (2016) described it, “the kind of temporality that we lived at that moment was a very kind of intense temporality.” The conditions of HIV and AIDS, which remained without effective pharmaceutical treatment until 1996, meant, as Levine stated, that they did far more “over the course of one day” than “in a normal life, where you really didn’t have this sense of mortality that you lived with, among the people you lived with…” (Ibid). That distinctive temporal awareness in turn shaped perceptions of the importance of in the moment documentation. For Levine, documentation was about capturing the “kind of communication that allowed people to understand the parameters of the work you were doing” (Ibid). She focused primarily on documenting through video and other materials “the people whose lives we knew were fairly precarious” due to illness and death (Ibid). Levine was deeply involved in collaborations with incarcerated women, who were doing activism and making art, but did not receive much attention within ACT UP or the general public. Documenting these women’s lives also meant documenting the networks and connections needed to make their voices rise up. This meant that Levine tried to “figure out forms or platforms that attached” incarcerated activists’ work to those of more mainstream art and activism (Ibid). Those associations were essential in making visible and “refigur[ing] the kind of community that came into existence, that always came into
existence because of AIDS. Because AIDS was this crazy nexus, where like people who had extraordinary privilege were in a moment denied those privileges and actually depended on people who had never had the privileges, who really understood the way to organize themselves in order to demand or to claim the things that they needed” (Ibid). She also noted that “incarcerated activists contributions to the movement are not central to most of the recent historical narratives” of AIDS activism (Ibid). Danzig (2016) also highlighted the temporal aspects of the work she did early on in DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists), where they were “deliberately documenting what we were doing for safety and for posterity.” The video-centered documentation the collective made was about “creating something for posterity, but also being able to tell the story now” (Ibid). Some ACT UP activists recognized the currency of the work they were doing during the moment in which it was taking place. Danzig credits that awareness that “we were the news that we were making” as the thing that “saved the gay community during the AIDS crisis” (Ibid). Through documenting themselves the activists asserted that “our lives are in fact worth something, our lives are worth saving, our lives are worth documenting” (Ibid). Self-documentation was also about a rejection of “dominant narratives” that marginalized and misrepresented those living with HIV and AIDS. By documenting themselves on paper and video, Danzig concludes, “we did save our own lives” (Ibid).

Gender is an important factor in ACT UP’s documentation practices. While ACT UP is often read as a group largely made up of white, gay men, the gender dynamics that were described by many of my participants were more complex. In particular there were a significant number of women who were part of video collectives, but by and large Levine (2016) noted that they were not “really looking at ourselves as the center of documentation…” Women who were
engaged in these efforts often “had less reason to think our life and death survival at that historical moment was the primary subject of the work we were doing” although we recognized that doing it had political benefits for us as women (Ibid). Therefore, women were less likely to consider their own efforts as vital subjects for documentation. For others, like Wolfe, the gendered aspect of the activist work itself shaped their desire to document the place of themselves and other women, especially lesbian women, within it. Wolfe (2016) said, “one of the things that people don’t get about ACT UP, when they always call it a gay male organization was that most of the leadership was female.” Women did meaningful work across the organization, she continued, “We did the marshal trainings, we did the CD [civil disobedience] trainings, we did the logistics for organizations, we did a lot of organizing of actions, etcetera. We were the facilitators at meetings and we also had a Women’s Committee besides that and we made the Women’s Committee be national, so we knew women in all these ACT UP groups all over the world” (Ibid). Ensuring that the voices of and important place of women in the AIDS activist work are not forgotten thereby drives self-documentation efforts.

In addition to individual collecting efforts as a group ACT UP collected materials in its workspace. This documentation was haphazard and without a systematic or articulated process. Calling it the workspace was a product of “1980s activist slang” said former member Stephen Shapiro (2015). “We never would have called it the office, that was too bourgeois” (Ibid). In the early 1990s the workspace was located in Midtown West on 29th street in an industrial loft space on an upper floor of building shared mostly with cheap clothing manufacturers. The group erected their own drywall to make a series of small rooms. In his drawing of the workspace (Figure 1), Shapiro notes the locations of the filing cabinets used for storing posters next to the group’s Xerox machine as well as another the filing cabinet he describes as the “ACT UP
archives!” in the main room. ACT UP never had any paid staff members, but it did have a Workspace Manager position. Robert Rygor held this position in the early 1990s. The Coordinator of Collection Assessment Humanities and LGBT collections at the NYPL, and former ACT UP/NY member, Jason Baumann said he often thinks about Rygor when working with these materials today. Baumann (2015) said, “I think about how much of what we have is because of...what Robert Rygor filed.” Thinking about Rygor highlights the significance of individual members’ interests and efforts in shaping what is in the ACT UP/NY Records. As Baumann said these are “personal decisions by specific people. Even organizational and institutional archives are traces of people's decisions of what they decided was worth keeping” (Ibid). Because of the personal and idiosyncratic nature of the collection development, Shapiro (2015) describes what was actually in the collection at the workspace as “really random.” The limitations of the collection were also shaped by these personal decisions. Wolfe (2016) noted that workspace collection “didn’t have any of the women’s stuff, practically, and nothing about the actions themselves. What was there basically were the media materials, the media coverage, and the Treatment and Data books...” The workspace itself proves an important factor in the collection’s contents, and in the search for and choice of a subsequent home for the materials at the NYPL. ACT UP/NY had faced serious financial crises in 1994 and 1995. The result of which meant that the group needed to “leave the workspace extremely precipitately” (Shapiro 2015) within a two-week period (Shapiro 2004). This meant that “the archives were literally going to be left on the street, they were gonna be thrown out, that was it” (Shapiro 2015). It is this event that drove the donation of the group’s records and a number of associated collections to the NYPL’s Manuscripts and Archives Division.

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9 Exact dates of Rygor’s tenure in the Manager position are unknown. Once diagnosed in 1990 he devoted the last four years of his life to AIDS activism (Queens College 2014).
The Search for an Archival Home

The affective responsibility many activists felt towards the records, their activist comrades, and the larger community they were working on behalf of did not end at documentation. The controversial nature of the discussions about where ACT UP’s records should belong is evidence of a deep care and commitment to both their legacy and community. Where the ACT UP/NY records should find an archival home was the subject of heated debate, that took place in an “extremely compressed fashion because if we did not have a decision within literally a period of 10 days, the papers would have been completely lost...everything ACT UP had would be on the
street” (Shapiro 2004). On both sides of the debate ACT UP members framed their arguments as ethical questions at the balance between access and preservation.

Shapiro was the figure at the center of these debates. He had already been involved with the workspace collection while doing research in it for the group. It was Shapiro who made it his mission to seek out a permanent home for the collection. Shapiro approached Mimi Bowling, then Director of the Manuscripts and Archives Division, about the materials. “I just walked into Mimi’s office, Shapiro (2015) recounted, and “I said, look we want to give the archives to the NYPL.” This was not the first time the possibility of this donation had arisen; an employee of the Library had attempted a few years earlier to facilitate the donation of ACT UP’s noncurrent records to the NYPL, however a dissenting voice in the group prevented the donation from actually taking place. Shapiro was therefore met with some skepticism from Bowling. However, the “interest on the part of the Library was still there, and so, it was just a matter of handling the logistics,” Bowling (2015) said. The structure of ACT UP encouraged individual action on the part of members, like Shapiro, who would then return to the General Meeting to present the project they had initiated for collective approval. Shapiro (2015) describes this as “a very effective and powerful system” that provided an important “mechanism of accountability.” It was at one such Monday night meeting that the debate about where the collection should end up took place.

Activists on the floor took up two major positions. The first group wanted the papers to stay within the gay and lesbian community, at an archives run by and for the community. As Shapiro (2004) described it, this position was centered on the idea that “heterosexuals, or straight society, wouldn’t understand the materials, and wouldn’t protect them, and that we should build up community organizations.” As he remembers it a number of the very active voices in ACT
UP, including Wolfe, Dobbs, Danzig, and others, wanted the records to go the Center (Ibid) where ACT UP’s weekly meetings where held. Wolfe (2016) noted that the NYPL’s lesbian and gay collections were very limited at that point, even if “stuff from our enemies” were included in the count.\(^\text{10}\) Wolfe was one of the most vocal in her opposition to the NYPL. She was concerned about the safety of the materials when moved outside of the community. Those in favor of the NYPL donation kept saying “we want it to be protected and I said well here is why again you should give it to a grassroots archives because I’ll tell you something if there’s a fire at the New York Public Library the ACT UP collection is gonna be the last thing they save” Wolfe (2016) said. In contrast at a grassroots community-based archives, like the LHA, Wolfe said the collection would be the “be the first thing they save” (Ibid). Danzig (2016) also saw the Center as the “rightful place” as she wanted the records to “remain in the community.” It was by staying within the lesbian and gay community that that community would have the greatest and easiest access to them Danzig believed. Others, like Hubbard and Levine, were supportive in theory of a community-based institution, but did not believe there was a viable choice available to them that had the capacity to archive the materials properly. Levine (2016) noted that despite such hesitations she could see why some still see the Center as the best choice, while it “gave a framework” to the collection.

Activists in the other camp argued that the materials belonged at the New York Public Library. Shapiro and others on this side saw the NYPL as a legitimizing force for the records. “ACT UP was New York history and American history. And that we had a right to be seen as such,” Shapiro (2004) said. Activists were already considering the historical significance of the

\(^\text{10}\) ACT UP materials were included in the Becoming Visible Exhibition. Bowling (2015) notes that ACT UP was displeased with the exhibition for reasons that she said have “baffled me to this very day, claiming that we conflated sex with AIDS, which we did not.”
work they were engaged in. Shapiro continued, “I also thought…that in 50 years, there’s going to be an ACT UP stamp… they’re going to incorporate it into the mainstream narrative history, which will be bad and good. But…we deserve to be there” (Ibid). Those in opposition to a mainstream institution took affront to this position. Wolfe reads the desire to belong at the NYPL as a gendered one. She attributes men’s desire to donate the records there as about the “status of having your stuff at the New York Public Library” (Wolfe 2016). Shapiro (2004) also saw his position as reflective of the conditions in ACT UP/NY. “Where instead of 300 people coming to an ACT UP meeting, as I recalled in ’92, when we’re at 30 people [in late 1995]…and you think, okay, in 2027, how many ACT UP members are there going to be? How many Community Center members are there going to be for this…versus that the New York Public Library, well, we do know. They might have budget cuts. But they’re going to have a rare archive…. It was going to be there,” he said. For this side the decision was just as much about the limitations of the Center’s archives as about the possibilities offered by the NYPL. At the time the Center was located in a building that even the board recognized was in dire need of repair and reconstruction. It did not yet have asbestos removal and was structurally at risk (Shapiro 2015). Access, especially as related to staffing concerns, was a serious consideration for both sides in the debate. The Center operated with an all-volunteer staff, limiting their regular hours. At the NYPL there would be regular hours, and they “would make a financial commitment to it” (Ibid). The Center was also about to be closed for renovations. An important consideration, while as Shapiro said, “the archives would be inadmissible and we were fighting the clock. Today in the post-cocktail age it’s a very different thing, two years [then] meant that people would not be there…” and that “was not acceptable” (Ibid).11

11 The more effective treatment for HIV/AIDS developed in the mid-1990s is often described as
Despite the heated debate the vote on the floor was “overwhelmingly” in favor of the donation to the NYPL (Ibid). Shapiro interprets the dynamics of the decision as generational. The “people who were for the Center were of a certain generation…of a slightly older generation, who wanted to build up autonomous institutions…[people] whose life experiences with the academy had been primarily negative” (Ibid). That older generation of activists believed the particularity of the ACT UP materials “would be lost” in the move to the NYPL (Ibid). Shapiro was part of a younger generation of ACT UP activists. This group included more people who had close connections with the academy, and “who had studied the first waves of queer theory and no longer saw these academic and archival institutions as enemies, as closed doors, increasingly [we] saw them as tools that could be occupied…there was a greater comfort with that” (Ibid). Danzig (2016) said that her sense of why the vote went the way it did was about “people get[ing] starry eyed about authority and about institutions,” as well as a fundamental unwillingness to put in the work of creating and maintaining a community archives. She continued, “I think that something has been lost by putting it in [the NYPL], something will always be lost…” by removing records from the community from which they emerged (Ibid). After the one heated meeting the donation of the materials was not discussed at length again in the full group as Shapiro (2015) put it “it was done and then we moved on.”

Appraisal and Acquisition

It is to one of the research units of the NYPL, the Manuscripts and Archives Division, that ACT UP donated its records. Located in the Stephen A. Schwartzman Building in Midtown, the “AIDS cocktail.” This combination therapy is also referred to as highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), combination antiretroviral therapy (cART), or simply antiretroviral therapy (ART)
Division holds over 29,000 linear feet of manuscripts and archives in over 5,500 collections. It collects the papers and records of individuals, families, and organizations with a particular focus on the New York region (NYPL, “About”). The Division’s collecting of lesbian and gay materials began in earnest in the mid-1980s when John Hammond and Bruce Eves of International Gay Information Center (IGIC) donated their archival and manuscript collections to the Library. Bowling (2015) had been interested long before accepting the position at the NYPL “in documenting the AIDS crisis.” She had encountered Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) in the early-1980s while they occupied the same neighborhood. In the mid-1980s Bowling recalled having attended an Archivists Roundtable of Metropolitan New York meeting at the GMHC offices to talk about issues of documentation in the crisis. Activists were overcome with “an overwhelming sense of mortality,” Bowling said, they knew “we may not be here that long and we must leave a record behind. And somebody's gotta preserve it” (Ibid). A GMHC representative at that meeting had stood up and said to the archivists in the room, “‘No one is dealing with this. No one is saving the records. And we're very concerned about it’” (Ibid). It was not until she joined the NYPL in 1989 that Bowling had the opportunity to make documenting the HIV/AIDS crisis a priority. In the late 1980s and early 1990s the NYPL was unique in both its commitment and interest among archives positioned outside of the LGBT community in collecting such materials. Bowling sought out and was approached by a number of major AIDS activist groups including GMHC, People with AIDS Coalition, and ACT UP/NY as well as by individuals and estates looking to donate their collections. My participants remembered the institutional support and constraints for such collecting around AIDS efforts

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12 When she was hired in 1989, Bowling (2015) took up the mantel of what she describes as the “really intriguing and exciting” opportunity to prioritize collecting on gay men and lesbians in the Division.
differently. Bowling (2015) recalled a generally supportive atmosphere and awareness of the significance and urgency of AIDS as a priority at the Library. Shapiro (2015) remembers a more mixed reaction. He said of ACT UP’s records “not everybody wanted them within the NYPL.” It was clear to him that Bowling did want them and that she was making every effort. In the negotiation process for the donation Shapiro described how, “Mimi and I kind of played good cop, bad cop…occasionally I would throw tantrums strategically so Mimi could use that” to gain institutional support (Ibid).

The process of figuring out ACT UP’s donation to the NYPL was largely entrusted to Shapiro, who asked Danzig to join him. Together they went to three meetings with Bowling, the Director of the NYPL, and another Library staff member. After each meeting Shapiro and Danzig reported back to the ACT UP floor creating “a constant recursive loop between conversations” over the course of the two months in which the negotiations took place (Ibid).

ACT UP had three major areas of concern. Their first concern was over the public domain status of their materials. The Library had never before acquired such a collection with “a public domain grant” (Ibid). This ownership issue took a number of weeks for the Library’s lawyers to sort out in the acquisition process. ACT UP’s second concern reflected the activist’s focus on access, especially on access for their community including non-traditional users. The NYPL was in Shapiro’s words “stunned by the fact that we put no time restrictions on the material” (Ibid). Conditions in 1995-1996 within the AIDS epidemic and within ACT UP meant that people were still dying and in significant numbers. This lent urgency to the matter of access, as Shapiro said, “think of all the people who can’t be here to speak to this. Now add 25 years” (Ibid). Just after the negotiation process was wrapped up Shapiro recalls Bowling contacting him to notify them that “people’s names and numbers are on these contact sheets” (Ibid). Bowling was “very, very
nervous about it because there were no time limits...‘we were like Mimi, this is our point...we’re comfortable with it and we want people to be able to contact people’” (Ibid). To the negotiations Danzig brought her own demand that there be no age restrictions on gaining access to the materials. This condition was sought in large part due to the inclusion of YELL (Youth Education Life Line)’s material in the collection. ACT UP did not want any kind of interference with youth access as those records were “information that had been made by teenagers, non-researchers, and we wanted high school students...to have that resource” (Shapiro 2004). It “took time to negotiate” such a policy (Shapiro 2015). Finally, ACT UP had reservations about the composition of the NYPL’s Board of Trustees. Cardinal John O’Connor was then on the Board. O’Connor was the Catholic Archbishop of New York from 1984 to 2000. He famously opposed condom distribution as an AIDS-prevention measure viewing it as being contrary to the Church’s teachings (Goldman 1987; Navarro 1993). He also perpetuated inaccurate information as to the efficacy of condoms to the broad audience. ACT UP was appalled by the Cardinal’s position and a series of confrontations followed (Purdam 1989). These included a demonstration at Saint Patrick’s Cathedral on December 10, 1989 held by 4,500 members of ACT UP along with WHAM (Women's Health Action and Mobilization) (Ibid). As Shapiro (2015) summed it up, “there was not a lot of love between these two.” The activists were “freaked out that O’Connor could place restrictions” on access to their materials (Ibid). Shapiro notes this point was settled with the NYPL “on a handshake deal, nothing was written in” (Ibid).

The impending loss of the workspace with its attendant concerns about the materials being destroyed or broken up meant that the Library had to handle the acquisition process very quickly. The quick turn around limited the Library’s opportunity to make appraisal decisions. It was from “LGBT and AIDS related collections” Bowling (2015) said that the NYPL learned “to
expand our definition of what a document is and [that] there are things like T-shirts that tell stories that don’t exist anywhere else.” In their appraisal of ACT UP materials, archivists evaluated the “research potential” of materials something they defined “very broadly” (Ibid). As Bowling said, “Everyone recognized that this was an epic horror that was affecting all of our lives and colleagues at the Library died and my friends died and whole fields of endeavor practically got wiped out…we felt, a very profound obligation to document that time in history” (Ibid). Bowling said this meant that “we tended to err on the side of inclusiveness,” especially for textual records (Ibid). The Library’s limitations were more significant in relation to ACT UP’s graphic materials. “There was this giant room full of all of those posters and placards and banners that you see in all of the now historic photographs of ACT UP actions,” Bowling recalled (Ibid). She continued, “there was no way we could take…even most of them” (Ibid). Archivists did their best to try to identify the graphics that they “recognized as iconic or that were particularly special and off the wall” (Ibid). They were also considering the “exhibition potential” of these materials when appraising them. Fully processed the ACT UP Records are 97.4 linear feet (NYPL 2008). The collection includes administrative and subject files, minutes, notes, correspondence, legal and financial documents, fliers, photographs, posters and placards, and ephemera.

The Division now holds over one hundred collections pertaining to the history and culture of gay men and lesbians, and of the AIDS/HIV epidemic. The digital reference guide on this set of collections notes, “Gay and lesbian history and AIDS history are not a single subject; however, because of their interrelationships, both types of collections are included in this guide” (NYPL “Gay and Lesbian”). That guide makes explicit the powerful correlation of the gay and lesbian community, its activism and history, with those of HIV/AIDS. Since the NYPL’s earliest
collecting and processing efforts in these areas the collections have been connected. This is linkage is part of the reason that some within ACT UP were ambivalent about NYPL as the proper repository for the ACT UP/NY records. What she and others feared is that their materials would be secluded “in a gay and lesbian collection” (Ibid). For Shapiro (2015) the choice of the NYPL over the Center was in part due to the same factor, “because a lot of people conflated the [gay and lesbian] community and AIDS activist community…just because there were a lot of gays and lesbians didn’t mean that they had any better sense of what AIDS activism was than anyone else.” While the ACT UP records are part of a Division with a much broader focus than either gay and lesbian life or AIDS and its activism, it is noteworthy that the problematic linkage of gays and lesbians with AIDS is again reinforced through their archival apparatuses. The finding aid too reinforces this connection, albeit with greater nuance, noting in a paragraph on ACT UP/NY’s decline in membership and media attention that part of “internal divisions” with the group were over its relationship with gay and lesbian social movements (NYPL 2008). The connection formed by archivists in their descriptions between gay, lesbian and AIDS activist movements are important to concerns of historical belonging, of where the proper home of AIDS activism lies that matter deeply to the access to and subsequent interpretation of these collections by archival users.

In the Archives

The relations between activist movements and the institutions archiving their materials are often complex. As Alycia Sellie et al. have suggested these collections of activist material do not always emerge from “an affinity” between the archival institution and the activist group being collected (2015, 456). The authors also note that the process of archiving these materials “does
not automatically signify that this collecting establishes a relationship between the archive and the community that it draws materials from” (Ibid). There is both the possibility of mutually beneficial relationships for the activists and archives, and of contentious interactions between the archives and communities whose records they hold. The ACT UP/NY Records sit at the center of a set of complex relations and ethical responsibilities between their creators and subjects, between archivists and the AIDS activist community, and between all of those parties and the larger community.

Within a period of six months after they were opened, the ACT UP/NY Records, according to Shapiro (2004), “became the most frequently asked for material in all of the NYPL catalog. We’re not talking about the Shelley letters. We’re not talking about the Wordsworth letters. ACT UP’s material is the information which people want to see the most.” The public interest in and accessibility of their materials is a point of pride for a number of activists who were on both sides of the donation debate. There were materials including some that had once been a part of the collection at the workspace that did not get donated to the NYPL in 1996. The first part of these materials were held by members such as Ron Goldberg, who was then planning to write a book; a few years later he gave up his plans and donated the materials back to the Library where they were subsequently added to the ACT UP/NY Records (Shapiro 2015). The finding aid also notes additions received from Jack Ben Levi, Conyers Thompson, and Shapiro (NYPL 2008). The Division also received the donation of a number of associated personal collections of ACT UP members in the years following. “A lot of people had personal stuff they had hung onto…there were lots of little bits people collected and we hoped that once they were in the NYPL that would magnetize them and some of that happened…” Shapiro (2015) said. Wolfe (2016) emphasized the gendered aspects of these individual donations, “the men tend to
give to them [there] because the men think the NYPL is status.” Wolfe is not alone in her conflicted feelings about the materials finding a home at the NYPL. Danzig (2016) said, “as much as I think the archives of ACT UP is very well served at [the NYPL] it becomes one of the million collections and that’s a problem…” These comments gesture to the ongoing complexities of relations between the archives and the AIDS activist community.

There is a note at the bottom on the ACT UP/NY webpage containing the New York Public Library’s March 11, 1996 press release, “ACT UP/NY Archives Donated to The New York Public Library” (NYPL 1996). The note reads, “other sources of comprehensive information about ACT UP can be found at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn” (Ibid). It offers phone and fax numbers for the LHA and directs those seeking specific information on the ACT UP collection there to contact “Maxine Wolfe via her Voice Mail” (Ibid). Wolfe was one of the most active collectors of print materials. Wolfe always “knew where her stuff was going to go” and that place was always going to be the LHA (Levine 2016). Wolfe (2016) described how when she retired in 1996 “the first thing” she undertook was to spend the next year and half organizing her archival collection for donation. This process involved arranging, annotating, and otherwise describing her political papers, the collection that was then housed in her home “in a big file cabinet” (Ibid). At the end of that process they became a 15-box collection housed at the LHA. The LHA was the rightful home for the ACT UP materials, “Because that’s the place they should be, because I’m a lesbian, and because I want people to know…that the people who were in ACT UP weren’t just the men that everybody thinks were the people in there,” Wolfe said (Ibid). The context provided by the LHA centers women, particularly lesbians, and their significant roles in AIDS activist work. Wolfe’s decision to place her materials at the LHA was also shaped by an earlier experience with the ACT UP archives held in the group’s first
workspace. She recounted going up there to help pack up. She described with a cynical laugh how “what the men were concerned about was packing up all the Treatment and Data Committee work…they weren’t interested in any of the other stuff that was up there” (Ibid). The collection at the time included “papers from 80 chapters of ACT UP which they didn’t think were important” (Ibid). After the group finished packing up that workspace Wolfe proceeded to collect all of the papers that were to be thrown out for her own collection. She said this experience was “just like [how] nobody thought it was important to save the stuff on women [in ACT UP], except the women” (Ibid). The materials included in Wolfe’s collection are by far the most substantive documentation on women, feminist politics, and gendered dynamics of work within ACT UP/NY. In turn this means that the “collection at the NYPL has very little on women…” (Wolfe 2016). Wolfe stands firmly behind her decision to donate the papers to the LHA. Shapiro’s (2015) response to her decision is a more ambivalent one, “on one hand it’s contextualized within lesbian history, on the other hand it further exacerbates the split of the material, because it’s not in the wider social context…”

The question of where the proper home for other ACT UP/NY materials might be is not entirely closed yet. In her dissertation research Levine (2016) found that “a lot of people have shit in their basement and still are conflicted about what to do with it. Basements, attics, little sections of their tiny overstuffed apartments, all of that.” There are complex racialized and gendered aspects of power at play in these donation decisions. For example, Julian De Mayo (2016) recounted how it became clear in his work doing the history of the Latino Caucus of ACT UP for a digital project that much of the documentation of the Caucus’ work is still in the hands of participants within private homes and that community. Those who held the materials were deeply concerned about their survival, but still unsure as what archives those materials best
belonged in. When Finkelstein was deciding where to donate his own papers, including the ACT UP materials he had created and collected, his critiques of the descriptions of the ACT UP/NY Records at the NYPL figured into his decision. He donated his collection to the Fales Library instead. Finkelstein sees marked differences between how the materials from Gran Fury, an art collective associated with ACT UP of which he was also a part, and the ACT UP/NY Records themselves were catalogued by the NYPL. He argues that archivists devoted greater attention in description “to the stuff that had some marquee value, the cultural production that had come out of Gran Fury” and that “they didn’t really do that with the ACT UP” records (Finkelstein 2016). This treatment means that the finding aids “have holes in them” (Ibid). Finkelstein cites as an example the donation by Gran Fury of both a Silence=Death poster and an AIDSGATE poster which were then misattributed in the Library’s descriptions to being both Gran Fury creations.13 The finding aids thus perpetuate small “inaccuracies [that will] make it harder after we’re all gone for people to find their way through the material” (Ibid). And as Finkelstein said, “those things matter…”(Ibid).

*Why We Fight*

Baumann’s position was created in 2008 as part of an LGBT Initiative at the NYPL. By the early 2000s the Library faced significant backlogs in processing, particularly in processing the many LGBT and AIDS related collections it had acquired in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Baumann’s (2016) role includes fundraising for the Initiative and to support these collections, promoting the materials, and “interfacing with this community and this content.” There was a perception in the AIDS activist community, especially among ACT UP activists, that their materials were not

13 Silence=Death was an image created by a collective of the same name.
being processed, used, or exhibited. From Baumann’s perspective this perception was not entirely accurate. The ACT UP/NY Records, “had been processed once with a fairly usable processing [in the late 1990s], and then also had been filmed in its entirety and actually was made available on microfilm to other organizations that wanted to purchase it or have copies of it” (Baumann 2015). Despite these efforts on the part of the NYPL “there was still a perception in the community that it wasn’t processed, or wasn’t available” (Ibid). Baumann’s awareness of the tensions between the activist community implicated in the records and its archival home at the Library has shaped his work. The “missing piece” in developing an ethical relationship grounded in care between the archives and the records’ creators and records’ subjects was outreach and programming (Ibid). These are the activities that inform people in the activist community that their materials are there, that they are processed, that they are being actively used and cared for. Baumann acknowledged that “because they might not be interacting with it as users” that the “archives appear closed” (Ibid). The NYPL, like many mainstream archival institutions, had been focused largely on serving researchers. Before Baumann took it on the “community relations piece” had been sorely neglected (Ibid). Improving relations with the AIDS activist community was a priority for him while “these collections because they have, because there is a community, its our history and these people need to know that its here and there needs to be somebody to negotiate that non-professional access and relationship” (Ibid).

*Why We Fight* showcased posters, pamphlets and artifacts from the 1980s and 1990s from the Library’s collections of organizations and individuals pivotal in their responses to the AIDS epidemic, including ACT UP/NY. Running from October 4, 2013 to April 6, 2014 in a main floor gallery in the Schwartzman Building, the exhibition was named after a 1988 speech of the same name by ACT UP activist Vito Russo. The portion of Russo’s speech with which this
Chapter opened was included on the show’s first panel. The exhibition was organized topically. It included sections on: “Changing Perceptions of People Living with HIV,” “Safer Sex and Needle Exchanges,” “Public Mourning,” “Healthcare Activism,” and in the final panel, “HIV Today.” Baumann and the archivist who had done much of the processing of the AIDS activist collections, Laura Karas, curated the show. “All the programming was about making this [AIDS activist] community at home at the Library and hosting this community…” at the Library, Baumann (2016) said. “The show wasn’t just about ACT UP, it was about this whole arc of AIDS activism” so it put ACT UP in “a broader context” (Baumann 2015). That contextualization was important even for those within the community who Baumann hoped would see materials and events that they might not have been aware of in the exhibition. The show was intended to inspire and to inform. Baumann says, “when you’re doing curatorial work around living communities, there has to be a dialogue with the community you’re talking to and about what they think about what you did, who they think they are, what they think about your show” (Ibid).

To encourage dialogue with the community of records’ creators, subjects, and all of those with a stake in these records, Baumann worked to ensure that there was a great deal of flexibility in the planning of the public programming series that accompanied the exhibition. Programs were aimed at both adults and teens across the city. Baumann invited Hubbard to curate a film series drawing primarily on the Library’s collections of video and film produced by AIDS activists. He also worked with Library colleagues to plan panels such as the first in the series, “We Were There, Too: Black Gay Activism and the Fight Against AIDS” with Steven Fullwood of the Schomberg Center for Research in Black Culture. He also called upon the AIDS activist community that created and is documented in the archives’ records to suggest programming. These community organized events included panels on “Women of ACT/NY” and “How to ACT
UP,” the latter of which is discussed in greater detail below. As Caswell and I describe under the rubric of an ethics of care, there is an affective relationship between archivists and larger communities (Caswell and Cifor 2016, 38-39). This larger community consists of all who are affected by the use of these materials (Ibid). The programming for Why We Fight also included examples of such an ethics of caring for a larger community, including those who might never actually enter the space of the archives or the exhibition. For instance, through an open call a group of artists, activists, writers, and any interested member of the public was also invited into the archives to create new works as a “flash collective” under the guidance of Finkelstein for display in library branches across New York City.\(^{14}\) In another example of caring for the larger community, in collaboration with Visual AIDS Baumann planned a series of workshops for teenagers at library branches across the city. Each workshop featured one of the Visual AIDS’ Artist Members who led an interactive workshop in which teens were connected with information about HIV/AIDS and its history through the art making processes. Through the show and programming series Baumann (2015) aimed to create “a context in which a conversation can take place, that I’m one member of, and that the archive is one member of, and then the community that it’s about is one member of, and then the community that wasn’t a part of it, or that’s just interested.” He was “trying to set a stage where all these things can come together” (Ibid).

Coincidentally, during the planning stages of Why We Fight, a group of ACT UP/NY alumni began to organize. Baumann reached out to notify them about the upcoming exhibition. Some of the ACT UP members had trepidations about the show, “there was a certain amount of like ‘who is he to do this kind of stuff,’” Baumann recalls (Ibid). He saw this type of community

\(^{14}\) The Undetectable Collective that was formed is discussed in detail in Chapter Five.
outreach as vital to the success of the show because these activists are deeply concerned about how “the story of what happened” is being appropriated or reappropriated in our contemporary moment. Baumann’s own involvement in ACT UP/NY was significant to his curatorial role, providing him with a deeper “understanding of what the materials I was looking at were, and who people were” and created “a measure of comfort” among some in the community with his work (Ibid). However, “my having had a personal connection in the past wasn’t as important as my wanting to have a personal connection now” to these activists, he said (Ibid). That “I was willing to show up,” made the most significant difference (Ibid). Being a member of the community in question is not enough to prove that one is engaged with that community in responsible relation. As Baumann said, “I could have been a member of that community, but I could [still] be appropriating that history to my own commercial ends that glorify myself. So, you have to prove that you’re not doing that, and that you’re trying to create a forum for a historical conversation that’s crossing different kinds of generations with your work…” (Ibid).

**The Die-In**

ACT UP/NY activists’ resounding chants of “Act Up, Fight Back, Fight AIDS” reverberate through the NYPL’s imposing Astor Hall. Falling silent the thirty activists’ prostrate bodies spread in a non-geometric configuration across the Hall’s white marble floors. Activist Matthew Rodriguez rises to speak. He insists that neither the AIDS pandemic nor AIDS activism are over, criticizing New York City’s cuts to HIV prevention funding that put at unequal risk the lives of young, gay men of color, men like himself (Poz 2013). It is October 4, 2013 the opening night of *Why We Fight*. The activists are there to make the point that “AIDS is Not History” and that it is dangerous to memorialize it as if it were. This action by current members of ACT UP clearly
demonstrates their important and ongoing relationship to their group’s past. Moreover it illustrates how they conceptualize their responsibility to their records, to the creators and subjects of those records, and to the larger community implicated by them.

The alumnae and current members of ACT UP had been invited by Baumann to attend the preview of the exhibition a few days prior to its public opening. At that event activists notified Baumann that they were going to stage a die-in on opening night both inside and outside of the gallery. ACT UP members were supportive of the Library’s effort to honor the history of AIDS advocacy, however they wanted to ensure that the present of AIDS was not overlooked in this context. As Mark Milano, an ACT UP activist involved continuously since 1987 said, “we’re not remembering AIDS activism, we’re living AIDS activism” (Poz 2013). He and participants wanted to make clear ACT UP’s position, that it has never gone away, and that it won’t go away until the epidemic is over. In a Poz Magazine video shot at the die-in Milano said, “We’re here today to make the point that this is not just something that was just going on in the 80s and 90s, it’s something going on right now” (Ibid). Another current member Bacilio Mendez II said, “Teaching young people about the history of AIDS and LGBT activism allows them to connect with a tradition of empowerment that occurred before they were politically conscious…But if we want new generations to repurpose these tools of activism and empowerment to fight HIV today, we have to start with the statement: ‘AIDS is Not History!’” (Mendez in Cimarusti 2013). The activists’ “message about AIDS not being history was something,” Baumann (2015) said, “I was completely in favor of.”

Baumann navigated the complicated relations between the NYPL and ACT UP/NY. This was the first time that a demonstration had happened in a Library exhibition and “there was some anxiety from our security about how to handle it” (Ibid). Despite their trepidations the NYPL’s
public relations and security teams agreed that “the only right thing to do was to let them
demonstrate, and as long as nothing was harmed in the gallery and as long as nobody was
bothered who was a patron, then that it wasn’t a problem” (Ibid). These comments illustrate the
importance of balancing the needs of different parties within archival relationships (Caswell and
Cifor 2016, 34). Die-ins are a signature form of demonstration for ACT UP and an act of
confrontational care. These activists performed with their bodies the very function of the action
they were protesting by moving their bodies from vertical standing positions to horizontal ones
to emulate death. By laying their bodies down, holding them still and silent, the activists
symbolize visually the many comrades, friends, and lovers who have died. In these actions the
bodies involved aggregate in intimate proximity to one another, with their heads touching, and
sometimes even resting on the legs and arms of other bodies. The intimacy in these
demonstrations is part of the power of these clusters that radiate outrage even in stillness (Foster
2003, 404).

Breaking that stillness following Rodriguez’s statement the activists’ rose to their
feet, raising their signs high above their heads while streaming down the Library’s front steps
where they proceeded to hold a second die-in in front a gathering crowd of onlookers. Both
Baumann and Milano agreed that in the end the die-in went very well.

How to ACT UP

A digitized image of the iconic pink triangle above the inscription SILENCE = DEATH poster
from the Gran Fury Collection was used to promote the “How to ACT UP Panel” held on
January 15, 2014 (Silence=Death 1986). This image, appearing on posters, stickers, placards and

15 Strategically in die-ins the closeness of activists bodies also makes it difficult for police to
surround and to drag away for arrest any single body thus providing a kind of communal care.
The “determined listlessness” of their bodies also served to make the removal of their bodies
difficult and time consuming (Foster 2003, 404).
buttons, and the group it became associated with, ACT UP, are likely the things most people associate with AIDS activism in the United States. The online description of the event first offered a brief history of ACT UP,

Beginning in 1987 with an action calling out Wall Street profiteering on AIDS drugs, ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, significantly improved HIV drug development, championed HIV prevention, cared for its members, and won laws helping people with AIDS and HIV. The AIDS activist group’s unique form of fierce and fabulous direct action confronted the opponents of people with AIDS and stopped onerous laws targeting that population. With ACT UP’s powerful messaging and political engagement, people with AIDS were transformed from ‘AIDS victims’ into a movement that saved millions of lives (NYPL 2014).

The event invited the general public to come to the Library in order to “learn the nuts and bolts of grassroots political activism from current and former members of the historic AIDS advocacy group” (Ibid). This panel was one that originated within the activist community, and demonstrates their clear investment in the power of their history and their archival records to be activated in the present to enable a more just future for those living with HIV and AIDS. It also offers an example of an archivist engaged in a relationship of care with records creators and subjects.

When Baumann had reached out to the ACT UP alumni they had made “it very clear that we would not sign off on the exhibit unless they did something about ACT UP today. That’s really what that panel was about” (Milano 2016). Milano recalls responding to the show proposal with, “That’s great. But you cannot talk about ACT UP in the past tense” (Ibid). The group proposed to do “a panel on how to act up.” The activists wanted to emphasize as Milano said, the “fact that A) ACT UP is still going, and B) we need you to get involved and C) here is how you do it” (Ibid). The panel thus developed as a means to transfer knowledge about how to do direct activism to the broader public (Ibid).
Panelists included Jamie Bauer, Jay Blotcher, Danzig, Ron Goldberg, Milano, and Matthew Rodriguez with Andy Velez serving as the moderator. The panelists were all ACT UP members, both former and current. Each of the speakers addressed distinct aspects of direct action activism including outreach and public relations, planning a message, and how to engage safely and effectively in civil disobedience. The panelists focused on what tactics and perspectives from earlier eras of ACT UP activism might be useful and adaptable for the present. For example, Milano’s presentation focused on how actions with only a small number of participants could and can effect meaningful social change—a point that resonates today when actions on HIV/AIDS are small and media and public attention to the issue difficult to garner. To this point Milano began by showing archival footage of an ACT UP action with only twelve participants including him in Carthage, Tennessee in June 1999 where Al Gore announced his candidacy for the presidency. This action in which activists disrupted at key moment was successful in drawing international and significant media attention to United States policy on the importation of generic AIDS drugs to South Africa. The work of a small group of ACT UP activists changed the conversation and eventually the policy. Milano’s presentation clearly linked past to present, but in a way that challenged dominant narratives of AIDS activist history focused on large demonstrations in an earlier period during the 1980s and early 1990s.

The transmission of knowledge and tactics is a now a key function of Milano’s activist practice. He said, “As those of us involved in ACT UP are getting older,” we need “to make sure there is a new generation of people carrying the torch” (Ibid). There is a great deal of “cultural knowledge that needs to be passed on,” Baumann (2016) said. He continued, “Something I wonder about is how much because of the number of people who died are there kinds of cultural knowledge in the LGBT community that didn’t get passed on, as a kind of interruption, that a
whole generation of people were lost, and what didn’t get transferred, either because of just the number who lost their lives or what kind of rifts are there are generationally…” (Ibid). This panel attempted to create that “cross-generational dialogue” around civil disobedience (Ibid). It drew people from the current ACT UP/NY chapter and other young activists. Baumann recalls them seeking answers to very practical questions. For example, about how to run a meeting, “‘do you take names down and run down the list, or do you just keep calling on people?’” (Ibid).

The panel was originally planned to conclude in a march on City Hall. However, the freezing temperatures and an unexpectedly favorable political outcome in a recent election that led to a cancellation of that part of the event. Baumann said, “once they all got into a room they were more interested in communicating with each other than they were in marching anywhere” (Ibid). For him this shift in plans “was a great relief” (Ibid). The Library as a public institution could neither endorse nor oppose ACT UP’s proposed action. Baumann (2015) said all he could do was step back and say those attending the event that “they are free when they leave the Library to do whatever they want…I can’t tell you should, but the people on the stage can tell you that they think you should, and you all are free to go do what you wish. But it’s not easy…those are the scary moments in doing all this kind of work.”

The focus on tactics, strategies and action in the present in serve of the future was important in relation to the memory work of the exhibition. Tactics and strategies for direct action seemed like “something interesting to pass on and to organize a panel around, rather than a panel around what did ACT UP mean or what is the state of HIV/AIDS today, or about stigmatization, but to do a panel about how do you do this? How do you pull this off?” Baumann (2016) said, “that seemed like a much more interesting panel to have.” Out of the entire exhibition and programming series, it was this event that Baumann says, “was my moment,
where I felt like I had really accomplished something with that show, was when that connection got to be made between present activists and veteran activists about real concrete questions” (Ibid).

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined through the lens of home the life history of the ACT UP/New York Records including their creation, acquisition, processing, and their use in outreach and programming. It has also analyzed ACT UP/NY activists’ ongoing relationships to their records and the narratives that they help to build and promote. Home is a lens that offers productive and affective ethical orientations grounded in a feminist ethics of care towards records creators, records subjects, and larger communities implicated in the archives and its records to both archivists and activists. The ethical approach developed in this chapter is one that requires from archivists a new understanding of archives as homes not just for activist communities materials, but also for their memories, identities, and narratives. Home is a concept of significance also to the AIDS activists who both created and are the subjects of records in question. In turning to archives what they seek is a place of belonging. This chapter extends the ethical obligations of activists to their materials. Activists have ethical and affective obligations to records subjects, records creators, and to larger communities. As with other homes, the archives can provide a space in which the community can continue to live and find refuge. However, like other homes archives are also sites of conflict and contradiction, and can be exclusionary spaces. In ongoing acts of care for their materials, activists are invested in these records as central to their histories, collective memories, stories, and identities. It is only by taking up an ethics of care approach that is formed through critical nostalgia that archivists can build and sustain productive and
responsible relationships with the communities invested and implicated in their records. Critical nostalgia is productive in the multiple moments of collaboration between archives and the communities they serve. In the following chapter I build on this study of ACT UP/NY’s archival records. I turn to the examination of nostalgia for ACT UP’s brand of direct action activism in the present. That chapter looks both at the nostalgia from those who participated in the 1980s and 1990s and from those outside of the group in relation to their archives and its materials.

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Chapter Three: “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!” ACT UP Nostalgia, Historical Narratives and their Meaning in the Present

“It is not the remembering and it is neither the history, nor the material culture nor the valorization of the battles won and lost that impedes our movement forward, but rather the unpinning of our past from the circumstances from which the fights were born.” –Ian Bradley-Perrin and Vincent Chevalier (2013)

Introduction

My dissertation takes its title from “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!” a poster created by Vincent Chevalier and Ian Bradley-Perrin that moved across walls, both physical and digital, in 2013 and 2014 (Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin, 2013). The poster (Figure 2) is a creative response to the roles that nostalgia, representation, memory, history, social media, and the present play in the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis. The setting for the poster’s nostalgia is a teenage bedroom in which archival images, art, and advertisements are translated and remixed with a conscious nod to 1990s digital aesthetics. Canonical artworks by General Idea, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Keith Haring, and archival images of ACT UP and Queer Nation plaster the bedroom walls. Such images of 1980s and 1990s AIDS activism and cultural production are paired with contemporary images. These include advertisements for Product Red and a photograph of pop star Justin Bieber sporting an AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) t-shirt on the red carpet. The poster sparked heated and critical conversations between multiple generations of AIDS activists that extended from social media to the halls of the New York Public Library, and which foregrounded the fraught legacies of ACT UP/New York (ACT UP/NY) and of the AIDS crisis on a broader scale. As a case this poster exposes the stakes of nostalgia in relation to AIDS archives, as well as nostalgia’s critical potential to complicate and contest dominant historical
narratives in order to intervene in the present AIDS crisis. Tracing nostalgia in the present is necessary for archivists to be able to continue to contextualize archival materials documenting AIDS activism. Such contextualization is necessary so that they do not become flattened signifiers and is a part of the ethical responsibility of archivists to implicated communities.

The contentions of the poster and the tensions over its meanings expose both possibilities and pitfalls of nostalgia for HIV/AIDS activism of the 1980s and early 1990s. The phenomenon of nostalgia for ACT UP is examined in this chapter through a look at their activist practices, discussed here and in the previous chapter. The inspiration, creation, and circulation of the poster are addressed in relation to nostalgia and AIDS activism. ACT UP was and is a non-hierarchical coalition of people taking non-violent direct action to fight HIV/AIDS. Across the United States beginning in 1987 “ACT UP took to the streets with resistant, nonviolent tactics, postmodern wit, and fabulous design” (Hilderbrand 2006, 303). At its height from the late 1980s through the early 1990s, activists came together to march, chant, fall in love, advocate, fight, research, mourn, build community, cruise, share meals, make art, testify, care, gossip, organize, debate, document, and just live their lives. It is only by considering how these quotidian aspects of daily life were affected by both HIV/AIDS and the activism created in response to it can the desire for a collectively imagined, more socially engaged and communal past be understood. Nobody wants to revive or relive the death, discrimination, and mass destruction that marked the height of the AIDS crisis in the United States. But nostalgia for ACT UP’s brand of direct action AIDS activism, both by those who participated and by younger generations who did not, has become a common language through which people express their disappointments and frustrations with the shortcomings of popular attention paid to AIDS and to the investment of activists in AIDS related causes more broadly today. The stakes of how, when, and where ACT UP is remembered
feel particularly acute in this moment when historical narratives about the AIDS crisis are solidifying through archives, as well as scholarship, exhibitions, and media.

We are in the midst of what Ted Kerr (2016) terms the “AIDS Crisis Revisitation.” This is a period characterized by an increased interest in AIDS, its activism and cultural production in the 1980s and early 1990s, as evidenced through scholarship, documentaries, exhibitions, and other modes of art and cultural production and dissemination. Kerr (2016b) writes, “on screens, walls and in discourse, mass death and community responses are remembered through culled and curated video and film footage, photos and ephemera from personal collections as well as individual and institutional archives.” The archival records largely circulated focus on a particular kind of AIDS activist and activism, shaping what is quickly emerging as a dominant historical narrative. This account focuses exclusively or predominately on middle-class, white gay men, and on flashy “street-based, postmodern, confrontational” AIDS activism (Juhasz 2012, 72). Such stories frequently have neat story arcs and young, sexy white male characters. This account of AIDS history begins with the discovery of the virus amongst such men in 1981. It then follows these men and their allies on a tragic tale of death and destruction. This story is portrayed as heroism by the showing the passionate activism of these men fighting for their own lives against the backdrop of New York City. This narrative establishes a “heroic tale of fighting for drugs and getting them” (Finkelstein 2016). ACT UP is the star. It has become the most famous of the many AIDS activist groups working at the time. ACT UP frequently comes to stand in for all of AIDS activism in such narratives. Its history “has at times eclipsed other efforts” (Hilderbrand 2006, 304). The dominant narrative of AIDS activism concludes with the activists’ successful push for the development of the successful drug cocktail for AIDS treatment in 1996, thus stemming the death and dying of gay, white men. As part of this it also chronicles
the demise of ACT UP, which despite such accounts, never actually disappears in New York City. The dominant narrative of AIDS activism is thus a gendered, racialized, and classed one. As Avram Finkelstein (2016) summed it up, “So many of the things that suit the dominate narrative, [that] AIDS was an embattled community [who] fought for their lives and shook loose the pharmaceutical industrial complex and now people no longer die. ‘And look they made really cool posters.’ That storytelling around it really suits power structures.” He continued, “its not to say that that story is wholly inaccurate, but as a narrative, as a cap to this story, it’s ethically questionable” (Ibid). These historical narratives are a kind of selective remembering done with archival footage and documentation that conjures up “memories and trauma for many who were there, as well as a possible displaced nostalgia for those who were not, and a desire for many to be able to return to such an engaged moment, yet without the loss” (Kerr 2016b).

This chapter engages the question of why ACT UP figures so significantly in historical narratives about AIDS activism and in nostalgia for it. I examine the poster, its contentions and creation, as well as responses to it as a case study of negotiating nostalgia for AIDS cultural activism. The poster has become an important focal point in AIDS activists’ relationships to archival records documenting AIDS activism and cultural production, and in the NYPL’s relationship to the AIDS activist community whose records it houses. This chapter draws on interviews with the poster’s creators and its audience and interlocutors, including ACT UP activists, librarians, and curators. It also relies on a document analysis of social media conversations and a reading of the poster itself. The chapter begins with a review of literature in two sections. The first section examines scholarship on the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its documentation in archives in United States from history, gender and sexuality studies, media studies, and memory studies. It takes up ACT UP’s significance in emergent AIDS
historiography as well as in affect and memories of AIDS activism. The second section of the review explores the larger relationship of archives to memory through a reading of archival studies literature. Nostalgia is often conceptualized as a memory practice. Collective memory is also practiced in, through, and with archives and their records. Together these literatures provide an understanding of the historical narrative that is forming on AIDS activism and exposes the role of archives in such processes of collective remembering. “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!” its context, inspiration, creation, circulation, audience, and responses to it are then analyzed as a case. This case exposes the stakes of nostalgia in relation to AIDS archives, in the use and reuse of archival materials, and the critical and generative potential of nostalgia for complicating and contesting dominant historical narratives and for intervening in the present crisis.

Literature Review

AIDS Historiography

The historical narrative of the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States is still emerging. The first set of literature on AIDS from a socio-cultural perspective, rather than a medical one, is the scholarship and cultural critiques that appeared as early as the end of the 1980s and continued to grow in the 1990s (Bordowitz 1987; Cohen 1998; Crimp and Rolston 1990; Hoffman 1997; Howe and Klein 1995; Kramer 1994; Patton 1990; Schulman 1994; Shilts 2007; Senak 1998; Watney 1987; Wojnarowicz 1991). Much of this early literature was addressed to audiences outside of the academy. Beginning in the late-1990s there was a turn in the academy towards the study of AIDS and its activism from within the disciplines of history (Brier 2011; Royles 2014; Ramirez-Valles 2011), sociology (Elbaz 1992; Gould 2009; Cochrane 2003), political science and public policy (Shepard and Hayduk 2001; Siplon 2002; Cohen 1999; Carroll 2015),
medicine and public health (Bayer and Oppenheimer 2000; Epstein 1998; Engel 2009; Levin and Sanger 2000), cultural studies (Cvetkovich 2003; Castiglia and Reed 2012), art history and performance studies (Molesworth 2012; Bordowitz 2010; Speretta 2014; Levine 2012), and gender and sexuality studies (Román 1998; Feldman 2010; Andriote 1999; Mackenzie 2013; Moore 2004). It is this later body of scholarship on AIDS activism that I address briefly in this sub-section before turning to work on archives of AIDS activist materials.

Most of the scholarship on the archiving of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States and the activism it inspired emerges from queer media and film studies scholarship. A 2010 special section of GLQ “Moving Pictures: AIDS on Film and Video” is emblematic of this small, but substantive engagement with archival collections of AIDS video and film. As guest editor Paul Sendziuk writes,

Video and film became a way to bear witness and make sense of the epidemic and the loss of our lovers and friends. Cameras provided comfort by helping us memorialize and remember, but they also created images that were used to challenge the often ignorant and homophobic representations of the disease and of people with HIV/AIDS that were circulating (2010, 430).

The section also includes a piece by Roger Hallas (2010), “Queer AIDS Media and the Question of the Archive,” in which he argues that queer AIDS media is engaged in an archival imperative. He describes the process of building “an archive of AIDS knowledge otherwise neglected, marginalized, suppressed, or forgotten” as a key component of ongoing cultural activism (Ibid, 430). The archival imperative that Hallas identified is one that is continuous throughout the AIDS epidemic. However, in the 1980s and 1990s this imperative was focused on marshaling in “a range of representational archives as a way for AIDS cultural activism to articulate historical consciousness as well as political immediacy” (Ibid). In the 2000s that archival imperative has shifted to focus more “on preserving and reframing earlier AIDS cultural activism, including the
production of oral histories, the collection and preservation of films and videos, and the appropriateness and reworking of these materials in new works of memory and retrospection” (Ibid). In the same section Jim Hubbard (2010) reflects on his own strategies for documenting AIDS and its activism as a filmmaker and archivist at the NYPL. Hubbard’s acknowledgement of a self-consciousness about the historical significance of this documentation during its creation is noteworthy. Performance studies scholar Debra Levine (2010) reflects on the experience of using and reusing archives of HIV/AIDS in her piece, “Demonstrations of Care: The ACT UP Oral Histories on Video.” In 2008 she engaged in a durational performance piece, “Enduring ACT UP,” in which she watched and responded, alone and collaboratively, to each of the two to four hour long interviews in the ACT UP Oral History Project in the order assigned by the archives. Over the course of two weeks she watched twelve hours of interviews with ACT UP activists and other participants per day. She argues that this use of HIV/AIDS archives and her own reuse of the materials in her art served to demonstrate anew the “acts of kindness and care” that “secured ACT UP’s communal survival” (Ibid, 442). Levine continues emphasizing the importance of using the archives to her perspective on it, “This [care] was most often experienced through a constant turn of one testifying subject to another. That form of indexical behavior showed itself as a gesture of deferral and an offer of reconnection. It invites the present user of the archives to follow the links that in turn allow for a multiplicity of engagements that attach surviving voices to reconstructed narratives” (Ibid).

There is a significant focus on oral history in creating and sustaining archives of HIV/AIDS in both projects and scholarship from beyond the archival field. Cvetkovich (2003) conducted her own oral history interviews with women from ACT UP/NY for her book, An Archive of Feelings. She writes that, “gay and lesbian history as well as activist history have
ephemeral, unorthodox, and frequently suppressed archives, and in both cases, oral history can be a crucial tool for the preservation of history through memory. It can help create the public culture that turns what seems like idiosyncratic feeling into historical experience” (Ibid, 166-167). Gender studies scholar Julian Gill-Peterson (2013) returns to the ACT UP Oral History Project, the same digital archives of oral history testimony that Levine used in her project. Hubbard along with fellow activist Sarah Schulman founded the ACT UP Oral History Project in 2002. It includes more than 100 interviews with surviving members of ACT UP/NY (ACT UP Oral History Project, “About”). Schulman has described the Project as a continuation of ACT UP’s emphasis on making AIDS visible and offering testimony of the reality of living and dying within the AIDS epidemic (Gill-Peterson 2013, 283). Gill-Peterson suggests that the fit between oral history and ACT UP’s politics is therefore not at all surprising (Ibid). The attention to work on archiving AIDS video and film, and on oral history documentation by film, media, gender and sexuality, and cultural studies scholars, emphasizes the importance of format and the archival materials created to document the AIDS crisis. It also addresses to a limited extent the impact of archival materials on AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s, and in our contemporary moment.

ACT UP looms large in the scholarship on AIDS produced from the 1990s to the present. It is important to note that much of this scholarship comes from those with first hand experience as participants in ACT UP in the 1980s and early 1990s. The disproportionate focus on ACT UP, and ACT UP/NY specifically, Hilderbrand attributes to the quantity of such histories that have been written and recorded by its members, past and present (2006, 304). There is a notable recognition of the role of affect in social activism around HIV/AIDS among these scholars. Douglas Crimp describes the often-contradictory co-existence of rage, mourning, ambivalence, pleasure, joy, and exhaustion as the “affective conditions of political activism” (2004, xiv).
Sociologist and former ACT UP/Chicago member Deborah Gould’s (2009) *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* is the most in-depth of these scholarly engagements with AIDS activism and affect. She examines critically the force of affect in the emergence, mobilization, expansion, and decline of ACT UP/NY. Through her close reading of newspapers, speeches, bodily actions, interviews and her reflections on her own experiences Gould argues that emotion was central in the movement’s ability to turn grief into anger. ACT UP created a new “emotional habitus,” the “collective conscious and not quite conscious emotional dispositions” of a social group, which profoundly remade queer life and politics (Ibid, 32). Gould crucially recognizes the power of pleasure, ecstasy, and erotics in the group. She devotes significant attention to affect in relation to the movement’s eventual decline and division, especially around the focus on the distinct challenges facing gay white men and those of women and people of color affected by HIV/AIDS. In her work documenting lesbian involvement in ACT UP, Ann Cvetkovich, herself a participant in ACT UP/Austin, scrutinizes AIDS “activism for its affective and even therapeutic dimensions” (2003, 157). She draws attention to the importance of oral history testimony in documenting “lost histories and histories of loss” as well as trauma more broadly, emphasizing the role of memory in oral history and how such histories can produce necessarily affective archives that reflect the affective complexity of ACT UP activism (Ibid, 166). She also notes that ACT UP was a not a place where all felt at home, “the powerful sense of belonging that some people felt is matched by the ambivalence of others” (Ibid, 174). Former ACT UP/NY member Alexandra Juhasz’s (1996; 2006; 2012) documentary and scholarly work on AIDS activism and its cultural productions is also deeply steeped in discourses of affect, in addition to those of memory and temporality. In her dissertation Levine (2012) writes about how members of ACT UP formed deep emotional bonds through affinity that were
catalyzed by political performance. Levine’s (2010; 2012) work centers the performance of care as fundamental to ACT UP’s culture and its impact. It is in significant part the affective resonances of ACT UP, namely the sense of community and unity across difference whether real or imagined, that make it a focal point of both scholarship and of nostalgic feelings and memories. These projects and texts give primacy to first-hand experience, and serve to commemorate as well as nostaligize this personal history.

It is not just in the scholarship of former participants that ACT UP features so centrally. A younger generation of queer scholars has taken up ACT UP as a topic. In 2012, on the occasion of ACT UP’s 25th anniversary, Charles E. Morris III edited a forum section of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* devoted entirely to critically “remembering” the group. It included articles by Karma Chávez (2012) on alternative memories of ACT UP in relation to its engagements with Haitian migrants and by Pascal Emmer (2012) on ACT UP history, feeling, and its potential for queer futurity. Marking the occasion of AIDS 25th anniversary in 2006, *GLQ* included an “AIDS Cluster special section” (Román 2006). Within that section queer film theorist Lucas Hilderbrand (2006) writes about what he terms “retroactivism” in describing his own nostalgic admiration for ACT UP and its cultural productions. He, like I, grew up queer in the age of AIDS but was not of the right generation to have been a part of such queer activist movements at their height. Hilderbrand describes how his own view on such an activist past is “romanticized” and yet, in spite of its limitations, such nostalgia for an earlier period deeply informs both his political and sexual identities (Ibid, 303). Such scholarship makes note of the differences inherent in the relationship of those who lived through the era and participated in ACT UP, and those who were too young or far removed to have done so.
It is not just in contemporary scholarly works that ACT UP, and more narrowly ACT UP/NY, figures centrally. ACT UP is also at the heart of archival efforts, films, and exhibitions. ACT UP/NY has a large collection at the NYPL, which is accompanied by a series of associated personal papers from participants and the records of associated collectives and activist groups. The NYPL also holds significant video documentation of and by ACT UP within its collections. ACT UP/NY materials also are included within the holdings of the Lesbian Herstory Archives and at the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University. The ACT UP Oral History Project centers this history through its large-scale collection of interviews of surviving members of ACT UP/NY (ACT UP Oral History Project, “About”). It is the only chapter to have been documented through such a large-scale oral history project. ACT UP/NY is also the focus of two of the most significant documentary films on the AIDS activism in recent years, *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (2012) and *How to Survive a Plague* (2012). It was also the focus of 2009 and 2010 exhibitions at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University and at White Columns Gallery, *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993* (Burk 2013; Weiner 2012). ACT UP also figured prominently in a series of exhibitions in 2013 and 2014, including *AIDS in New York: The First 5 Years* at the New-York Historical Society and *Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism* at the NYPL. It also appears in exhibitions such as retrospectives on associated art collective Gran Fury held in 2012 at 80WSE. ACT UP/NY even made it to the small screen recently in the 2017 ABC miniseries *When We Rise* that chronicled AIDS activism in charting of the larger arc of the LGBT civil rights movement (Black 2017).

*Memory and Archives*
The concept of memory is central to this chapter, as nostalgia is often understood as a form or practice of memory. This chapter also contends with concerns of collective memory practiced in, through, and with archives and their materials. Contemporary literature on nostalgia emerges most frequently from the multidisciplinary field of memory studies. Memory studies is devoted to the examination of core concepts of memory, the development of methods studying the complex dynamics of memory creation and transmission, and generating models for cross-cultural, spatial, and temporal study of memory (Misztal 2003). In this section I examine engagements with memory within the archival literature, many of which in turn draw on memory studies scholarship. The literature on archives and memory is expansive. This review focuses on collective memory. The memory practices I engage with around nostalgia in this study are fundamentally social ones even when practiced by individuals. As Geoffrey Yeo writes, “records are linked with collective memory because they transcend the limits of a single human mind” (2007, 330). Maurice Halbwachs (1992) provides foundational framework for the study of collective memory. He argues that all individual memory is constructed from within social structures and institutions therefore an individual’s private memory can only be properly understood through an examination of group context. That group might be a family, an organization, or a nation state and are delineated by space and time. In Halbwachs’ view it is the role of the group to construct memory and that of the individual to do the work of remembering. Collective memory is shaped profoundly by the needs of groups and individuals who are doing the remembering in the present. Pierre Nora (1996) expands upon Halbwachs’ work on collective memory’s instrumental presentism by asserting again that all sorts of groups use collective memory to interpret the past. However, Nora argues that such memories become detached from that past. In his view, groups’ select particular dates and people to commemorate, construct
traditions, and deliberately erase others from representation. Nora noted that the representations of collective memory reflect the selections by those who are in power, making collective memory both a tool and an object of power.

Archives undoubtedly have a close relationship with memory. They are often understood “as crucial institutions of social memory,” and many functions in which archivists engage are characterized as “forms of memory preservation” (Jacobsen et al. 2013, 217). The evidence of the tremendous interest in archives and memory are the numerous manuscripts, essays, and special issues of both the leading journals, *Archival Science* (2001 and 2011) and *Archivaria* (2002), devoted to the subject. Hugh Taylor (1982) was the first to contend with the relationship between archives and collective memory in the field. The last three decades have seen a marked increase in the focus on collective memory in archival contexts. This interest stems from the deeper investment in the relations of archives with the communities, individuals, and organizations that they document and serve. It is also indicative of a critical interest in the role that archivists and archives play through their practices and functions in the shaping of society’s collective memories.

There are two substantive literature reviews on the concept of collective memory in the archival literature. The most recent is a study by Trond Jacobson et al. in which the authors identify four primary “threads” in the deployment of the concept (2013, 219). The first thread identifies archives within the paradigm of heritage institutions and centers its examinations in the role of archives as “symbolic foundation for collective memory” (Ibid). For example, within this thread scholars articulate the diverse ways that archives serve to enable “feelings of a common past feeding into a collective identity” (Ibid). It is noteworthy that a number of scholars in this thread view archives as political sites where communities are either included or excluded from
public memory practices and narratives (Cook 1997; Harvey-Brown and Davis-Brown 1998; Punzalan 2006). The second thread Jacobson et al. identify is that which “critiques the role of records, archives, and archivists in the creation, construction, and propagation of social memory” (2013, 219). These scholars have raised difficult questions about the role and influence of archives in shaping memory, and in the types of memories that archives produce, reproduce and legitimate. For example, Verne Harris notes that records included within archives represent but “a sliver of a sliver of a sliver” of past events thereby representing highly politicized, situated and partial views (2002, 65). The third thread Jacobson et al. examine is the complex relations of archives, memory, social power, and ethics. Within this scholarship the responsibility of archivists and archives as key participants in collective memory practices is highlighted and examined. Memory is frequently perceived as a crucial means to analyze archivists’ ethical roles in relation to historically marginalized communities and for social justice aims (Jacobsen et al. 2013, 219-220). David Wallace, for example, situates archives at the center of the “ethics of memory construction” (2011, 1). He examines the connections between archives, memory, politics, and justice arguing that archivists have a profoundly important role in the political processes of constructing the past. The final thread identified by Jacobson et al. is where memory is employed to develop ways to reconsider the very nature of records both as “evidence and artifacts of the past” (2013, 220). This literature establishes the unique role of archives in the building and transmission of memory. For example, Brien Brothman (2001) analyzes the differential meanings and approaches that memory and history offer to archives. He elaborates identifying two types of archivists: “history’s archivist” and “memory’s archivist” (Ibid, 62). History’s archivist as Brothman sees it is concerned above all with “finding records and, in them uncovering evidence to develop a linear narrative about a past” (Ibid). While “memory’s
archivist is interested in the past’s residue as material promoting integrated knowledge, social identity, and the formation of group consciousness” (Ibid). Through a citation analysis Jacobson et al. found that despite the archival field’s frequent invocation of memory, its engagement with collective memory literature has actually been very limited. In spite of these limitations, the authors conclude that memory “has the capacity to suggest a profound sense of purpose” (Jacobsen et al. 2013, 226) serving to connect archives and archivists to each other and to their constituents. Jacobson et al. determine that archives do have a significant position in relation to collective memory generation and sustainment, and therefore require a rigorous reflection and examination of the memories they can evoke.

Anthea Josias (2011) conducted the second major literature review on the concept of collective memory in the archival field. Like Jacobson et al. she demonstrates that there have been many engagements and threads of thought on collective memory in the literature. She also offers a substantive review of interdisciplinary literature from memory studies to offer definitions of collective memory and to explore its distinctions from related forms and practices of memory, such as public or social memory. Josias focuses on the “social constructedness” of collective memory in relation to the “social and political dimensions of archives” (Ibid, 108). She narrows in on the manifestation of collective memory in the South African context. Her foregrounding of place and space as determinant of “what the notion of collective memory does and what it has the potential to do” is particularly relevant to my study and its work with nostalgia. Nostalgia too connotes the significance of place and space as well as that of time (Ibid, 109).

This chapter takes this scholarship on collective memory in the archival field into a new realm, that of nostalgia. Looking to nostalgia exposes how collective memory can be a form of
an affective relationship to history. Collective memory is comprised of feelings and experiences, both personal and shared. It evokes a sense of a shared past of experiences. This is a shared history that cannot be reduced to a history that simply records places or years, rather it is crucially felt (Hilderbrand 2006, 306). As Svetlana Boym writes, “Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (Boym 2001, xvi). Her work emphasizes the collective nature of nostalgia as a memory process. In spite of the significant, if at times troublingly superficial, engagement with collective memory and the field of memory studies in archival scholarship there has been almost no engagement with nostalgia. Looking to nostalgia as a particular practice of memory as well as an affect contributes to a deeper engagement with memory studies literature and the role of archives in collective memories and memory practices in the field.

“Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!”

*Inspiration and Creation*

“Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!” is the product of a collaboration between Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin (Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin 2013). It was made for the Toronto community-based organization AIDS Action Now’s PosterVirus Project. PosterVirus was launched on November 30, 2011, the thirtieth anniversary of the medical discovery of AIDS. It aims to address with “complexity, depth, and an intersectional analysis” HIV related issues and “to spark dialogue that leads to changes in the ways we think about, and talk about” the contemporary virus (PosterVirus, “About”). Its curators, Alex McClelland and Jessica Whitbread, bring together artists, community groups, and activists to create posters that can be distributed as street
and digital art (Ibid). “Your Nostalgia” was created for the third round of PosterVirus in 2013 (PosterVirus 2013). The curators posed a series of questions: “How can we challenge the logic of the AIDS industry? What can art posters change? What do people care about in the AIDS response? In a movement divided by identity politics, how do we make sure that voices are being heard (and not only the ones with the privilege to shout the loudest)? Are we just talking to each other - what about all the people around the world who are not (or do not want to be) part of the mainstream HIV discourses?” (Ibid). In statement accompanying the release of the posters that summer that was posted to the PosterVirus Tumblr page, McClelland and Whitbread comment on the proliferation of recent attention to AIDS and its cultural production. They write,

> hipsters across North America are flocking to get down with the AIDS movement and embracing some of our lost warriors. We are swimming in nostalgia. As we continue to romanticize the past, is the popular imaginary forgetting that AIDS still impacts us today? Has this created the false appearance that AIDS has made its way back on political agendas? People are still dying. People still don’t have access to treatment. People don’t have housing. People are increasingly criminalized. People still spread ignorance and hate. And yet mainstream AIDS industry and media suggests that stopping all this is as simple as a ‘cure.’ A simple pill to make AIDS go away (Ibid).

Their statement emphasizes issues of nostalgia, cure, and the present of HIV/AIDS that are raised by Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin’s contribution. It also speaks to the rise of new medical interventions in HIV through the development of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). PrEP is a daily pill taken by HIV negative persons that has been shown to significantly reduce the risk of HIV transmission during sex (Caims 2013). The poster was released at the same moment that PrEP was being marketed to and receiving a lot of attention from within the LGBT community. As Bradley-Perrin (2016) said, that attention to PrEP “perfectly described what the poster was trying to prevent.” The largely uncritical focus on PrEP in literature and casual conversation demonstrated how:
young people [are] getting sucked in by like the aesthetics of activism and action and like sex-positivity and all of those things without thinking through the deeper political implications of what does it mean for a pharmaceutical company to say ‘I can just take this pill everyday for the rest of my life and I’ll be safe from everything and I never need to worry.’ And how is this medication made? Who is getting tested? Who are the trials being done on? Who gets access to it? Where does that leave HIV positive people? (Ibid).

The public health and community-based discourses on PrEP were not critically addressing any of the questions Bradley-Perrin raised. It was the fear and stigmatization of HIV/AIDS that made the appearance of “this sort ‘cure all’” deeply appealing to a set of young, gay men, the same group that was Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin’s intended audience (Ibid).

Bradley-Perrin coined the slogan, “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!” in the midst of a night out with a friend. At the time he was a historian and AIDS activist working in Montreal. The two had been talking about AIDS and the art scene in their city. That friend took to the slogan and began deploying it in online conversations. It was in one such post that Chevalier, an interdisciplinary video and digital media artist, came upon the slogan. In that post it was being used to critique another artist’s video work for being nostalgic for the height of AIDS crisis. Chevalier (2016) paraphrased that post as saying something to the effect of “you know, like maybe art isn’t your thing. There are many chapters that ACT UP reopening across America. Maybe you should join one of those, and do something useful.” For Chevalier that “Facebooking myopic bitchy thing to say” was “the height of hypocrisy” (Ibid). The deployment of the phrase “your nostalgia is killing me!” in combination with the guidance that the artist should go out and join the chapter of an organization that is thirty years old and “no longer has the same relevance” was the perfect manifestation of “this nostalgic idea of ACT UP being the be all and end all of activism” (Ibid). This was a conversation about AIDS’ past and present that Chevalier was invested in, personally and professionally. He took up the slogan as the core concept for his PosterVirus contribution.
The poster began for Chevalier, “from the Internet and my Internet brain” (Ibid). He was responding to the ways that culture is mediated online through the phenomenon of “aesthetic blogging” (Ibid). In aesthetic blogging, blogs are organized around “coherent stylistic themes” ranging from fashion to contemporary art (Ibid). These included numerous blogs focused on theme of the “gay male body, [the] white gay male body, or bodies in general” (Ibid). It was through Chevalier’s quotidian experiences of surfing Tumblr that the great quantity of AIDS imagery the site’s users were scrolling through and consuming became apparent. Chevalier described it as here is “this amazing picture of Keith Haring and then you go to some contemporary porn, and just scroll through, scroll through, scroll through Felix Gonzalez-Torres” (Ibid). Archival materials and art works from the 1980s and 1990s AIDS activism were just
inserted in these blogs. This flattened the context and meaning of such records. Critic Brian Holmes (2003) has termed such superficial aestheticizing of activism, “picture politics.” Chevalier (2016) saw both a powerful opportunity for such imagery to introduce users “to sexual cultures and archives of the past” and a marked desire among younger gay men to “connect to these things, or images, or find them fascinating, or find this sense of community…” However, what was happening on Tumblr was largely a missed opportunity to enact such a politicized consumption. Instead, Chevalier witnessed “a lot of revisionism on blogs that visualize sexual cultures of the past, and then also valorized the artistic or cultural production of HIV and AIDS…[they were] ignoring the social, political, racial contexts of these [works]” (Ibid).

Chevalier does not consider himself an activist, but sees his work as performing the “visible functions of activism” including being out as HIV positive (Ibid). He said, “I feel I had no choice but to be public, and to speak out against things, or to speak up for certain things. My sexual acts are criminalized, and face stigma no matter the level of my disclosure...I find myself confronting subtle and overt acts stigma pretty much every day either in chats, hook ups, social media exchanges” (Ibid). Chevalier wanted to address these aesthetic bloggers and their consumers, “being like ‘Fuck. What are you doing? Why do you get all this attention? You’re not even HIV positive. How does your work circulate so much when you don’t have a connection to the context that it was created?” (Ibid) The mass scale decontextualized circulation of AIDS artists, artworks, and archives on new media he described as their ability “to just exist without gravity” (Ibid).

It was not until, in a perfect digital loop, when Chevalier posted a draft version of his poster on Facebook that Bradley-Perrin became aware of it. He commented on Chevalier’s post that the poster’s slogan “looked very familiar” (Ibid). Chevalier responded, “Yeah, I’m just
appropriating stuff that I saw on the Internet” (Ibid). He and Bradley-Perrin ended up having a conversation resulting in the decision to collaborate on the poster project. While each brought distinct skill sets, perspectives, and target audiences to the project they were both seeking to address people, especially young and HIV negative men, who were circulating and making work that was “capitalizing on the AIDS art of the past while ignoring the AIDS reality of the present” (Ibid). Bradley-Perrin was also interested in reaching people within the [AIDS activist] movement who, though a focus on or over emphasis of the past de-prioritize the current lived experiences of people Living with HIV whose story begins after a number of the accomplishments of ACT UP and numerous other organization in the US or in my case in Canada, made and brought about significant strides but now face altogether new challenges such as criminalization, and a lifelong dependency [sic] on the pharmaceutical industry.¹⁶

What I was hoping the poster would say, Bradley-Perrin (2016) told me, was Don’t be bamboozled by like the look of the past, its in the present, its here, there is a clear line connecting the issues of that time to the issues of now, unresolved things still exist and they are not being dealt with because people feel self-satisfied by being able to like, play dress up with the past, which is more sexy of course, the crisis period, the point is its still a crisis, its just not a crisis to you anymore.

It is the uncritical focus on the past that made the creators own experiences as positive men illegible culturally (Kerr 2016). Chevalier was more focused on ways in which aesthetics are flattened and context is removed on sites like Tumblr as well as in documentaries and art galleries (Ibid). Through a set of emblematic signifiers the creators assert that a nostalgic focus on AIDS and its activism in the past often results in the neglect of the contemporary nature of the AIDS crisis, and prevents the initiation and implementation of lifesaving actions in the present. They argue, “the stigma, health, and social realities that they experience were being ignored in lieu of a look back” (Kerr 2014).

The creation process was conversational and circular, a back and forth between the two men. Chevalier created the poster’s look and layout in Google SketchUp’s 3-D modeling software. It allowed him to create the bedroom and the perspective. The program also fit perfectly into his model of digital appropriation. Its affordances include the ability to download objects created by other users. Those users made the teddy bear, the laptop, and the bed on which it sits. The inclusion of the bed was requisite to the setting, but also reflects the artists’ contending with early AIDS images that frequently show “people on their deathbeds, in the hospital bed, in their own beds surrounded by family, and friends, and stuff” (Chevalier 2016). In contrast the room they created “is empty except for the flat signifier purpose surrounding that bed” (Ibid). Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin collaboratively selected images for inclusion. Bradley-Perrin (2016) envisioned the poster’s look as a visualization of “this cabinet of curiosities, like old school Victorian room that’s full of all of this decontextualized stuff from everywhere… all of these traces.” The “methodology” for finding images reflected the ways that Chevalier and other Tumblr users collect and share images (Chevalier 2016). The creators drew on their knowledge of the canon of AIDS activism and cultural production in doing a series of Google image searches for AIDS, artworks, artists, and activism. They often simply selected the top results for inclusion.

There are a number of images that both creators felt strongly about including in the poster. Chevalier had recently seen the General Idea wallpaper at the Museum of Modern Art, an experience that informed his image selection. General Idea created the wallpaper for 1988 AIDS campaign, terming it an “image virus.” In it the artists appropriate Robert Indiana’s iconic 1960s *LOVE* motif to read instead AIDS over and over again. It was produced as billboards, prints, stamps, and wallpaper (Conaty 2012). Of seeing this recent installation of the wallpaper
Chavalier (2016) said, “I always get overwhelmed because my nostalgia for something that I’ve never experienced comes in.” He continued, “but I was standing there surrounded by this group of uptown Manhattan girls on their cell phones, but for some reason they were all just drawn to the poster [of David Wojnarowicz’s “One Day, This Kid…”] at the same time as me, and we had maybe this three second moment of silence where we read it, and then one of the girls just speaks up and says, ‘Deep’ and everybody laughed.” That gallery experience he said “became my archetypal space for creating the 90s teenage bedroom. It’s partially a museum, partially a virtual space, and the curation is less specific [than] it is trying to throw in as much different things as possible, but also have a surface…of a canon of AIDS” (Ibid). The now iconic art activism posters made by Gran Fury also “needed to be pretty much up front and center” (Ibid). Chevalier also wanted to include an explicit reference to Tumblr within the poster. The site is open on the laptop atop the bed to an image of Gaétan Dugas. Dugas was a Canadian flight attendant who once was widely regarded as “patient zero” for AIDS in the United States (McNeil 2016). The view out the bedroom window is an archival image of an ACT UP action. Chevalier (2016) said, “I wanted to place that outside of a window” because in archival videos and images and in documentaries about the AIDS crisis, “the political funeral” is “the centerpiece.” The photograph of ACT UP they selected is one that topped the results in a Google image search. They used a close-up of the image in which two activists lying down on the ground each hold above their heads placards in the shape of headstones at a die-in. The headstone above the blond head of a young man on the left reads “RIP. killed by the F.D.A.” On the right above the dark brown hair of another young man, the text can’t be made out it full, but “AZT” is visible. This image is

AZT was an early medication used to treat HIV/AIDS in what turned out to be toxic and ineffective ways. For more on AZT and the medical development of AIDS treatment see Chapter Five.
from a 1988 ACT UP action at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) headquarters in Maryland protesting both the lack of AIDS related medical research and development and the slowness of drug approval processes. This is a demonstration in which ACT UP activists came from across the country to stage a large-scale action, including the die-in pictured here. Zooming out on the same image and in a set of related images by Associated Press photographer J. Scott Applewhite (1988) the second activist’s headstone reads in full, “AZT is not enough.” It also reveals that the blond activist is clad in the same style of ACT UP shirt as the one Bieber was shown donning elsewhere in the poster. These archival images of ACT UP have become so iconic and so frequently circulated online that it requires significant research to uncover which chapter and action the image documents, providing further evidence for Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin’s argument. Together the images included in the poster create a “surface aesthetic Tumblr vibe” (Chevalier 2016).

Nostalgia

“Strictly speaking, nostalgia does not entail the exercise of memory at all, since the past it idealizes stands outside time, frozen in unchanging perfection. Memory too may idealize the past, but not in order to condemn the present. It draws hope and comfort from the past in order to enrich the present and to face what comes…” (Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin 2013). It is with this quote that the artists’ statement accompanying the poster begins. These are the words of historian Christopher Lasch on the difference between memory and nostalgia (Lasch in Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin 2013). Lasch was a notable voice in the widespread condemnation of nostalgia by scholars from the 1970s into the early 1990s. In distinguishing between nostalgia and memory in
their statement Bradley-Perrin (2016) hoped to bring nuance to the discussion of the poster’s message. The statement’s tone is self-consciously and “performatively academic.” It continues,

> It is not the remembering and it is neither the history, nor the material culture nor the valorization of the battles won and lost that impedes our movement forward, but rather the unpinning of our past from the circumstances from which the fights were born. It is this that makes light of the impetus to resist; the gentrification of our memories and our worshipping of idols whose miracles are forgotten (Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin 2013).

The statement makes clear that Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin are not condemning all remembrances of AIDS activism. They acknowledge that memories can serve as a “powerful and productive force in activism.” Simultaneously Bradley-Perrin wrote that they are calling for a revaluing of the present “as worthy of and in need of critical and subversive energy and recognizing the ongoingness of the struggle that is continuing to be taken up by young people today with their own experiences of HIV and AIDS which are valid despite its distance from the canon of AIDS activism.” The dangers of decontextualization and commodification of the past of AIDS and the ways they depoliticize the present are highlighted by the creators. They turn in the second paragraph to the context of digital culture in which poster operates. Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin write, “Silence=Death but the white noise humming from your latest post is keeping me up at night. Flying in two dimensions, scrolling through virtual space, virtual time, random access memories referencing deep memory held in those you find inaccessible; beneath the porch light we’ve all been circling” (Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin 2013). They then call again upon the poster’s audience to reengage in AIDS work in the present,

> Do not let the dregs of our history be your horse blinders as you move through today’s world because things are different now as they were different then. Allow the history to be real and tethered to a time and place and reason such that the output is responding to

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today and is ready for tomorrow. Let the past sleep some such that it can be more present the choices you make on reality, not the reality itself (Ibid).

They do not urge for the outright abandonment of the past of AIDS, just for a more complicated and contextualized relationship to it. Such a shift would mean that the past does not come at the cost of the present and future of HIV/AIDS activism. To conclude they employ lines from one of the most famous monologues in Tony Kushner’s play about AIDS and gay life in the 1980s Angels in America, “‘Nothing’s lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we’ve left behind and dreaming ahead. At least I think that’s so” (Kushner in Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin 2013). Those final words are intended like the statement itself to “soften [the] poster a bit” (Bradley-Perrin 2016).

Calling on nostalgia for Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin was also a means to address the complex temporal relations of HIV/AIDS. It reflects the present realities in which historical narratives of HIV/AIDS are being articulated and solidified by scholars, activists, artists, curators, and a larger public. Nostalgia from Chevalier’s (2016) perspective is a process of valuation that establishes “certain narratives, and perspectives, and aesthetics” as ones that are positive, productive and good, and others in contrast as “bad, or not useful”(Ibid). Those valuations mean only the ways that HIV/AIDS activism can be discussed or represented as heroic, unifying, and successful in its campaigns. Chevalier wants to shift that discourse, “My intention wasn’t to say AIDS are good, AIDS are bad, it was to be—this is the setting for nostalgia, and let’s have a conversation around it through that” (Ibid). “AIDS Nostalgia,” as Bradley-Perrin (2016) said is “used to construct a narrative of success in which certain key battles being won brought about a public understanding of AIDS as over.” The poster was in part Bradley-Perrin said, about re-evaluating the way the past gets used in the present—I think there are productive…but there are also undoubtedly harmful uses as well, which close space for conversation, use important successes as end points rather than moments of reassessment.
The poster is about a need for constant self-reflection and criticism within the movement as much as it is about those outside. I personally feel that is the only way to make a space where a diversity of experiences becomes a productive part of activism (Ibid).

Nostalgia for the creators named a dangerous and yet also possibly productive relationship to AIDS activism of an earlier period, both by those who had participated and a younger generation.

The relationship to the 1990s is important to the poster’s work with nostalgia, particularly in terms of aesthetics. This was not only a decade were some of the most significant AIDS activism in terms of scale, attention, and impact took place. The 1990s are also the decade that HIV/AIDS becomes transformed in North America. The premiere of a new combination of more effective antiretroviral medications in 1996 had important outcomes for extending the lives and improving life chances of many living with HIV. The improvements in pharmaceuticals were important in shifting public perceptions about the urgency of AIDS as a crisis in an American context. It was also just that culturally as the creators noted “we’re having a 90s moment generally. So, it seemed appropriate to place nostalgia in that time period” (Chevalier 2016). The aesthetic allure of the cultural production in the early AIDS crisis is significant in such a moment of 1990s chic. The contemporary allure of 1990s digital aesthetics is also significant in the design and impact of the poster. Its look and feel mirrors that of the early web graphics, as well as the colors and graphics of AIDS cultural production in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The image of Bieber highlights the aesthetic nostalgia at work in the poster. Here ACT UP is transformed into just something cool, a T-shirt with words on it that does not require any political or historical connection to AIDS or its activism.20 Bradley-Perrin (2016) described the

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20 Chevalier (2016) said of the image of Justin Bieber “Well, I remember it happened, and I was like, ‘Oh brother’…I know that Justin Bieber didn’t know anything about it, and his audience would be like ACT UP, like totally. ACT UP, but not know what it was. The creators did not learn until the NYPL panel on the poster where someone came to the defense of Bieber that the shirt he was wearing was a fundraising tool made in collaboration with Opening Ceremony to
frustration he had being at very small AIDS demonstrations, where only ten or fifteen activists showed up, while at the same time seeing just “walking on the other side of the street [that] everyone is wearing their ACT UP American apparel t-shirt with their cut-off jeans.” ACT UP always had a conscious and appealing aesthetic to its work and look whether in fashion, graphics, or other action. In the early 1990s fashion writer Guy Trebay (1990) noted “the street-side potency of ACT UP’s graphics, which have defined a generation of activists through fashion presence.” Bradley-Perrin (2016) said, “it bothered me that people were so ready to be obsessed with the ACT UP aesthetic, but so unwilling to engage with the issues that ACT UP actually had engaged with at the time…if you put half as much energy into doing the work that is needed today, as you do in reproducing or resurrecting an aesthetic from the past we might make some progress.” Boym (2001) noted the dangers of a nostalgia focused on restoration. Such a nostalgia denies that it is actually nostalgia in its focus on recreating a lost time and place. Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin wanted to talk to those engaged in such a practice of nostalgia, “the people who could have been in a movement, but are just choosing to dress up like they’re in a movement instead of actually being in one” (Bradley-Perrin 2016). The poster “was like an emotional response to that” (Ibid). The danger as Chevalier (2016) said is that “You see aesthetics of the past rather than seeing the politics of the present.” As a response the poster created “a satirical space” that included “everything but the kitchen sink of AIDS, art, the AIDS canon in order to highlight when you’re trapped in that space. You’re not looking at the present realities of today” (Ibid).

*Circulation and Response*

create this limited edition line of T-shirts that have these old broadsides on them…also it’s a teenager’s bedroom so she had to have a picture of a pop star, or she or he.”
In a move that mirrors the circulation of graphic poster-based political and public art in the 1980s and 1990s, the PosterVirus works are wheatpasted to walls\footnote{21 Before the ubiquity of the web, building exteriors served as public forums for the exchange of information, particularly in New York City. “The possibilities for public, political image activism through posters in New York City dissipated when non-commercial wheatpasting became a prime target of the “Quality of Life” policing of misdemeanour crimes pursued by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (1994–2001)” (Burk 2013, 35).} in a number of cities across North America.\footnote{22 Images of poster in circulation are available through the PosterVirus Tumblr site (PosterVirus 2013).} Most audiences however engaged with the poster as disseminated online through Tumblr, Facebook, and other social media platforms. It was also engaged within archival spaces. Jim Hubbard curated a film series that was part of the public programming accompanying the exhibition \textit{Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism} at the NYPL. Each evening program of films was dedicated to a particular line of inquiry providing artists, activists, academics, and interested members of the public with a point of entry into the subject and into the Library’s AIDS activist video collections from which most of the selections were made. Hubbard (2016) wanted to display the breadth of short film and video work from the 1980s and 1990s in order to challenge recent discourses around HIV/AIDS. His selections included rarely viewed clips, primary footage of historic ACT UP actions, and “once ubiquitous images that have seen been divorced from context” (Kerr 2013). After each screening, there was an informal discussion between the audience, Hubbard, and the filmmakers. On January 8, 2014 the films were on the theme of “Mourning and Militancy.” Included in the program was the 1991 short film \textit{Katrina Haslip Memorial} by Debra Levine and Catherine (Saalfield) Gund. Kerr (2016) remembers that Levine in her remarks brought up how she “disliked” “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!” Kerr, who was in attendance that night, felt Levine had “misrepresented” the poster and thought it was important to address this from his perspective; as Levine had shared the “point of view” of other
“long term activists that felt that they were dissed by the poster, they felt they were being disrespected, they felt they were being called to task, like move out of the way type stuff” (Ibid). During the question and answer period Kerr briefly offered his own interpretation of the poster. Once he got home that night he shared the link to the PosterVirus’ Tumblr page on the ACT UP Alumni Facebook group. He captioned it, “Really invigorated by the conversation tonight around nostalgia and memory at the NYPL Why We Fight film screening curated by Jim Hubbard. Here is that poster that Debra Levine and I were talking about.”

He also tagged others who had been at the event and shared links to the PosterVirus campaign, to another video piece by Chevalier, to a Visual AIDS interview with the Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin, and to a piece he had written about PosterVirus.

“I really thought that Vincent and Ian’s poster was going to be heralded by old ACT UP activists as something that they saw in their lineage, because what I saw Ian and Vincent doing was speaking truth to power by creating a counterpublic to the dominant narrative,” Kerr (2016) said. He continued, “I really saw them in the same vein as Gran Fury and all these amazing examples of art being able to articulate the moment against the powers that be. But that’s not what happened” (Ibid). In the early morning hours and over the course of a few days that followed the thread on ACT UP Alumni’s wall exploded with responses. Responses also took place on separate threads on both Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin’s personal walls. The most active participants were former members of ACT UP/NY, not exclusively but largely of an older generation, who had been active in ACT UP during its height in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Early on Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin tried to respond directly to comments and questions posted. As those comments grew to include more inflammatory and personal ones, both artists

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largely stepped back from the conversation on the Alumni’s group page. A number of younger activists also stepped in to voice their perspectives, largely but not entirely, in the poster’s defense. McClelland and Kerr also stepped into the fray. Kerr said,

I just saw it as my job as someone who is invited to be in the ally space sometimes as to like, Ian and Vincent, shouldn’t have to absorb that criticism on their own, Alex and Jessica commissioned the poster and Visual AIDS really put it out in the world in way, and I personally put it out in the world so it was my job to absorb some of that, like, I think really violent rhetoric [directed] at them (Ibid).

Kerr in his role as the Programs Manager at Visual AIDS had written about, shared, and otherwise circulated the poster in New York City. A few of the ACT UP activists on the thread also took up measured defenses of the posters or tried to serve as mediators between the parties involved.

Many in the older generation of activists took specific issue with the frame of nostalgia in the poster. One ACT UP activist wrote,

I deny the idea that ‘AIDS Nostalgia’ even exists: It’s a figment of imagination by people who weren’t there. The definition of nostalgia is to look back at the past and see ONLY the good stuff! The definition of regret is to look back at the past and see only the bad stuff! I have never met an AIDS activist who looks back and remembers only the good times. Not a single one. But, yeah, there were good times & bad times, and we who were there remember it all. The question of seeing AIDS as a problem that was somehow ‘solved’ years ago has nothing to do with anyone's warm & fuzzy nostalgic view of a rose-colored past that didn’t exist.24

In reading the negative responses to the poster by many of his contemporaries, Finkelstein (2016) said, “you don’t have to read very deep to see the responses…were surrounding that question, of whether it was a good time, and people were remembering it in a positive way, or a whether it was a terrible time and we are the walking wounded, and fuck you for not knowing that. That’s what that thread is about, it’s a class conflict about a conversation about the cultural

meaning of history.” Following the heated conversation online Baumann (2016) said he could see where the activists’ reading of the poster “as accusatory towards people who were from that time period, that we were nostalgic about that time period and unable to engage with the realities of HIV and AIDS today…” came from. Kerr (2016) cited one comment from the thread on the significant disconnection between who Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin saw as their primary audience for the poster and the reading of the poster by the audience of an older generation of AIDS activists. That comment said, “that is like this is about the youth eating their old” (Ibid). Kerr said, “I think he’s absolutely wrong, but I understand why he thought that. I don’t think he’s wrong to come to that conclusion, but he didn’t do the work to see how that wasn’t what Ian and Vincent were saying” (Ibid). Another ACT UP activist took issue with the artists contention that the poster was not about ACT UP specifically as he said, “the poster features artistic output from ACT UP members and groups in a foregrounded way—how could you possibly say it’s not ‘about’ the group who created those objects?”25 Others took the poster’s frame of nostalgia quite personally. One commenter described the two creators, as “an ACT UP hate group.”26 The breakdown in communication across generations was also reflected in many other comments, such as one that reads, “Rather than sneering at the supposedly oppressive ‘nostalgia’ surrounding them, Chevalier & Ian might simply show a bit of gratitude and move on.”27 The tone of the social media conversations moved between the conversational, the catty, the cruel, and the reflective.

For their part Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin grew increasingly frustrated by ACT UP’s response on social media to their poster. At the end of a long few days, Bradley-Perrin posted a reply on Facebook along with a link to the poster,

This poster was not made about ACT UP, or older activists or ‘AIDS Art’ of the past but rather the appropriation and uses of it in the present in a declawed and depoliticized way, turned into an aesthetic and deployed for the purposes of obscuring and rewriting history…I am in history, I consider myself to be a historian and activist as well as a member of a community that includes the ACT UP folks but this is BULLSHIT…to assume that all AIDS must be processed through ACT UP New York and their tired cronies and must pass the test of white male ACT UP supremacy bullshit under the guise of conversation is actually the most depressing assertion of the central message of ‘Chevalier and Ian’s’ poster ever. Your Nostalgia is Killing Me! UGH.28

Both Chevalier and Bradley-Perrin recall being surprised by the strong reaction of these activists, an audience they had, perhaps naively, not considered as one their primary interlocutors. As Kerr (2016) described it, “there is a phenomenon happening across activist communities, in which emerging and younger generations of activists are feeling silenced, or boxed in by previous generations. In turn this makes the established and older generation of activists also feel silenced, and can put them on the defensive.” It is clear from reading the threads that ACT UP activists felt attacked or confused. They, as Kerr saw it, “wondered if they did not have a right to broadcast their past, which relates to their life chances. Many felt that they were being silenced or attempts were being made to render them and their work irrelevant” (Ibid). The poster is a critique made and curated by people living with HIV, and as its creators saw it as one was that was leveled primarily at artists who were HIV negative and thus could take an aestheticized view of HIV/AIDS as they “didn’t have skin in the game” (Finkelstein 2016). As Finkelstein put it “the viral divide is in that poster” (Ibid). He extends the discussion of this divide to the Facebook

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thread, where many of those involved were HIV positive. A “natural affinity” between the creators as gay, HIV positive men and many of the activists, who were also gay, HIV positive men, Finkelstein (2016) said should have been possible. However “HIV positive gay men or people living with HIV were not able to find any affinity across generations” here (Ibid). Kerr (2016) concluded that the tone of conversation and its intergenerational conflicts, was “a failure of a Facebook feed rather than an art gallery, that poster was read in a silo, it wasn’t read as part of a larger project.”

It is the contentious social media conversations that led Visual AIDS to organize a public conversation at the NYPL about the poster. This event, like the poster, took up the roles art, representation, nostalgia, commodification, memory, history, and social media play in the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis. The event aspired to create a space open to conflict and complex configurations of empathy, inviting all to come with their “confusion, criticism, anger, joy, will, and love” and “to work through and share what you bring” (Kerr 2014). At Visual AIDS Kerr (2016) said they recognized that it “seemed like such an intense moment we wanted to do a program about it.” For Baumann (2016) including this panel as the last in the Why We Fight series made perfect sense as “all of the program[ing] is about making this community at home at the Library and hosting this community, so if this conversation started at the Library and got heated at the Library, then the Library owed it to continue that conversation and help that community have that conversation.” Former ACT UP members, Finkelstein and John Weir, joined Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier as panelists. The event began with the panelists each briefly presenting on the poster. 29 Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier tried to clarify what they were saying in both the poster and statement and also to make it more personal. Weir had served as both

29 Video of the NYPL event on the poster is available online (Conrey 2014).
peacemaker and instigator in the online threads, calling for critical engagement with the poster and the issues it raised within ACT UP. Finkelstein (2016) had followed the social media conversation, but had refrained from engaging online while he termed the thread a “social media mosh pit” where there was “nothing I could do in this context that would be in any way useful.” He stated, “[I] completely agreed with the contentions in that poster…I do think the institutional uses for history have no meaning to people living with HIV now” (Ibid). Finkelstein also “felt as the person who did half the work that is depicted as nostalgic in that poster that [he had] this distinct ability to and responsibility to speak critically about the meaning of that cultural production” (Ibid). Finkelstein’s sense of this responsibility became acute after reading the responses of “people who I got arrested with…[these] were people who were stakeholders, [but] whose world this didn’t, whose purview this didn’t fall into, who never thought critically about this material, that I spend my entire life thinking and talking about. That’s why I became particularly interested in and felt responsible to speak on the panel about it” (Ibid). The panel and breakout groups that followed were intended to include all parties from the social media conversation in the same physical place for the first time. However, none of the “the people who screamed loudest” participated, Finkelstein said (Ibid). He found the event of limited impact, while having those voices in the room would have been a more “politically useful” (Ibid). In that respect, Bradley-Perrin (2016) said also that it “was unsatisfying.” The tone of the event was very different from that of the online conversation, as Baumann (2016) said, “it was much more amicable in public, then over the internet, as most things are.” That the poster with its use of archival images of AIDS activism and cultural production, some of which are held within the NYPL’s collections, returned to that context alone is significant. By working to return this
conversation to the setting of the NYPL, the archives is ensuring its central place as an active participant in the ongoing conversations about AIDS history and ACT UP nostalgia.

ACT UP Now

“I had seen the footage like a million times and I had never seen myself in the footage…” Baumann (2015) told me. He had been watching the same footage of ACT UP’s 1992 Ashes Action repeatedly over the course of a year. Baumann needed to select the two minutes of video footage that would display on a loop in the gallery during NYPL’s Why We Fight exhibition. In this action ACT UP activists literally threw their loved ones ashes at the White House. In the accompanying statement activist David Robinson articulated that this action was meant to counter forums like the AIDS Memorial Quit that “makes something beautiful out of this epidemic” (ACT UP 1992). The action was one in a series of “political funerals” which variously involved the use of activists’ bodies, living and dead, to make powerful political statements. Robinson continues, “Our political funeral returns people to the reality of AIDS. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been reduced to bone and ash, by the ignorance and apathy of the Reagan–Bush administrations. Today, we are depositing this reality on George Bush’s doorstep.” The activists thus subjected invaluable objects to irreversible disposal. By doing so they literalized the devaluation of persons with HIV/AIDS as an expendable population. The Ashes Action was for Baumann (2015) “one of the most beautiful actions ACT UP ever did.” However, despite a “very clear moment” where he appears front and center in the video of the march to the White House it was not until the exhibition had been up for four months that it hit him, ‘Oh, I’m right in this loop! Oh, there I am!’” This late realization was “a pivotal moment” in Baumann’s

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30 More details on this exhibition, including the video footage, can be found in Chapter Five.
contemporary relationship to ACT UP/NY of which he had been “a rank and file member” in early 1990s (Ibid). Baumann names his own inability to actually see himself as a form of “trauma” (Ibid). The daily work of AIDS activism was “traumatizing…it was just so much” (Ibid). The feelings of those experiences remain very much in the present for many of the persons involved.

The investment of ACT UP activists in the formation of historical narratives and in the archives used to create them is significant. Baumann (2016) said, part of “approaching this content and trying doing work around these archives is that a lot of the people who created them are still here and a lot of the people who created them aren’t still here, right? And that both of those things color what you end up doing with these archives, and how they play out both personally and politically. People have something very visceral invested in this material so you have to keep that in mind when you’re working with it.” In talking about reactions to “Your Nostalgia” among ACT UP activists, Baumann said, “I think people underestimate how much people have invested in that time period and how much people have invested personally…people who sacrificed their entire lives to be members of ACT UP, that really ACT UP was their entire life, they sacrificed careers, they gave up monetary gain, everything to devote themselves full time to being AIDS activists and whose lives, life trajectories suffered greatly as a result” (Ibid). There are many activists who devoted

maybe 6 to 8 years of their lives to being full time AIDS activists at a time when that wasn’t a professionalized thing, and you didn’t get grants, and you didn’t get paid to do these things, so really had taken chunk of their lives to devote to this, and also they had lost innumerable people to this disease and so there’s also I think a lingering a kind of feeling of failure, of doing all of that work and then not being able to save the people that you were trying to save. That sours everything. Even with the release of medications and all these things, whatever gains we had in ACT UP still doesn’t save, it doesn’t bring back to life the person that was the reason that you were fighting for all of these things, and even you may, all of the people’s lives that may have been saved because of the things we did, right? It doesn’t bring back the person who was the reason why you did
this or it doesn’t fix your life if you’re HIV positive and you’ve devoted whole your life
to this. It doesn’t necessarily save you or bring you back anything you’ve lost because of
this (Ibid).

There is nostalgia for the rooms and workspace ACT UP occupied at the Center, what Kerr
(2016) termed a “yearning for home” among participants. In talking about a long-time colleague
who is an artist and a former ACT UP member, Kerr (2016) said, he still “will say, I just want to
go back to that room, and when he says, I want to go back to that room, he means the ACT UP
room.” Kerr notes how he has run up against “the sanctity of that room” repeatedly in doing
public programming around HIV/AIDS and how
even in my most hardened heart, I know that that is devastating…I can’t imagine…its
like their lives were robbed from them by illness and by a whole lot of shit, and so they
were part of this thing that really mattered and changed the world for the better. And to
have, so they can’t handle even the slightest criticism. Because if you say, if you even
hint, that ACT UP doesn’t matter or ACT UP isn’t as demigod as they need it to be, what
you are saying is that maybe even the most important thing in your life doesn’t
matter…(Ibid)

He identifies this as a powerful form of nostalgia at the intersections of “white fragility, male
fragility, New York fragility” (Ibid). It is important to note, as Juhasz writes, that, “When ACT
UP is remembered—again and again and again—other places, people, and forms of AIDS
activism are disremembered” (2012, 69). Even the collective memory as well as its reflection in
historical narratives of ACT UP itself is a partial and highly selective one. When it is
remembered, it is most often thought to be the home of privileged white gay men (Ibid, 71).
There were indeed plenty of such persons in the room and on the street, however this view
dismisses the significant work of women and people of color. It also ignores the full range of
range of activities and activist practices such as insurance and medical research, needle
exchanges, and administrative tasks engaged in by the group outside of the flashy public actions.
Nostalgia for ACT UP focuses on idealized versions of the group’s building of community unity, radical politics, and on its aesthetics. Gilbert Elbaz’s (1992) dissertation on ACT UP/NY argued the group was as focused on building egalitarian community as they were fighting against damaging AIDS policies. Long-time ACT UP activist Mark Milano (2016) recounted how “it was extremely exciting back then to walk into that room” for ACT UP’s Monday night meetings. He continued, “whenever you walk into a space like that and its filled to the rafters, with almost no room for anybody else to get in, that’s exciting. There is an energy that really is thrilling, and some people remember that energy” (Ibid). Of those years, the height in the numbers of participants, actions, and energy at ACT UP, Milano said,

People look back so lovingly at those early years of ACT UP because there was, for the first time since Stonewall, a tremendous sense of unity...there was an incredible sense of community, of people getting together to fight a battle... the bonding and the powerful sense of comradery in ACT UP was totally different than what I had experienced before ACT UP. I can’t think of anything, anything in my gay youth that was anything like the comradery we had in ACT UP—it was thrilling (Ibid).

Milano attributes that sense of unity and community to the conditions of the epidemic that were “essentially [like] being in a war. And when you’re in that kind of war-like situation you have to rely on each other and people want to know that somebody has my back and I have somebody else’s back...” (Ibid). Gould reflects on the “collective effervescence” of group demonstrations and the intimacy of ACT UP chapters (2009, 207). Quoting member Heidi Dorow, Hilderbrand argues that the very intensity of ACT UP “grew out of a queer intimacy” (2006, 213). Dorow recalls that ACT UP

really did take on an urgency that made you want to do anything. I began to live in this world where you got to know people, and you got to love them, and you laughed with them and found out how beautiful they were, and they were going to die. . . . They like me and they love me, and they’re there for me... and you’re telling me they’re going to be fucking dead in a few months, or a year, or two years? No way. That just made you enraged. That made you want to do anything (Dorow in Hilderbrand 2006, 213).
Being in ACT UP made activists feel like they were “a part of something and we were a community working together” (Milano 2016). The nostalgia among participants Milano said is born of the feeling, “that’s all gone, and I’m alone and that sense brotherhood and sisterhood is gone…the reality is that things were pretty depressing in the gay world before ACT UP, then they were pretty exciting during ACT UP, and then went back to being depressing again. The basic difference is isolation, community, isolation” (Ibid). The longing for community, real or perceived, built by ACT UP is not just the purview of participants. “AIDS blurred the boundaries of class, race, and gender between previously disparate gay communities that united through activism” in this brief and beautiful moment (Hilderbrand 2006, 313). Whether or not such a beautiful moment of unity in community ever actually occurred or whether it occurred in the same way for all participants is dubious. However, that longing for a kind of togetherness that crossed and diffused lines of difference is a very real object of nostalgic longing for both participants and for younger generations. Bradley-Perrin (2016) said of such nostalgia for ACT UP’s unified community, “Don’t forget that that was other people’s demise, that moment was not only beautiful, it was painful and the painful part of that still exists, its just the beautiful part that’s gone.”

Nostalgia for ACT UP is also about a longing for a radical queer politics in the present and for the future. Much of this nostalgia centers on the real or imagined ways that the LGBTQ community was not only unified, but politicized by AIDS activism. Milano (2016) describes how ACT UP gave activists “a real purpose.” In describing his relationship as a gay man too young to have participated in ACT UP himself, Hilderbrand writes that it “epitomized what I wanted the gay community to be” (2006, 305). It is the perception of a “radical past” in which “progressive social movements” were or seemed to be at the heart of LGBT community and activism that we
are nostalgic for (Ibid, 307). Hilderbrand writes, “With the distance of time and mediation, we can see that we have lost not only lives but also queer forms of radicalism; in this way, the memory of AIDS’s impact is not only traumatic but also potentially enlivening for the formation of a radical queer community“ (Ibid, 308). Many of the divisions within the queer community seem significant in the contemporary moment Hilderbrand concludes, “At a moment when gay politics has prioritized a relatively conservative marriage agenda, perhaps what I am nostalgic for is not ACT UP per se but for the way it mobilized a queer community” (Ibid, 313). At a reunion of participants a few years ago Milano (2016) attempted to get ACT UP activists to return to the group,

I got up and said, ‘People, the reason you feel that way is because you left ACT UP. The work still goes on. If you want that sense of belonging, get involved again. The reason you felt great when you were in ACT UP was because your life had a sense of purpose. You had a meaning to your life, and that is the greatest thing in life. You left that and now you obviously don’t feel as good. So come back! We need you – there are plenty of fights left to fight. We need you back.’ I got up and said that, and people got up after me, but nobody responded to what I said. They all just kept saying the same thing: ‘I’m so depressed now and it was so wonderful back then.’ They didn’t come back (Ibid).

Nostalgia has thus become a shared language through which participants and subsequent generations express their disappointments with the lack of attention to AIDS, and to activist energies and actions more broadly.

Nostalgia for ACT UP is also about the group’s aesthetics. It was image driven and image conscious activism. The group strategically used graphics and other visually impactful tactics to enact its transformations in public sphere during the 1980s and early 1990s. ACT UP courted cameras and other media coverage (Juhasz 2012, 72). Part of this visual work happened through street-based theatrical demonstrations, the die-ins, kiss-ins, and political funerals (Foster 2003, 404). It also included video and film work, including public access television shows, documentaries, and video art. ACT UP was also hugely successful in creating and distributing
AIDS cultural ephemera. These included cheaply produced posters, fliers, stickers, T-shirts, and buttons that were intended to inform diverse publics about HIV/AIDS, to gather support for their work, and to demanded necessary and continued attention to the AIDS crisis (Burk 2013, 34). The graphic design of these materials contributes to the appeal of such activism, particularly by those who were not participants. As Hilderbrand writes, “My portal to this earlier moment is inescapably mediated, and the documentation and histories I have seen emphasize ACT UP’s ‘fagulous’ demonstrations, clever slogans, well-designed signs, and sexy videotapes” (2006, 310). The commodified and depoliticized appeal of images at the nexus of AIDS art and activism to younger generations of artists and LGBTQ persons is in large part what “Your Nostalgia” is responding to.

Archives figure crucially into nostalgia for ACT UP. As discussed in chapter two ACT UP activists did a remarkable and highly effective job of documenting their own work as they were doing in it in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The gendered, racialized, classed, affective, and technological reasons for this self-documentation are detailed there. Juhasz writes that ACT UP “got and gets most of the attention because it could and can and it wanted to” (2012, 72). She continues, “It had the funds, time, and self-confidence” (Ibid). Elaborating on these comments she writes, “Given that its participants were more photogenic, wealthier, more powerful, and simply sexier (in the eyes of dominant culture) than the rag-tag group of feminists, lesbians, drug addicts, people of color, homeless people, poor people, immigrants, mothers, and Haitians who were also engaged in activism at this time, ACT UP activism is quite memorable.” The proliferation and mediation of video documentation in archives is particularly significant in nostalgia for ACT UP. Hilderbrand writes,

For former AIDS activists who were there and those of us who could not be, video presents our most immediate connection to this earlier moment. Through handheld
footage marked by sun flares, static, and other technical glitches, we sense the chaotic threat created by the police in riot gear. We see ACT UP’s democratic meeting styles that combined experience sharing with Robert’s Rules of Order. We see large groups of activists weep and hug, but more often we see them shout, sing, and cheer (2006, 310-311).

Video footage thus “simulates a kind of historical immediacy. Seeing home video recordings specific to the technology in 1987, 1991, or 2002 takes us back so we can perhaps more closely imagine their original moments of production and reception” (Ibid, 309). The experience of community, politics, and aesthetics in ACT UP is now distilled through the recollection of these intense moments, which seem to capture the energy of the group more than any comprehensive accounting of dates or facts can (Hilderbrand 2006, 305). As “Your Nostalgia” illustrates new media has created affective economies where archival materials documenting early AIDS activism and cultural productions frequently circulate and are appropriated in ways divorced from the context of their production. Archival images are disseminated across social media in ways that shape and are shaped by the platforms’ affordances as well as social, political, and cultural values. Nostalgia for ACT UP is thus grounded and circulated through access to archival images, video footage, ephemera and other records.

Archivists need to take seriously the contemporary reality that born-digital and digitized archival records are frequently circulating as objects without context across digital platforms. Such circulation can challenge their very status as archival records. Considering such objects will challenge and expand archival thinking about the nature of records. Is an archival record a record any longer when it circulates without metadata, other description, or even an acknowledgement of its archival origins? The poster exposes clearly the dangers of digital decontextualization and related commodification. Archives can and should be important players in these conversations about ACT UP, its records, and their circulation as well as the historicization of AIDS and
nostalgia for its activism. Archives almost universally place significant emphasis on context for the creation, provenance, and culture of records in their work, whether it is through the provision of descriptions, the maintaining of original order in arrangement, or in the provision of reference services to users. We in the archival field need to take such significant work and theorization of the importance of context into new and digital frontiers. To do so we will need to more broadly disseminate archival understandings of the record. Archival studies has an opportunity to intervene and reconceptualize these images as archival records, a stance that crucially shifts their impact. Understanding these images anew as archival records resituates them in their full and meaningful context.

David Lowenthal writes, “What pleases the nostalgist is not just the relic but his own recognition of it, not so much the past itself as its supposed aspirations, less the memory of what actually was than of what was once thought possible” (1985, 9). “Your Nostalgia” can be read as anti-nostalgia, highlighting the pitfalls of dwelling in a romanticized version of the past which comes at the price of taking action in the present of the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis. However I argue the poster can more productively be read not as calling for the outright dismissal of nostalgia. Rather what the poster seeks is to find a more critical practice of nostalgia. The nostalgic interest in and strong feelings for ACT UP, both by those who participated in it in the 1980s and 1990s and those who wish they had, can be deployed with the aid of creative works like “Your Nostalgia,” to bring attention to the contemporary nature of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Nostalgia can thus productively move contemporary scholarship, cultural production, and archival work towards a more complicated history and remembering of the AIDS activist movement. This is a counter-narrative that acknowledges an affective spectrum of AIDS activism ranging from death and devastation to love and celebration, as well as their implications
for subsequent generations. Nostalgia for ACT UP crucially creates a much-needed space for imagining a different future, in which queer politics can be radical, fashion can be fabulous, and activism cool again. Finkelstein (2016) said, “We’re in this pivotal moment because the solidification of an AIDS historiography didn’t happen five years ago, it’s happening now. The future is in our hands. We’re in a potentially radicalizing moment. So the history of AIDS has nothing to do with the past. It has to do with now.” That “Your Nostalgia” was able to generate such intergenerational and heated conversations about the past, present and future of AIDS and its activism is for a sign of the power of nostalgia has an opening point for an ongoing discourse and means of generating action. Finkelstein concludes, “whether Ian and Vincent’s poster was a success or a failure doesn’t matter because it activated a whole generation of, two generations of people thinking about it” and maybe it inspired some of those people to act something that is needed while “We’re at war. You’re either in resistance or you’re in compliance…”

References


Chapter Four: The Cure: Nostalgia, Affect, Preservation and The Archive Project as Cure

“Decades into the epidemic we find ourselves between: between past battles, lost loves and a loss of what is next. Between ongoing trauma, trauma anew and uncertain hope. For many, the urge to focus on the cure is a cultural imperative for resolution -- we have come so far, and we want badly to feel the triumph of defeating HIV. But we are not there. Instead, we are between a rock and hard place -- a middle ground that is thick with possibilities.”—Ted Kerr (2014).

Introduction

This chapter takes as its starting point the concept of the cure. It takes up the multiple meanings of the cure to examine Visual AIDS’ Archive Project. Nostalgia’s bittersweet longing for home was for its first two centuries understood as a curable medical ailment. In the 19th century nostalgia was transformed, moving beyond the purview of both medicine and curability. Between that century and our own, nostalgia became understood an incurable state of mind. Similarly, the search for and desiring of a medical cure for HIV/AIDS has driven science, medicine, public health, and activism. While medical treatments have improved, a cure for HIV/AIDS remains elusive. Such a cure, as the virus continues to expand on a global scale, is only becoming further out of reach. In their contemporary figurations both AIDS and nostalgia defy, but are also defined by the desire for and a fixation on the cure. The Archive Project is an imperfect and partial form of the cure in the face of an ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic. Cure is both a noun and a verb, both with multiple meanings. Its roots are in the Latin noun “cura” meaning “care” (OED; Krysa 2015, 116) and “curare” meaning “to care for” someone or something (OED; Glannon 2004, 71; Krysa 2015, 116). As a noun, the meanings of “cure”

31 More on this medical history is included in Chapter Five.
include: a cure for a disease (OED), a subsequent recovery to health (OED), and the “solution to a problem” (OED). As verb “to cure” similarly names the solving of a problem or the relief from an ailment (OED). It also names a preservation process for certain meats through smoking, salting, or drying (OED). Cure is thus associated often with “care, concern, [and] responsibility” (Ibid). The Archive Project is a community-based archives that has documented, preserved, and engaged the work of artists with HIV/AIDS from the early years of the crisis to the present. The relief that the Archive Project provides its Artist Members is not from HIV/AIDS. Instead, the archives prevents another kind of demise—that of the loss and destruction of artists’ work and careers.

Visual AIDS’ Frank Moore Archive Project and the Artist+ Registry are the result of activist efforts, motivated in part by affective relations, to work towards a cure in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic’s devastation of the art world. The chapter begins by examining the Project and Registry in relation to the overarching concept of a cure as framed within and beyond the organization itself. I trace the literature on nostalgia’s early curability to its present status as an incurable state of mind and modernity in this section. The remainder of the chapter is divided into sections that reflect the multiple understandings of “cure” at play in this archives: as a fix, a preservation process, as an affective process, and as a limited solution to a still incurable condition. In the first of these sections the founding and development of the Archive Project and Registry as a form of fixing or treatment for artistic death is examined. In the next section the archives is explored as the result of affective relation and as a space for affective use. In the fourth section curing as preservation process is taken up. The chapter’s final section analyzes the limitations of the Archive Project and Registry in relation to the incurability of both AIDS and nostalgia. The conclusion addresses nostalgia is as component of activist archiving. Nostalgia as
a means of looking to the past is part of a holistic understanding of the “cure” as it offers way forward for the community utilizing access, preservation, and care as a way to heal and survive.

The Archive Project and the Cure

There is a meaningful parallel between nostalgia and the HIV/AIDS epidemic: both are conditions that are focusing on reaching for a cure that remains elusive. The formal identification of nostalgia as a medical condition in the 17th century named the preexisting phenomenon of homesickness. Homesickness at the time was associated primarily with exiles, in particular with displaced soldiers stationed far from their homelands. Naming nostalgia as a condition meant that medical professionals opened up the popular phenomenon for rational inquiry and possibly even a cure. Those afflicted were characterized as manic with longing and nostalgia was described as “melancholic,” “debilitating” and even “sometimes fatal” (Spitzer 1999, 90). By the mid-19th century there was consensus in the medical field regarding nostalgia’s basic attributes. It could strike across age, gender, nationality, and profession. That which could provoke its onset included: an overly lenient education; “disappointed ambition”; a mountainous homeland; masturbation; the eating of “unusual food”; and love, especially “happy love” (Roth 1991, 11-12). The associations of memory often triggered it, including the sounds, tastes, smells and sights that might remind individuals of the homes and homelands departed (Spitzer 1999, 90). Some theorized that it might have a physiological origin, “a pathological bone,” however such searches came to no avail (Beck 2013; Boym 2001, 7). Nostalgia from the 17th until well into the 19th century was understood as a curable. Some such as 18th century French physician Jourdan Le Cointe believed nostalgia should be treated by “inciting pain and terror” (Ibid, 4). While others proposed that opium, leeches, warm emulsions, or a journey to the Swiss Alps might soothe the

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afflicted (Ibid, xiv, 4). The highest success in cures was found in a return, or at least the promise of one, to that which was familiar and local to the patient. If a full return were not possible, prescriptions included visits from relatives or persons with the same accent and the tastes and sounds that evoked memories of the homeland (Beck 2013; Boym 2001). By the end of the 19th century, nostalgia, despite physicians’ best efforts, began to evade cures as the object of longing became larger than personal history, instead turning into a more collective and abstract sense of loss. Nostalgia was thus transformed from a treatable sickness to an incurable state of mind. Since its medical discovery in 1981 a clinical cure for HIV/AIDS has been sought. Driven in large part by activists’ efforts, in 1996 an effective treatment emerged for those infected, prolonging lives but not curing the virus itself. Further innovations have aimed to stop the transmission of the virus between positive and negative partners. Yet, there is no complete cure in sight. In fact a cure in public health contexts is now defined only as a significant reduction in rates of transmission rather than a solution that would reach those already living with the virus.\footnote{Still Here: Fighting HIV/AIDS in The Bronx, Bronx Museum of the Arts, September 10, 2016. http://www.bronxmuseum.org/events/still-here-fighting-hiv-aids-in-the-bronx.} The continual evading of curability by both nostalgia and HIV/AIDS requires a more expansive notion of a cure and its meaning, one that encompasses the archives.

“For it is not right that there should be lamentation in the house of those who serve the Muses. That would not be fitting for us,” read Sappho’s words in the epigraph to Nick Debs’ essay in \textit{Arts Communities, AIDS Communities: Realizing the Archive Project} (1996, 20). This is Sappho’s advice to her daughter as she lay upon her deathbed. Debs, a curator and then-Executive Director of Visual AIDS, wrote the opening essay for the exhibition catalog for the 1996 show at the Boston Center for the Arts. \textit{Arts Communities, AIDS Communities} was the first
large-scale exhibition focused on the Archive Project, its work and its artists. Debs moves quickly into the present of 1996. He writes,

We are all too familiar with the grief and suffering caused by AIDS. We can’t help but cry, especially when we think of those we have lost, and ‘what might have been.’ But the normal human reaction to death, lamentation, can get out of hand. The tears we shed for the dead too often turn into tears for the facts of life, a desire to wish the facts of life away. When I was 16, life was different, and AIDS was not a factor. Those who are dead from AIDS now were alive then, and most of them probably looked forward to living to a ripe old age of around seventy or seventy-four. But that was then and this, as they say, is now (Ibid, 20-21).

Debs offers a series of facts about the crisis that would have been familiar to many of the show’s participants and attendees. He writes,

The average life expectancy of a gay man, which I am, is now thirty-three; yours truly will turn thirty-two during the course of this exhibition. But so what? Life has changes, and one cannot shed tears because of that: to do so is the height of folly. AIDS is a fact: it is a disease caused by a physical agent, it causes death, it has killed many, and will continue to kill more. Cry for those who are in pain, but know crying won’t effect a cure (Ibid, 21).

Debs’ words echo ACT UP’s famed refrain that grief must be turned into anger to effect social change. He is calling upon the show’s participants, attendees, and the wider arts community to work towards that cure.

It is the topic of a cure that is the focus of the remainder of Debs’ essay. He writes, “‘Work for a cure:’ that has always been the philosophy of Visual AIDS, and it will continue to be so” (Ibid). In early 1996 the hope for a biomedical “cure,” or, even an effective treatment for HIV/AIDS of any sort was still unrealized. AIDS was in that year still “a death sentence” even for the most privileged of the infected (Sur 2016). It was not until in 1996 that important biomedical innovation would result in more effective combinations of antiretroviral (ARV) treatments. Yet, already in that moment Visual AIDS’ vision of a cure is expansive. Debs continues,
And by cure we do not mean a medicine that will stop the mechanism of HIV within the human body. We mean a cure for the human impulses, which lead to such things as the destruction of the books of Sappho...And these impulses are the same as those which cause the evisceration of social service agencies for those living with AIDS, the censoring of life by the religious right and the theory-obsessed left, and the material impoverishment of the majority of humankind (1996, 21).

Debs powerfully concludes, “We mean a cure of cruelty and fear” (Ibid). This essay outlines succinctly the core mission of Visual AIDS, then and now. That mission is to work towards a cure for HIV/AIDS. Visual AIDS demands a holistic cure to a complex epidemic.

Since its inception in 1994 the Archive Project has been an important part of Visual AIDS’ mission of achieving and enacting a cure for the stigma, hatred, and discrimination faced by those living with HIV and AIDS. “A part of this cure,” Debs writes in the same essay, “is the efforts of the Archive Project” (Ibid). Echoing Sappho’s lines he continues, “In documenting the work of all artists with HIV/AIDS, we preserve the wisdom of those who serve the Muses, and stop, for the moment, our sobbing. We follow Sappho’s command: we see the beauty such artists have made, whether that beauty be a representation, an object, or the very act of making” (Ibid). This statement gestures to the archives’ collecting parameters, it is open to all self-identified artists living with HIV/AIDS. Debs does not let the audience confuse a notion of “beauty” with one of artistic merit as established in the art world (Ibid). He writes,

…in collecting thousands of versions of the world, all different, we engage in a healthy blindness to so-called ‘quality.’ Knowing, somehow, that the ways up and down are at least similar, we document what we can get our hands on as quickly as possible. Time is of the essence, for all people, so let the future decide what is ‘worthwhile’: we have too much work to do to engage in judgment or interpretation. This is especially true in a world where ‘all is flux’; categories of value will change violently over time, so we must try as hard as possible not to impose our own meaningless criteria on the undertaking. We must try to document everything, including the kitchen sink. And we must remember that the kitchen sink is beautiful (Ibid).

Debs’ words draw attention to the focus of the Archive Project on documenting, preserving, and making accessible the work of all artists, living or dead, impacted by the virus. He also
highlights the significance of such an unjuried collecting approach in relation to the new sped-up temporality of the AIDS epidemic. The Archive Project is a key component of Visual AIDS holistic and expansive understanding of a cure. The Archive Project highlights the important function of art in fighting AIDS, particularly in its capacities to challenge dangerous hatred, discrimination, and stigmatization born of fear and cruelty that limit the lives and life chances of persons and communities living with HIV/AIDS. This case study examines the Archive Project in relation to the cure in four sections shaped by the multiple meanings of cure: as a fix, a preservation process, as an affective process, and as a limited solution to a condition that remains incurable.

*The Archive Project as a Fix*

This section frames the Archive Project in the context of both Visual AIDS as an organization and within the larger HIV/AIDS epidemic as a fix to a complex problem—the death and destruction HIV/AIDS has wrought in the arts community. Visual AIDS was founded in New York City in 1988 by a group of artists, curators, and arts administrators, many of whom were also AIDS activists and some of whom were persons living with HIV or AIDS (Visual AIDS, “About Us”). It was one of the first national initiatives to address and to record the impact of the AIDS pandemic on the artistic community (Ibid). Visual AIDS is deeply committed to “preserving” and “honoring” the work of artists with HIV/AIDS and their artistic contributions in the context of AIDS (Visual AIDS, “The Archive Project). The organization promotes art that is public, inclusive, and accessible in order to facilitate and support reflection, dialogue, and action on HIV/AIDS (Visual AIDS, “About Us”). Visual AIDS’ produces and presents visual art works, projects, exhibitions, public forums, and publications. It also provides free services to
HIV positive artists, including the Archive Project, artist web pages, advocacy, exhibition and event opportunities, and grants for materials. They frame their work as an activist project. Art, as they describe it is “is our weapon of choice” in fighting AIDS (Ibid).

The problem that the Project addresses was both urgent and acute in 1994. This year marked a significant moment in the AIDS crisis. The New York City Department of Public Health estimates that 13 percent of those in the City’s arts world, some 8,500 people, were living with HIV/AIDS by that year (Hoot 1996, 15). Visual AIDS staff (2012) described 1994 as the crisis’ “deepest darkest point.” Archive Project co-founder Frank Moore wrote at the time, “I have witnessed firsthand the extraordinary courage with which so many of my friends have struggled to reduce the human suffering caused by AIDS…It has been a decade of trench warfare, in which progress (where it has occurred) has been incremental and riddled with doubt in which the forces of intolerance and apathy almost always seem to gain the upper hand” (Moore, 1993-1995). AIDS activist and theorist Douglas Crimp describes the early 1990s as a period of “setbacks” and “disappointments” following the early successes of activism in the late 1980s (1992, 3). There was increasing knowledge by this point of the great breadth and depth of the crisis, both in terms of populations affected and the extent of the social change that would be required to improve the lives and rates of survival for these diverse persons (Brouwer 2006, 199). Gould describes the activist landscape as one of “despair and desperation” (2009, 349, 392). The vision for the Archive Project was shaped by this context, an environment where “burn out had been epidemic” and “activism seems almost paralyzed by internal conflict” (Moore 1993-1995). In describing the need for an archives Moore wrote in his notebook,

Intolerance and hatred provoked by the AIDS crisis has proved a potent political weapon. There will always be political leaders who harness intolerance and hatred to further their own political agenda to the extent that this power depends upon distortion and misinformation, it will become increasingly vital to collect and preserve a wealth of
information and documentation of the AIDS crisis to prevent the manipulation of history driving, intolerant agendas (Ibid).

The politics of the AIDS crisis in the present moment thus shaped, and continues to shape, the Archive Project.

The Archive Committee, later in partnership with Visual AIDS known as the Archive Project and since 2002 as the Frank Moore Archive Project, began as a conversation between Moore and David Hirsh in January 1994 (Moore 1996a, 21). Moore was a painter who had achieved some success in the 1980s and had gallery representation and a number of solo shows (Visual AIDS, “Frank Moore”). He had received his own HIV diagnosis in 1985 (Ibid). At a symposium on Estate Planning for artists in 1994 Moore described his experience as an artist living with HIV. He said,

I’m sort of lucky in that I’ve had relatively few health problems or symptoms. I am working harder than I ever have in my life and have been having more success with my work than I’ve ever had, but, at the same time, I now have seventy T-cells, instead of a normal count of somewhere between 800 and 1200 T-cells. So there is some background anxiety. I see either of two doctors regularly, I take thirty-three pills a day, more or less, and just keeping track of it all is a time consuming process (Moore 1996a, 19).

Moore notes that other HIV positive artists were spending as much as thirty to forty percent of their time simply dealing with health related concerns (Ibid). While Moore described himself neither as a medical professional or a political activist, he was intimately familiar with “AIDS related suffering and death” (Ibid, 19-20). Co-founder Hirsch was an art critic who wrote for the New York Native in the early 1990s (Rhein 2016). He like Moore was all too familiar with AIDS related death and dying. Moore and Hirsh invited to Moore’s SoHo loft a number of artists they knew who were living with HIV/AIDS, many of whom had inadequate resources to ensure that their estates would survive them. Moore reflected on this experience in 1996, “We knew that there were stories that needed to be preserved and retold—not about ‘victims’ but about the
universes these artists inhabited; not about their illness, but about its irrelevance to their deepest life-affirming gift” (1996b, 23). The Committee’s early work was linked with that of the national Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, which was proposing solutions to estate planning for artists on what Moore described as “a theoretical level” (1996a, 21). The Archive Committee was focused on the realization some of their proposals for archiving artists’ materials on a practical level. In a final note outlining the Project in his notebook Moore (1993-1995) writes only four words “Towards an AIDS ARCHIVE.”

1994 was also marked a turning point for Visual AIDS as an organization. The Archive Committee formed in the same moment that Visual AIDS was destabilized. The “old guard” (Sur 2016) who founded the organization had by that point “reached a level of burn out through losing people, care giving, or being ill themselves” (Rhein 2016) and some were ready to move on. This required that Visual AIDS either “fold or reinvent itself to actually provide hands on, tangible support to artists who were positive, and rescue in some form the works of the many who had died, or were dying” (Ibid). In the summer of 1994 Visual AIDS conducted a survey of artists and arts organizations nationwide about their needs. They found that artists living with HIV/AIDS urgently required a number of professional services, including documentation. Moore, who was both a Visual AIDS Board Member and a founder of the Archive Committee, proposed joining them to form the Archive Project in fall 1994 (Visual AIDS 2012). The Archive Project became the new directive for Visual AIDS, a position it continues to occupy within the organization.

The Archive Project was concerned that for many artists living with HIV and AIDS two deaths were immanent, first a physical one and second the death of an artistic practice and career (Ibid). The fix the Archive Project could actually provide was to prevent the second kind of
death. The toxic and all too common combination of health and financial issues faced by artists meant that many stopped creating new works, and, as they were dying and after their deaths the work they had accomplished was lost, thrown out, or forgotten all together (Ibid). In the darkly humorous, “The Archive Project (zine),” on a page titled “Mindful/Landfill” (Figure 3) its anonymous creator drew a trashcan complete with an accompanying rat. Across the trashcan the text spells out “life’s work.” The image is captioned, “His name was Robert, cutest boy in the East Village—someone said. Molto Talento (Great Animal Sculpture) Now Landfill” (Visual AIDS, n.d.). The loss of work was particularly acute for those artists who did not have gallery representation. It was through galleries that most documentation of artistic output was done in this period. The stakes of not having such documentation were high. As early member of the Project Roberto Juarez (2016) said, “if you don’t document things they just disappear.” Photo documentation, a literal process of fixing, was and is an important component of the Project. Board Member Lisa Pines led early efforts to recruit volunteer photographers (Visual AIDS 1995). These professional photographers would donate a few hours of their time to go to the studio of an artist living with HIV/AIDS to shoot their work. It was Hirsh who made the first matches between artists and photographers, and who set up and attended the photo shoots (Ibid). In this pre-digital era documenting artworks was both more complicated and expensive. The project gave three copies of the slides to the artist, and kept a copy for donation to the archives. Interviewed about documenting his work artist Copy Berg said, “My greatest fear is that I'm going to drop dead and my work will just disappear into some basement or be thrown away” (Blumenthal 1995). He goes on to state, “I can’t tell you, my anxiety levels just dropped, if I were to die tomorrow, Visual Aids would finish the job” (Ibid). Within the first year seventy-five
artists had their work documented, and had donated their slides and other materials (Pines 1996, 6).
Figure 3: The Archive Project (Zine)
To engage in such documentation efforts required the community to “fight the weariness that sets in when one thinks of preserving a memory of that which one would rather forget…the bone weariness of those who deal on a daily basis with AIDS and must then contemplate the effort involved in documenting and preserving not just their own efforts, but the widest possible array of cultural artifacts and information,” Moore (1993-1995) wrote. He described the temptation to “forget that ever happened – forget all the pain and suffering” (Ibid). Early members of the Archive Project were thinking carefully and explicitly about “cultural memory” and its transmission, particularly across generations (Ibid). Moore connects this to the experience of discovering in his late twenties that gay men had been systematically targeted and killed in the Holocaust. He notes that the transmission of such traumatic memories in the gay community is more difficult than other communities where it most often takes place through familial structures. The disruption in collective memory formation in the gay community means that “Its hard to feel like its your history” (Ibid). Moore writes of AIDS, “we must preserve [the] record” if we are to “say never again” (Ibid). He is already concerned in the early 1990s that gay and lesbian youth will reply, “never what again?” (Ibid).

Outreach was identified from the very first days of the Archive Committee’s work as central to addressing the problem they were aiming to cure. The particularities of artistic practice mean that in Moore’s words, “many visual artists are extremely solitary creatures” (1996a, 22). This made it difficult to bring information about the Archive Project to their attention. These issues were “even more difficult when you are dealing with minority communities, communities that are, for the most part, cut of from much of the arts activities that go on in Manhattan,” Moore said (Ibid). Volunteers for the Project visited organizations in person, for example, the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Longwood Center for the Visual Arts, and other local
New York City organizations. Moore says these efforts are so vital “because its face-to-face contact that I think is necessary to tell people you are on the level and make them feel welcome to use these services” (Ibid). In 1995 Juarez created a recruitment poster (Figure 4). The headline reads, “WANTED DEAD or ALIVE.” The poster’s text echoes its floral imagery. It reads “ARTISTS and ART BY PEOPLE WITH HIV/AIDS FOR ARCHIVE AND EXHIBITIONS. We need you all: foxgloves, innocences, eyebrights. BE PART OF HISTORY, BE PART OF HERSTORY” (Juarez 1995). The line “wanted dead or alive, [was] very provocative I thought,” Juarez said, “the idea is that you don’t have to dead to be in the Archive Project, if you had HIV and were living with AIDS it was something that could help organize your life and help you with your work” (2016). He continued reading aloud the text he’d written, “Artists, people living with aids for the archive and exhibition and these are just names of flowers, we need all the foxgloves…I thought it was romantic” (Ibid). The use of floral imagery in the poster Juarez connected to the witnessing of death and dying. He drew “flowers that were very kind of graphic, but not necessarily blossoming, more like dying and very emotional and in an abstract way…there was never a conscious idea in my head that I would just mourn in my work, but I did” (Ibid).
Figure 4: Roberto Juarez’s Recruitment Poster for the Archive Project of Visual AIDS, 1995
Since it’s founding the Project has welcomed all self-identified visual artists living with HIV and the estates of artists who have died of AIDS to contribute. This means that their collection includes many canonical artists of the 1980s and 1990s, such as Keith Haring, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and David Wojnarowicz. It also includes artists who are well established but lesser known outside of the art world, such as Moore, John Dugdale, and Tony Feher. What is highly unusual, especially in the art world context, is the inclusion and promotion of artists and artists who come from outside of an art school or commercial art system. “Vital in conceiving the archive was that artists to be included would be self selecting,” early member and donor Rhein (2016) said. There has never been, he continued, “any kind of hierarchy or criteria of how known somebody was, or references required, any kind of accreditation in terms of what makes somebody an artist” (Ibid). The openness of the archive to all artists with HIV/AIDS as Rhein stated “corresponds with the theme of…HIV as a non-discriminating virus.” The aim that at the early stages of the project “was of extreme value and still is” is that, according to Rhein, “any self-identified artist with HIV could be documented and contribute as part of this history of recordkeeping, of art and HIV” (Ibid). The inclusivity of the Archives Project’s collecting policy is significant to the archives as a form of cure for this community.

Reaching beyond just the impact of HIV/AIDS the parameters of collecting for the Archive Project serve as counter to the societal valuation of only those artists who achieve a level of market and institutional recognition. That limited scope of success means that many other artists as Moore (1993-1995) wrote, “may find it very difficult to believe in any larger societal value to their work. If any artist doesn’t believe in himself, and in his or work, or if his faith in its value is undermined by having AIDS, being Gay, or by not being able to support her or himself with his or her work as an artist it becomes very difficult to insert this work in our
cultural discourse.” With its unjuried collection, the Archive Project “does not pass judgment on the basis of what might be considered success” (Visual AIDS 1995). This means, as Associate Director Esther McGowan (2016) observed, that “The Archive and Registry include many people who are not professional artists, and who are self-taught. They do it because it therapeutic, because they love it.” The arrangement of the analogue and the digital archives also reflects that.

McGowan noted, for example, “If someone’s last name is Marston. They show up right next to Robert Mapplethorpe and that’s an amazing thing. When you look at who is represented in the Registry, you have Keith Haring and then someone who makes a living as a hairstylist in Kentucky who also creates beautiful photographs” (Ibid). By opening itself to all self-identified positive artists and their estates, the Archive Project thus captures “this really amazing breadth of what it means to be an artist. Both what it means to be HIV positive right now in the world, but also what it means to be an artist. “It tells a story about who is making art across the U.S. and even the world right now, and how they do it,” McGowan said (Ibid). The impact of this collecting policy means that unlike many other archives documenting art movements and artists in this period, the Archive Project is not based on a “canon” and can therefore crucially disrupt dominant narratives (Fialho 2016). From its earliest days the importance of openness to all archives was recognized. Debs wrote in 1995, “For those artists who have operated at the margins of already marginalized art communities. The Project will guarantee their works’ survival and exposure…it will preserve a tremendous amount of experience and hold it out to the future, saying, ‘all of this happened, all of this was real—use the information well’”(Visual AIDS 1995).

Employing serostatus as the collecting parameter Executive Director Nelson Santos (2016) described as both “the interesting” and “the unusual thing about the Archive Project.”
Serostatus as a collecting parameter rather than a more common focus on a theme, artistic medium, or an identity means that the Project includes a disparate range of work and materials, as well as artists. That range is the strength of the collection. It by showcasing the full range of work that the archives can as Santos said, “break the stigma of who is living with HIV/AIDS” both the “variety, but also how people express themselves that way” (Ibid). Some of the work documented was made in response to the crisis and its consequences in that moment, but the archives also includes work that is not necessarily about or in response to HIV/AIDS. The “chaos” that results from this kind of collecting policy suits HIV/AIDS and its intersections with art and activism. As Sur (2016) states, “it’s very chaotic and that’s okay. Everything doesn’t have to be neat and tight around the edges, some things can sort of be fuzzy.” The messiness of the Archive Project requires that users “look more or try to understand more than when its very neat” (Ibid). Sur also highlights how the archives form reflects that of “a period that is kind of messy…there are parts of it that you can see that are really neat and there are some artists you can see are really wow and others where you’re going why...then when you get into the why, and [its when you] really get into that that you can find some really rich stuff” (Ibid). It also documents work that occurred before 1981, extending the temporal bounds of AIDS historicization and placing it in broader context of art production.

The Archive Project was founded as and remains a community-based archives. Moore wrote in 1996 that the Archive Project “is beginning to convey a multifaceted image of the impact AIDS has had, and continues to have, on our culture. This larger image is all the more valuable in that it can be seen straight up, without the filters of government, corporations, academia or mass media” (1996b, 23). It is a community-based solution enacted by and for community members. In the early 2000s, as popular attention turned away from HIV/AIDS,
Visual AIDS was struggling financially. The organization hosted a town hall meeting about whether they should remain open at all. The question of whether they should deposit the archives at a larger archival institution came up at that event. Santos (2016) stated, it was “the artist members who were most vocal about, that there’s no one else doing anything like what Visual AIDS is doing, there’s nothing else like the Archive Project.” From that point forward remaining a grassroots, community-based archives has been a priority for the Board and for the organization’s small staff.33 Being community-based allows Visual AIDS’ “to stay nimble as we shift and decide on priorities and programming” (Fialho 2016). It enables them to do projects with little notice and collaborate with individuals and other organizations as they wish.

The organization’s emphasis on an evolving and broadly defined cure means that Visual AIDS’ staff engages the Archive Project actively, consistently, and continually for programming purposes. A key component of their fix to an incurable condition is to bring attention and investment from audiences to the importance and lived realities of HIV/AIDS past, present, and future. The materials and artists in the Archive Project are leveraged to address contemporary concerns in the epidemic. The Archive Project McGowan (2016) said is “the inspiration for all of

33 Visual AIDS is in the process of donating its noncurrent organizational records to the Fales Library. Visual AIDS relationship with Fales Library emerged from their project from spanning from 2003 to 2006 developing a catalogue raisonné for Robert Blanchon. During that process they acquired many of Blanchon’s papers. Blanchon’s materials were within the Fales collecting scope and director Marvin Taylor shared their interest Blanchon’s work and life so that materials were placed there at the end of the project. In 2011 after artist member Chloe Dzubilo passed away Visual AIDS took on her papers and did the initial processing of them. Again Taylor was interested in the collection and its was subsequently donated to the Fales. In was in the course of those discussions that Santos and Taylor began talking about Visual AIDS’ own organizational records. It is Santos’ hope that by donating their materials to an institutional archives it will provide significant context for organization, make their materials “more accessible to people who are doing research,” and facilitate a greater awareness of the Visual AIDS and its work. The digital and analogue records within the Archive Project and Artist+ Registry will remain with Visual AIDS.
our projects.” At a recent Board retreat they reaffirmed that the “Archive Project should be the backbone of everything we do and that anything, any event, any book, any exhibition that we do members of the Archive Project, HIV positive artists, are part of it and are informing it and that their voice, issues that they raise, concerns they have, things they are facing in their lives all are the core of everything we do” (Ibid). In planning programming, Programs Director Alex Fialho (2016) said, “typically, whichever theme or topic we’re interested in exploring, there are artists…working in that theme” that focus might be “topical, or identity based, or somewhere therein.” The use of the archives to draw focus to contemporary realities, needs, and concerns is part of the nuanced cure for the virus that Debs’ envisioned. “I love Visual AIDS. At the same time there was something I wrestled with in regards to the work,” former Programs Manager Ted Kerr (2016) said while talking about what his goals had been with public programming. He continued, “The mission is about supporting artists living with HIV/AIDS, which includes those who have passed away. And sometimes that could get messy or rather, I found myself uncomfortable when I felt like the work veered in to putting a question mark around the possible output that artists who had died might have had. Within the context of the art market I find myself squirming when a question would come up round potential. It seemed to close to a capitalist lament regarding a lost life.” (Ibid). Kerr emphasizes how in Visual AIDS programming he worked to address the realities of “how are people on the streets now [are] living with HIV or deeply impacted by it interacting with the virus”(Ibid). It is “an engaging, creative challenge” Fialho (2016) said to “leverage Visual AIDS’ longstanding history” and its strong reputation “to bring new voices, that maybe haven’t been considered in these contexts, in these fields.” Fialho described this programming strategy as “looking back to look forward” (Ibid).
The Visual AIDS team noted an increase in public interest in AIDS cultural production and associated activism from the 1980s and 1990s (Fialho 2016; McGowan 2016; Santos 2016). Most of that interest is in what has become the canon of AIDS cultural production and focuses largely on artists who died of AIDS related causes such as Gonzalez-Torres, Mapplethorpe, Haring, and Wojnarowicz. According to Fialho (2016), “One of our stakes is to not let the interest in ‘80s and ‘90s activism and art and artists not get stuck in the historical or the nostalgic.” They creatively play on such nostalgia to “remind folks of the current crisis.” New media has become an important tool in this work. Fialho, who is in charge of their active social media presence, said, “I think considerately and consciously about the fact that if I hashtag Keith Haring we are going to get a hundred new followers, but then if I follow that up with photography by Kia Labeija or Jessica Whitbread then people are going to know about these artists living with HIV as result of the exposure we get as an organization associated with Keith Haring” (Ibid). The example of “Radiant Presence,” a digital slideshow at the center of programming for the 2015 edition of their annual Day Without Art event (Visual AIDS 2015), illustrates the concept of leveraging nostalgia for the past to enact a more just present and future. The video produced collaboratively with ten curators features as its lead image, a photograph of a shirtless Haring standing in front a mural of a shirtless person that reads ARTIST in large letters. Haring is a highly recognizable face and this photo is one “everyone loves” as it is a “candid” shot and Haring “has his shirt off, it’s sexy, it’s flirty, it’s fun,” Fialho (2016) said. The face in the photograph might be famous, but the person behind the camera, Juan Rivera, an artist and a former lover of Haring’s is largely unknown. “So when we post it on Facebook or we distribute the program information, the promotion evokes Keith, but the photograph is by an underknown artist from the Archive… they press play because it’s a photo of Keith, people love
it, then they have 50 images or more from the Registry,” Fialho said (Ibid). The video also brings in through interspersed text the concerns of the present including 2015 statistics and a focus on HIV criminalization issues. It is the past of AIDS cultural activism as embodied by Haring that ensured the video was widely seen, yet the project successfully transitions viewers’ focus within a few short minutes to the present realities of AIDS and the priorities of contemporary activism. This is a “two pronged approach” to programming, one that addresses “remembrance but also response” (Ibid). In these ways Visual AIDS promotes a timely and dynamic engagement with contemporary social justice movements, and the roles of art within them.

The Archive Project was founded by community members as a fix for the neglect, loss, and destruction of the work of fellow artists living with HIV/AIDS and dying from AIDS related causes. It was framed from the beginning as a type of cure for HIV/AIDS, one that used art and arts based activism to fight against stigma, fear, and other cruelties. As the epidemic has evolved so has the archives. It continues to act as a fix by deploying its materials and members to draw attention to contemporary problems in an ongoing crisis.

*The Archive Project as Curing*

In this section the Archive Project and Registry are addressed as processes of preservation, of curing. The Archive Project focuses on preservation as a component of a larger understanding of a cure. This section looks at the rhetorical framing of the project around the concept of preservation, digitization and the formation of the Artist+ Registry, and at the limits of preservation within their current organizational circumstances. In an arts context the Project and Registry are deeply implicated in curatorial work done by the organization and its collaborators.
Sharing the same root as cure, curating too conventionally includes acts aimed at the preservation of works under a curator’s care (Krysa 2015).

Preservation is emphasized rhetorically throughout Visual AIDS current and historical materials on the Archive Project and the Artist+ Registry. On their webpage describing the organization, its mission, and focuses they note, “The Archive Project was founded in 1994 as a slide and research library to *preserve* the work of artists with HIV/AIDS” (Visual AIDS, “About Us”). Similarly a page providing the history and development of the Project notes, “Since its founding, the archive has welcomed any and all professional visual artists living with HIV and the estates of artists who have died of AIDS, to *preserve* and honor the work of artists with HIV/AIDS and the artistic contributions of the AIDS movement” (Visual AIDS, “The Archive Project”). Again, in Visual AIDS’ description of the Artist+ Registry, the language of preservation appears. It reads, “The Artist Registry provides a forum for HIV+ visual artists to display and share their work with viewers worldwide and provides an opportunity for estates of artists lost to AIDS to *preserve* the work of these artists in a comprehensive online archive” (Ibid). The language of preservation makes its appearance early in the Project’s development. In 1995 for a show on the first ten artists documented, Debs described the importance of “marginalized communities” doing the work of “recording clearly and fully the events which inform their lives, and by *preserving* these records, members of such communities help ensure that their stories survive” (Visual AIDS 1995). Early recruitment materials include similar statements about preservation. A 1995 call reads, “Nobody knows the loss to our culture through AIDS. We do know that bodies of art are being buried in storage and sometimes thrown away. We seek a fuller view of the achievements of artists living with AIDS. One common theme in art today is the *preservation* of a living voice. A collective form of this is the Archive Project” (Ibid).
This brief description captures the early focus of the project on saving artworks from neglect and destruction. It also makes an interesting connection to trends in the contemporary art world to support the need for such acts on a communal scale. The focus on preservation of artworks, artistic voices and legacies, and AIDS cultural activism through archiving is not merely a rhetorical one for Visual AIDS.

Figure 5: Slides from the Archive Project on Display above File Cabinets Holding artists files in the Visual AIDS Office, June 2015.

The Archive Project houses hard copies of slides, biographic information, and other materials in its artists’ files at the small and art-filled office of the organization (Figure 5). That
office space is located in Chelsea a neighborhood on the west side of Manhattan in a building of galleries and artists studios. The building is not climate controlled and does not provide the ideal conditions for long-term preservation of what are largely photographic materials. As early as 1995 there was an awareness of the need to engage in digitization of the collection in order to ensure the long-term preservation of the materials and to increase access (Visual AIDS 1995).

Digitized images from the Project have been featured in rotating, guest curated web galleries since 1999 (Visual AIDS, “History”). A large-scale digitization project took much longer to accomplish as a small organization. For most of its existence Visual AIDS had a staff of two, which has grown to three. Their budget relies on grant funding for projects such as digitization. With the help of interns in the early 2000s, they began this process with many artists by just selecting a few slides to digitize in house in order to get as many artists up online as quickly as possible. Digitization efforts on a large scale began in earnest after receiving a grant from the Joan Mitchell Foundation in the mid-2000s.

Digitizing the archives raised important questions about, “how does it look, how do we promote it, how do we talk about it, how do we include, do we need, what’s missing,” Sur (2016) said. Many artists had given the Project materials only at a single deposit, whether it was because they lost interest, simply forgot, were ill, or were not making art anymore (McGowan 2016). Visual AIDS contacted all of the artists before the online launch in 2012. For artists who passed away getting in touch with their estates often proved difficult. As McGowan said many artists don’t have estates at all, and even if they do the executor “is not a person with a background in art, who is saving their brother’s or friend’s art as best they can, perhaps in their garage or a storage unit, but isn’t thinking about getting the work seen” (Ibid). The team had to make decisions on a one-on-one basis about whether they would post the work online of artists that
they simply could not reach. The solution for many artists who had passed became to create “memorial pages.” Such pages include “a line of text that says ‘This tribute page was created by Visual AIDS’” (Fialho 2016). The Visual AIDS team erred on the side of inclusivity when making difficult decisions, as Santos (2016) said, the “idea is that we preserve this history and if the history isn’t visible, then what’s the point of that? So we wanted to put that work up.”

The Artist+ Registry was formally launched in November 2012 and features digitized versions of many of the original slides held in the Archive Project as well as new work added directly by Artist Members (Visual AIDS, “Archive Project”). It was renamed Santos (2016) said, “because archive sounds so final, like a ‘closed box’ and we wanted artists living with HIV to feel this is an ongoing, involving project and resource to them.” The team finished the final components of the registry at McGowan’s home following Hurricane Sandy. As Kerr (2016) described it “that weekend was like the Wizard of Oz [where] like nothing is the same after the storm.” It was an aptly dramatic moment for the launch as Kerr said, “I think for individual artists it was huge” (Ibid). For some artists being online was the source of pure excitement. It was also for some contributors, especially those who do not work professionally as artists, a legitimizing experience as it made their work newly accessible. McGowan (2016) said, “There are a lot of people who when their work is chosen in a web gallery its an exciting thing and it validates their belief in themselves as an artist.” It was not just a significant moment for living artists. The digital archives aimed to bring artists who had passed “back through showing their artwork…if someone died in ‘89 or ‘91 they don’t really have a web presence.” “Mining” the archives to put that work online Fialho (2016) said has often brought artists “back from obscurity, if not complete historical amnesia.”
In the process of creating an online platform for the Artist+ Registry, some artists living with HIV declined having their work digitized and put online. As opposed to the Archive Project, which was held in the privacy of Visual AIDS’s office, the online access to the Artist+ Registry is very public and easily searchable. Previously, in instances where an artist would be widely and publically identified as HIV positive, such as exhibitions, they were contacted for permission. For many, disclosure of their HIV status is a very personal matter, for some artists living with HIV, the inclusion in the Artist+ Registry made the privacy of their serostatus too public, specifically for those whose jobs may require working with the public. For example, some artist members were also teachers, “who worry that their students might Google them,” and “they didn’t want the first thing their students to learn about them was that they are HIV positive and worry that this would influence their first option of them” (Santos 2016). Santos cited the example of one teacher who told him “that he comes out to his students early on in the semester every year, both as being a gay man and being HIV positive, but he wants to do it on his own terms (Ibid). There were also some artists who have commercial careers and “so again they don’t want someone to Google them and have someone’s bias keep them from getting a job” (Ibid). Despite the risks the majority of the artists in the Project chose to participate. Occasionally, Visual AIDS still gets artists who wish to donate materials but do not want to be part of the online archives. In those cases they register artists the “old fashioned way” by creating a file in their office (McGowan 2016).

“There is the natural human inclination towards preserving because” those materials, as Rhein (2016) said, “had currency in the past.” We must deny the “tendency to relegate things to stagnant preservation” (Ibid). The Archive Project and Registry are not oriented through the focus on preservation towards the past. As Rhein described “within the pain held by the
documents of disease there is life… its not preserving it like its dead, its history and it’s gone” (Ibid). He continued articulating the reasons he and other volunteers have done the hard work of archiving, “we’re preserving it because there is a life and essence there that goes beyond that time and that place, that goes through us and beyond, that wants to inform what we were, what we are and what we want to become” (Ibid). If there is no value in this for the present and for the future he concluded, “just bury it and let it rot” (Ibid). Rhein framed the work of the Archive Project in preserving this history and these legacies in relation to the experiences of long-term survivors, “for someone like myself, as someone whose lost people, and come close to death, there is also a wanting to have what we went through to matter in some real sense that it was that it has some kind of meaning beyond that particular experience” (Ibid).

The Archive Project as Care

Care is found in the very root of cure. Cure is often associated with “care, concern, [and] responsibility” (OED; Glannon 2004, 71; Krysa 2015, 116). From its location within an arts organization the Archive Project and Registry were designed in large part to be a curatorial resource. The verb “to curate” in the context of histories of exhibition making in the West, can be traced to the same Latin root as cure, “cura” (Acevedo-Yates 2014, 13; Galloway and Thacker 2006, 154). The noun curator comes from the Latin “curatus,” which referred to the person who was entrusted with the care of the souls of a particular parish (Krysa 2015, 116). In relation to the arts this genealogy emphasizes the care of collections through the responsibility for the acquisition, storage, preservation, conservation, documentation, and exhibition of such works
These origins of curating emphasize concepts of responsibility and caretaking that are evidenced in the Archive Project.

The documentation and archiving by community members of their fellow artists’ creative output and documentation is an affective practice of care. Caring and healing are an essential component of enacting a holistic cure. I argue in this section that “activist archiving” (Flinn and Alexander 2015, 331) is driven here by an affective state, a longing for such a cure. Affect thus motivated the creation of this archives. Nostalgia as an affective mode in turn drives in significant part the use of this archives in the present.

Affect is a force that creates a relationship (conscious or otherwise) between a body (individual or collective) and the world. As I utilize it, affect is a category that both encompasses “emotions of all sorts” (Gilliland 2015, 31) and reaches beyond them. Emotion names that feeling that is given function and meaning and is closely tied to action (Ngai 2005, 26-27). In contrast, affect is a less formed, structured and fixed force that nonetheless shares many of the qualities of emotion (Ibid). Affect is at the core of how we form, sustain and break social relations, differences and individual and collective identities. Archives are in large part about creating, documenting, maintaining, reconciling and (re)producing such relations—between records and people, ideologies, institutions, systems and worlds—across bounds of time and space. Visual AIDS engages affectively in care through the acts of the acquisition,

34 Carla Acevedo-Yates (2014) notes that a particular word’s etymology does not necessarily dictate the practices that emerge from it. However, in the case of curating, such origins do play a significant role in how the practice is understood and discussed. Acevado-Yates further contextualizes this history in the context of the nation state with its formation of “the public museum in 18th century Europe, the collection had a civilizing mission: to educate the population about the history, values, and virtues of its cultural lineage, in which ancient Greece and Rome were held to be the originary cradles of civilization” (Ibid, 13). For such understandings she draws on scholarship on the history of the museum (See Bennett, 1995).

35 For more on definitions of affect and an overview of affect theory as applicable to archival studies see Marika Cifor (2016a; 2016b).
documentation, description, preservation, accessibility, and exhibition of archival materials to the
members of the community and to broader publics. The staff also takes responsibility for using
the archives and its materials in service of the present of the epidemic, caring for those most
affected by HIV and AIDS. There is also pleasure and other affects to be acknowledged in the
experience of being an archivist, “caring for the materials, touching the materials, there is this
kind of intimate relationship you have with the ephemera” (X 2016b). Alexander R. Galloway
and Eugene Thacker (2006) have examined biopolitical aspects of curating shows that are
dedicated to epidemics and disease. Galloway and Thacker write, “with the act of curating an
exhibit of viruses or epidemics one is forced to “care” for the most misanthropic agents of
infection and disease. One must curate that which eludes the cure” (Ibid).

Affect was a significant motivation for the founders and early members of the Archive
Project. These affects include the intimacies and affection between loved ones, mourning,
suffering, fear, and care. Affect has not been adequately examined as a motivation for
performing archival work. For Moore it was the experience of a dying sculptor friend that was a
key source of motivation for the archives. “He was worried about the disposition of his work,”
Moore stated in an interview (Blumenthal 1995). “One day, like a miracle, a dumpster
materialized in front of his door. He loaded it all in and went home to his family and died. [The
work was] all lost” (Ibid). Rhein (2016) described Hirsh, who had invited him to join the
Committee, in affective terms as an “extremely sensitive, passionate person.” Hirsh’s lover, artist
Abbott Burns,36 had died of AIDS related causes. This has left Hirsh’s “little apartment…filled
with Abbott’s work” (Ibid). Rhein cites Hirsh as “a prime example of this man who loved this
man, loved his work, understood and lost him” to AIDS (Ibid). Hirsh was faced with the question

36 Burns’ first name is alternatively spelled “Abbot.”
of what to do with Burn’s work and how to preserve his legacy. He became deeply devoted to building an archives to preserve the work of other artists who had died or who were sick and dying. His commitment reached a point where Rhein said Hirsh “was devoting all of his energy into helping and in danger of not having his own place to live, healthcare and [of meeting other] needs.” All of this meant “he had to find a way of resolving this scenario so he wouldn’t vanquish himself even though he was a [HIV] negative man”(Ibid). Hirsh began extricating himself from the Archive Project in 1996. These experiences point to another affective state of archiving and activism, burnout.

The early Archive Committee members shared motivations with Moore and Hirsh for archiving that crossed the affective and the intellectual, the personal and the professional. In conversation with his husband Sur, Hendricks said “I came head on into the crisis with the loss of Brian Buczak, my lover and fellow artist…He left a legacy, but there was so much more that he wanted to do. With his death there was an initial feeling that somehow I must carry forth and realize those unrealized dreams” (1996, 56). Like Hirsh, Hendricks confronted the practical challenges of preserving, arranging, describing and getting that artwork seen. He “had the awareness that this loss was just one, a small island in a great sea. There was a whole archipelago of collections of work” (Ibid). Addressing Sur directly he says, “You went through the same kind of situation with Andreas Senser. When we came together and got married…we realized that this was also a marriage of archives of those we had nursed at their end” (Ibid). In 1988 Sur had left his gallery position because he could not deal with “picking up the phone and calling another artist and finding out they can’t answer the phone they couldn’t get across the room to get a glass of water” (Sur 2016). He turned his attention to caring for artists, including assisting them in

37 Hirsh is out of contact with Visual AIDS and could not be reached during the course of this study.
organizing their records. Juarez’s (2016) voice broke as he held back tears describing how AIDS had “decimated” many lives. “I didn’t know what to do,” Juarez said, “I thought that [the Archive] was the most amazing idea because there were so many people that were losing their lives, and had to worry that their artwork, their life’s work would not continue would not be cared for. I saw it over and over again. People’s families would come and just throw things out…it was real. It was terrifying…it just broke my heart” (Ibid). For Rhein the motivation to archive came from his artistic practice and concerns over the survival of his own work as a positive artist. The Archive Project was the “beginning of finding a forum,” as Hendricks’ said, “for realizing dreams” (Hendricks and Sur 1996, 57). Geographers Paul Ashmore et al. argue that the “hidden collaborations and socialities” between archivists and those being archived shape meaningfully the context, content, and space of the archives that are produced (2012, 81). May Chazan et al. also reflect on the emotional aspects of archival collaborations with activists, describing how they and their activist collaborators experienced a range of emotions including excitement, apprehension, nostalgia, urgency, and accomplishment as a result of the archival process (2015, 72).

Affect is significant in the use of archives by activists. Buchanan and Bastian (2015) argue that affect is of particular importance to activist engagements with archives while much scholarship now asserts the central role of emotion within activism. As the authors state, “If activism is just as much about influencing ideas about what one ‘ought’ to do, as it is about acquiring knowledge of what ‘is’ (or was), then it is important to explore, not just which archives activists might draw upon, but also the affective power of archives and how this might relate to their value as activist tools” (Ibid, 435). It is an affective relationship to earlier periods of AIDS cultural activism, the 1980s and early 1990s that McGowan (2016) identifies as driving interest
in the Archive Project among younger generation of users. Visual AIDS uses the archives and registry to educate and inspire. On site and digital research in the archives is done by artists, curators, scholars, students, and activists. McGowan noted that in recent years they have experienced a significant increase in the number of younger users coming into the archives. These users “are nostalgic for activism,” she said (Ibid). They are drawn to the Archive Project because of the inclusion of the artists whose “work and who they are representative of a time that a lot of people have a lot of nostalgia for, the late ‘80s and early ‘90s AIDS activism” (Ibid). These users interested in the works of those artist members who were early members of ACT UP as well as others who worked at the nexus of art and activism. It is a relatively simple attraction to the aesthetics of an activist past that drives some users to the archives. However, its usage can transform this into a more critical nostalgia for some users who want to explore the Archive Project and Visual AIDS as “example[s] of art activism, the power of art in that way” (Ibid). McGowan connects this more critical nostalgic use with the political awakenings that arose among younger activists from engagement in the Black Lives Matter and Occupy movements (Ibid). These are contemporary social justice movements in which images were central to activists’ work. That image-driven activism caused people to revisit activist groups such as ACT UP and Gran Fury, and the ways that they strategically deployed “images to get the message across in a way that was really powerful and that worked,” McGowan said (Ibid). A new generation of activists “are actively looking at art from that time to be inspired, to do activism now” (Ibid). These comments point both to the affective motivations for doing archival research, but also to the potential of activists use of archives for inspiration and strategy.

The engagement with affect has also been explicitly framed in curatorial work with the Archive Project and Registry. Out of his recent residency at Visual AIDS artist and community
archivist Ajamu X (2016a) curated a web gallery from materials in the Archive Project, “Archival Pleasures.” The web gallery featured on the Visual AIDS site in July 2016 addresses affective archival use through the lens of pleasure. Bringing attention to pleasure centers X’s larger concern with the question of “what an archive is doing” (2016b). Following Ann Cvetkovich, queer and activist archives have been read as providing “an emotional rather than a narrowly intellectual experience” (2003, 241). X (2016) offered an example of the importance of affect in his own use of archives. He said, “I touch the flier from the first and only black gay men’s conference it does something to me every single time, there are goosepimples because its not just about the event, It is the texture of the paper, the colors and technology of the time, used in the design, it is the materiality of the flyer, its who I met, its the people who’ve I’ve still got friendships with over nearly 30 years, its the people I slept with it, it’s the people who’ve died, who no longer identify as gay, this object installs all that stuff” (Ibid). This is an embodied experience and an affective one that acknowledges the “little things we can’t quite pin down, but we feel it, and we just know it…” (Ibid). Considering affect in archival use means acknowledging that others will have an entirely “different experience of the same object” (Ibid).

Through this exhibit X wanted to change the conversation about archives documenting queer lives and experiences. “As for me then we don’t talk about archives, history and politics around the sensuousness of those things. I think we get locked into your big clunky things around identity…around representation, it’s around social justice, important issues,” X continued but it’s “things like feelings, emotions, that’s what fuels those politics, it’s what creates those politics.” X said, “I think archives and archiving, acquisitions, and processing procedures can clean up our histories and makes it presentable and palatable, so things about around sex, desire, fucking…so on one level they can’t be archived neither, but they play an important role in who we are and
what we are as well. I think we need to find a way to articulate those things we can’t put in boxes. However, they are there already, already there anyway” (Ibid).

The Archive Project’s focus on collecting “the visual record” (Sur 2016) itself may be significant to the potential for its affective use. Artist member Becky Trotter concluded her 1996 essay on the Project,

Artists through time have laid before us not only beautiful works of art, but also pictures that tell stories. Some of these stories we may never fully know. The story of AIDS is not over. I have heard people say that one day we will all look back and remember the great numbers of people who lost their lives in the struggle against AIDS, and the people who fought for the same. Not only will we have memories, we will also have the images that courageous artists living with AIDS left for others to see and feel (33).

Trotter’s words highlight the importance of the visual as a sensorial experience that opens viewers to affective modes of use with these materials. That it is a non-traditional collection in a community-based space opens the Project to affective engagements and uses. The Archive Project is big enough Rhein (2016) said, “to hold the multifaceted all encompassing energy Visual AIDS has for recognizing that historical remembrance is a means to informing our future. It brings contemporary vitality to honoring the past. Within this there is vulnerability, resilience and hope for the future. It’s inclusive of the complex intricacy of HIV and AIDS. There is recognition within the archive as to what HIV and AIDS has contributed to our humanity. It is both elegiac and a celebration of life. It’s very sex positive, its intergenerational, multicultural, queer, expansive.” The breadth of the archives means it can be examined to understand what “we make of this experience” of HIV/AIDS and to “honor all aspects of it” and to affirm its “transformative” and affective power (Ibid).

*The Archive Project as a Limited Cure*
In 1996 Debs described how it was a cure for “cruelty and fear” that Visual AIDS was seeking (1996, 21). In the next line he wrote, “A part of this cure, and, indeed, a very small part, are the efforts of the Archive Project” (Ibid). Debs words mark an acknowledgement of the limitations of what the archives can actually do as a cure for a deadly and far-reaching epidemic from early on in its development. It has been more than twenty years since this essay was written and still there is no cure for HIV/AIDS. The archive is unable to cure HIV/AIDS even as a cultural phenomenon. It cannot end discrimination, stigma, and fear. Yet, the archives does important work in pointing to art as a resource for the fight against “cruelty and fear” that still pervades even in the wake of more effective treatments for HIV and lowered transmission rates in some communities (Ibid). The Archive Project has become the largest registry of artists with HIV/AIDS (Visual AIDS, “Archive Project”). The relief that the Archive Project provides its contributors, the Artist Members, is not from HIV/AIDS as an ongoing disease, but another kind of demise. It provides a relief from the fear over the loss and destruction of their artistic work and career.

The two parameters for donating to the Archive were established early on. The first is that a participant self-identifies as an artist. The second is that they are HIV positive and are willing to disclose their HIV status in a publically accessible archive. Moore articulated two reasons why artists work around AIDS “must be preserved,” first the works’ “intrinsic value” and second its “historic (AIDS) value” (1993-1995). “The goal,” Sur (2016) said at the beginning, “was to collect the work of as many artists that we could that were working, that had either died or were still living. Just to see what it would look like. Period. Just to see what we could find. We didn’t want it to look a certain way, we didn’t know how it would look…” The scope of the archives in the mid-1990s was an open question. There were discussions of having facilities,
including permanent exhibition space (Juarez 2016) and a storage space for artworks (Rhein 2016). Hirsh also planned to interview and videotape each artist in their studio showing and talking about their work (Rhein 2016). Moore and Rhein both identify the photographer John Dugdale as an important figure in developing the form the archives would eventually take. Dugdale was going blind from cytomegalovirus (CMV), a common condition for persons living with HIV (Moore 1996a; Rhein 2016). With assistance Dugdale was able to continue to make, show, and document his photographs (Moore 1996a, 21). A beautiful series of photographs taken by Rhein of Hirsh interviewing Rhein on a visit to his farm in upstate New York in the summer of 1994 is all that remains of those interviews within the archives (Figure 6). A few interviews were conducted, but quickly members began to realize that completing them was unrealistic given the funding and space that were available. They began to focus on collecting images. The Archive Project became and remains an archive of slides, press clippings, artist statements, printed invitations, small artworks, papers, and other related materials.
The archives has significant race, gender, class, and geographic limitations in its representation of AIDS activism and cultural production, past and present. “Because it’s open to anyone, it does provide a more democratic opportunity for someone to join,” Santos said however, “it would be blind of me to say it’s a complete or fully equal representation” (2016). When Visual AIDS first started it was primarily “gay white men, because that’s the group that was really coming together, that had some money behind it, that were able to work as artists,” McGowan (2016) said. In its early years much attention was given to those within the same community, largely other gay white men. This also resulted in the Archive including “far fewer”
women, people of color, and transgender persons for much of its history (Ibid). The representation in the archives over time, Kerr (2016) said, “can track like who do we imagine is living with HIV and who had the ability to announce that they are living with HIV.” Santos (2016) estimated that within a group of about 700 artist members today only 50 are artists of color. In describing how they address these “silences, absences, in the archive” Kerr (2016) says they “find them,” “put a name to them,” and “promote them.” In the last decade Visual AIDS has been making conscious efforts to bring in underrepresented artists, this in part about reflecting how “the nature of how the crisis has changed” in terms of the populations most affected (McGowan 2016). Citing the example of recruiting HIV positive women, McGowan emphasized the importance of their collection development policy to these efforts. “The idea of how we define someone being an artist,” is significant, for us ‘you’re an artist if you make art” McGowan said (Ibid). She continued, “It doesn’t matter if you “don’t have representation in a gallery or you don’t have an MFA” (Ibid). In working with HIV positive women we often have to encourage them by saying, “You’re an artist. You can be an artist member. You have 10 paintings at home; you can have a page on our registry. It’s not about you being a professional artist” (Ibid).

Geographic representation was also for much of its tenure limited to New York based artists. McGowan wants to expand the archives into major centers of the contemporary crisis, such as the American South (Ibid). Increasing their online presence has begun to make the archives more accessible to artists beyond the New York arts community.

Ajamu X’s “Archiving Activists Portrait Project” offers an example of Visual AIDS’ centering of the archives in its current programs to encourage the production of new dialogues in the present (Visual AIDS 2016b). It also demonstrates the organization’s commitment to increasing the representation of and engagement with communities of color within the archives.
X was Visual AIDS’ fourth Curatorial Resident in March 2016 (Ibid). He spent a month conducting research in the archives as well as activating the contemporary nexus of the AIDS activists and arts communities through dialogues, studio visits, and public programs. In his project proposal X wrote,

rarely is the Black LGBTQ experience explored through the lens of celebration and creativity, individual aspirations and achievement—essentially, the day-to-day lived experience is missing: the layers, the diversity, the individuals are not seen. What interests me is that the body of work in Visual AIDS’ facilitates a different discussion for some of the reductionist ideas that circulate within this area of work within the UK, in particular for Black LGBTQ people.

For his project X met with fourteen young activists of color he selected to discuss their art, activism, inspirations, and perspectives on what he terms “archives activism.” That “archives activism” he said is “about presenting another kind of politic” in which the distinctions between activist, archivists, and artists are dismantled and where “social engagement work” is “not devoid of the senses, and I would even go as far as to say the erotic and other passions” centered in the archives (2016b). The activists who participated in his project, “some of them were born in 81, 82 when AIDS came into being” (Ibid). He wanted to understand and to document that very different relationship to HIV/AIDS. X produced a video interview and took a portrait of each activist that was published on the Visual AIDS blog (Visual AIDS 2016). He presented the portraits and videos during a public event, “Suitcase Under The Bed: Ephemera Gathering Public Workshop.” It was also an important component of his project “to put that new work back into the Archive” (X 2016b). Making such an intervention he said, “For me, its about how do we create living archives? Knowing that the archive is not just a space I go to, but I also and archive and bring my lived experiences, memories, hopes, desires to the archive. So when I have put work back into the archive it keeps the archive moving, alive and fresh” (Ibid). X’s project was also focused on inserting “a black and brown experience because…generally, we don’t hear
those voices around this kind of work” (Ibid). X shares the commitment of Visual AIDS to bring the past to bear on the present in service of the future. His project was focused on the contemporary AIDS activists, while he said, “for me its around kind of archiving is about the ‘past,’ and this ‘present’ and the ‘future’…simultaneously how do I then archive this now, this moment?...I wonder can I install this moment, that speaks to a black and brown queer futurity, these multiple dialogues now?” (Ibid). Projects such as the one by X mark an important move towards representing the present realities of AIDS and making them accessible now and for the future. Yet, these efforts will need to be sustained, reflective, and shifting as the AIDS epidemic itself continues to be both incurable and changeable.

Conclusion

Nostalgia is a component of activist archiving. Nostalgia as a longing for the past is part of the holistic understanding of the “cure” that Visual AIDS has called and worked for through its Archive Project and Artist+ Registry. The orientation of nostalgia towards the past offers a way forward for the community of artists living with HIV and AIDS that Visual AIDS serves. It utilizes archival documentation, access, preservation, and care as a way towards healing and survival for this community in the present and for the future. This chapter contributes to a growing literature on “activist archiving.” As Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander define it, “activist archiving” is the “activities in which archivists…seek to campaign on issues such as access rights or participatory rights within records’ control systems or act to deploy their archival collections to support activist groups and social justice aims” (2015, 331). The study and practices of activist archiving emerge from the shift in the archival profession towards an “archival practice which, rejecting professional advocacy of neutrality and passivity,
acknowledges the role of the recordkeeper in ‘actively’ participating in the creation, management, and pluralization of archives and seeks to understand and guide the impact of that active role” (Ibid). The literature on activist archiving broadly asserts that practices and processes of archiving can themselves be a form of activism in support of political, human rights, and other social movements. Activist archiving is not restricted to those who are professionally trained archivists, it is also the work of activists, volunteers, and others with a stake in the archives. At Visual AIDS activists use an archives to serve and to advocate for their own community.

The Archive Project stands within a long tradition of activist archiving that in part, originates in the wake of shifts prompted by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Radical historian Howard Zinn called in 1970 for archivists to “humanize” their practice through the rejection of false neutrality enacted by professionalism and in refusing to serve as “instruments of social control in an essentially undemocratic society”; and instead to “play some small part in the creation of a real democracy” (1970, 25). Zinn’s appeal for an archival “rebellion” (Ibid, 20) inspired contemporaneous archivists to make their own calls for recognizing the political significance of archiving and to develop new critical and creative approaches to archival practice (Ham 1975; Quinn 1977). Much of the early archival activism inspired by Zinn and others in the archival community was aimed specifically at efforts to document underrepresented communities in the archives (Jimerson 2007, 266; Quinn 1977, 513; Warner 1977). Visual AIDS is engaged in such a project.

The significant engagements with activism in archival literature come largely in the wake of a scholarly turn fueled by critical and postmodern theories that resulted in the widespread recognition by both archival scholars and practitioners of the need for activist archiving (Flinn 38.

Vladan Vukliš and Anne J. Gilliland (2016) offer detailed history of multiple strands of archival activism that begins with Zinn’s seminal 1970 speech.
and Alexander 2015, 331). A critical understanding of archives as manifestations and tools of power exposed the power imbalances inherent to traditional archival practices and demonstrated that the seemingly objective and neutral approaches to practice served to create an archival record heavily biased towards those in power. As Maurice Wheeler argues, neutrality “can be a very dangerous and irresponsible position for archivists to take” (2011, 8). Likewise, Amanda Strauss illustrates how in the context of deep violations of human and civil rights in Chile archival “inaction causes harm” and neutrality becomes an “untenable position” (2015, 371).

Activist archiving operates from an understanding that archivists and archives are neither objective nor neutral. This position is in marked contrast to traditional understandings of the archivist’s role as the passive custodian of the historical record (Schwartz and Cook 2002, 1).

Verne Harris outlines the “core positivist formulations” found within traditional archival practices: that archives’ meanings are static and uncontested; that archives are the result of the natural product of process, one that beyond the archivist themselves; and that archival discourse is focused on custodianship of records (1997, 133-134). The scholarship that emerged from critiques of objectivity, neutrality and passivity in archival practice and that explored the political and cultural functions of archives in society, articulates the need for and possibilities offered by archivists acting as proactive agents in record creation, management, and dissemination. It points to the positive implications of an activist archival practice for social justice. As Harris succinctly suggests, “the archivist is a memory activist either for or against the oppression system” (2011, 121). While much progress has been made, the discourse about the desirability and possibility of neutrality stretch into the present as illustrated by the hotly contested debate about whether social justice is an archival imperative between Mark Greene (2013), Michelle Caswell (2013), Randall

39 For more on the debates on the possibility and desirability of “archival neutrality” see Gilliland 2011.
Jimerson (2013), and Mario H. Ramirez (2015). An understanding of archiving as a process of 
enacting a holistic cure for HIV/AIDS at Visual AIDS moves beyond discussions of neutrality to 
assert that the archivist can and should be personally and affectively engaged.

The literature on archival activism has significant ties to discourse on community 
archives. In the words of Schwartz and Cook, conventional record creating and archival practices 
mean, “some can afford to create and maintain records and some cannot; that certain voices thus 
will be heard loudly and some not at all; that certain views and ideas about society will in turn be 
privileged and others marginalized” (2002, 14). Flinn, along with Mary Stevens and Elizabeth 
Shepherd, argues that community archives can redress or shift those patterns of privileging and 
marginalizing (2009, 74). Caswell identifies “archival activism” as a “key principle” to be drawn 
from community archives discourse for the larger archival field (2014a, 308). Caswell argues 
that the acts of collecting and preserving records that affirm the existence of communities that 
have historically “been silenced, erased, or marginalized is a political act” (2014b, 35). 
Recently, Vukliš and Gilliland have gone as far as to identify community archives as “an 
important form of archival activism” (2016, 18). A number of studies of community archives 
practitioners have found that they see their archival engagements as activist labors as well as a 
means of promoting community empowerment and social change (Wakimoto et al. 2013; Cooke 
2007, 8-11, 109-130).

The critical discourse on activist archiving together with archivists’ proactive changes to 
their practices have significantly altered archival scholarship and practice. Of particular 
relevance here is the profound impact of activist archiving on outreach strategies. Public 
programming, including exhibitions, panels, and other events, are a prominent function of Visual 
AIDS. While acceptance of archival activism has grown and its aims have moved beyond the
mere diversification of the archival record, a number of archival studies scholars and activists assert archival activism needs to evolve even further. In a recent article Joanne Evans et al. call for an “analysis of the systemic problems associated with meeting the current recordkeeping and archival-related identity, memory, and accountability needs” of diverse communities (2014, 348). The authors argue that there is an imperative “for archival advocacy and activism, with archival autonomy to support community and individual self-determination as a major objective” (Ibid). The work of Visual AIDS reflects such an imperative to activist archiving and archives-based advocacy on behalf of the community it serves.

The devastation wrought by the HIV/AIDS epidemic continues and a medical cure remains elusive. It remains as true today as it was in 1996 that HIV/AIDS is more than a biomedical concern. HIV/AIDS is still highly stigmatized and those infected with the virus remain subject to discrimination, hatred, and fear, in ways formal and informal. Thus a holistic cure such as the one demanded by Visual AIDS requires an activist archiving practice, the caring for and deployment of records for social justice purposes. Archiving is a part of the cure for HIV/AIDS that is actually within our grasp. Nostalgia has not previously been considered in the context of activist archiving. However, nostalgia, a bittersweet relationship to a time or space that is irretrievably past, is an important consideration of such archiving work. Both archives and nostalgia recognize that parts of the past are lost. Yet, both demand that the past matters and that we maintain a connection to that past, which, in turn, shapes the present realities and possibilities for the future. Nostalgia is essential to the work for a holistic cure. Visual AIDS works to make accessible the full complexity of lives, experiences, and cultural production in the epidemic, and to demand a recognition of the unique and powerful work art and activism can do to challenge stigma, discrimination, and fear. It ensures that the past is not lost, and creatively employs the
longing for AIDS’ past and makes it visible in the present. It also makes uniquely accessible affective components of the AIDS crisis through documenting and making available the visual record. A holistic cure for HIV/AIDS requires such looking backwards as a means to heal and a way to live on for impacted communities.

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Chapter Five: Undetectable: Representation and Temporality in Archival Exhibitions

“We act as if HIV/AIDS is not in flux, that it’s stable. But in fact if you talk to anyone in the community, that’s not the case. We know a lot but we don’t know everything.”
—Avram Finkelstein (Buhl 2014)

Introduction

AIDS is not just a killer of humans, but one of art careers as well. Eric Rhein describes how, as a long-term survivor whose work contends with HIV/AIDS, he has not received the accolades and attention that fellow HIV positive artists who have died or have chosen not to make the virus visible in their artworks have. He questions how his now undetectable viral load mirrors that other sort of undetectability. “Undetectable” names the reduction of presence of HIV in the blood to one below the point of measurability through biomedical intervention. Rhein raised a series of questions about current the social implication of undetectability of HIV the virus and identity: “How does that word undetectable present me as a more physically desirable being in the world? Do I choose to share [my status now] as much as I did? Do I choose to have that [serostatus] to the front of my identity? If my viral load somehow become detectable again does it make me a different person?” (Rhein 2016). He noted “while an undetectable viral load is a blessing, somehow the term “Undetectable” can be equated with invisible, that what all I have been through that has informed who I am is erased, and this can feel invalidating” (Ibid). This chapter employs undetectability as the point of departure to consider representation and temporality in contemporary exhibitions of archival materials documenting AIDS activism and cultural production from the 1980s and 1990s. It also considers within such exhibition contexts the commissioning of new creative works inspired by and utilizing these archival records.
Undetectability is a focal point in contemporary discourses on HIV/AIDS in culture, activism, science, and public health. It produces and reproduces concerns of temporality, in/visibility, presence and absence, contagion and transmission, and the body and embodiment.

Undetectability has radically altered discourse around HIV/AIDS to focus on the future, instead of just the past and present. While it could be argued that such a reorientation would render nostalgia irrelevant to this topic, nostalgia despite appearing to be about the past has actually always been about the present and future as well. Nostalgia is critical for archives and archivists in the curatorial strategies they use to serve the HIV/AIDS activist community, both ethically and productively.

In 1987 AIDS activist and theorist Douglas Crimp wrote, “AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize it, represent it and respond to it” (1987, 3). In the present day of the ongoing epidemic, undetectability is an important practice in understanding, representing, and responding to HIV/AIDS. Undetectability renders the virus, which is already invisible to the naked eye, as also invisible to conventional testing measures. Yet, such treatments do not actually vanquish HIV. This means that HIV is understood in scientific, medical, and cultural discourses as a less, but not entirely non-infectious disease. Persons with an undetectable status may be subsequently reframed as respectable and responsible, while they hold the promise of halting contagion. Undetectability is thus connected with a measured notion of “safety, normalcy, and containment” (Köppert and Sekuler 2016).

Undetectability is also a temporal condition. It represents the biomedical interventions that have extended and improved in many ways the lives of persons with HIV. A long and relatively healthy life was a near impossibility in the 1980s and early 1990s. As Marita Sturken (2012) articulates the early AIDS epidemic should be characterized as “immediate, in the
moment, on the street, and carr[ying] a particular kind of temporal meaning.” This was an accelerated temporality that carried a sense of urgency and called for activism and engagement in the immediate present. Biomedical developments that created undetectability have brought a sense of security and safety, which though not entirely warranted, have shifted the temporality of HIV/AIDS in a Western context. Undetectability shapes current practices, policies, and the politics of engaging with persons living with HIV. It simultaneously shapes feelings, memory practices, and engagement with the past of AIDS. It also holds significant implications for the future of an ongoing disease. In its contemporary figuration nostalgia denotes a particular relation to time as well as to space. Nostalgia is understood as a longing for a time that is past and that cannot return. The past is undoubtedly a significant component of nostalgia’s temporal orientation. However nostalgia is never just about the past, it is always and simultaneously about the present and the future as well (Boym 2001, xvi). Like undetectability, nostalgia disrupts irrevocably established linear notions about the progress of time as a stable and consistent march forward from past to present to future. Novel understandings of temporality wrought by undetectability and nostalgia figure crucially into curatorial strategies.

This chapter analyzes a set of materials, texts, concepts, and practices around the exhibition of archival materials documenting AIDS, its activism and cultural production in the 1980s and early 1990s. It also examines the commissioned creation of new works by artists, writers, and activists in response to archival materials and exhibitions of them in recent years. It relies on semi-structured interviews with curators, archivists and librarians, artists, activists, and writers. It is also supported through a document analysis of exhibition documentation and creative products. The chapter begins by framing the concept of undetectability as a biomedical and cultural concept through a review of literature from public health, medical science, and the
arts. In the next section of the literature review the connections between archives and temporality in archival studies are addressed. The final section of the review looks at literature on exhibitions as an archival outreach and programming strategy, at studies of the exhibition of AIDS activist materials in museums, and on emergent scholarship on artists’ production of new works using archives and records. The chapter then turns to three cases of exhibitions by, for, and at my research sites during 2013 and 2014. The first case is *Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism* at the New York Public Library (NYPL) an exhibition featuring archival records drawn from its own collections on AIDS activism. The second case is a “flash collective” project, the Undetectable Collective. Their work was inspired by NYPL’s archival collections and was organized as part of the programming for *Why We Fight*. The third case is an exhibition collaboration between the Fales Library and Special Collections and Visual AIDS. *Not Only This But ‘New Language Beckons Us’* displayed records from the Downtown Collection in dialogue with newly commissioned creative works. Finally, the chapter offers an analysis of the contributions of undetectability to archival exhibitions. Undetectability crucially provides a framing for practice of critical nostalgia in curating with archives of AIDS cultural activism.

**Literature Review**

*Undetectable as a Medical and Cultural Term*

In 1985 the first enzyme linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) test kit to screen for antibodies to HIV was developed and approved for use by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) (United States Food and Drug Administration 2014). This test emerged a year after HIV was officially identified as the etiological agent of AIDS, and five years after the first mention of cases in the United States attributed to the virus (Ibid). The test inaugurated the fraught categories of
“positive” and “negative.” Positive/Negative became a profound binary in the fields of health, medicine, sexuality, politics, and culture. A decade later, in 1995 and 1996, the biotechnical development of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) offered for the first time the promise of an effective treatment for those living with HIV/AIDS (Hunt 1996). Eventually, those antiretroviral (ARV) treatments would enable a reduction of viral load to levels that elude conventional testing measures, to undetectability. Undetectability is understood as a new serostatus.

Members of a Swiss Federal Commission for HIV/AIDS, in a statement published in the 2008 edition of the Bulletin of Swiss Medicine, found that persons living with HIV on ARV could not transmit the virus via sexual contact if they had viral loads that had reached the level of undetectability for a period of at least six months (Vernazza et al. 2008). This built on research that had already proven ARVs effectiveness in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (Dao 2007). The statement quickly garnered much attention from the popular media, health-governing bodies, scientific communities, patient-advocacy organizations and healthcare activists. Both the media and public health responses most often took the form of cautious support. In an article for Time Magazine, for example, Alice Park (2008) described the statement as “bold and provocative,” but noted deep concern about “how this information is going to be used.” Similarly, an examination of the statement in public health nonprofit NAM’s HIV Treatment Update cites the hope garnered by the statement, but concludes with a section on how “nothing is risk free” (NAM 2008, 11). Later in 2008 an organization of persons living with HIV/AIDS presented the “Mexico Manifesto” (2008), which articulated a strong support for the Swiss statement’s conclusions. They emphasized its potential for enhancing the “quality of life”

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40 An undetectable load is defined as fewer than 40 copies of HIV per milliliter of blood (Dao 2007).
and social integration of people living with HIV (Ibid). They expected that the statement would alter the “public image of people with HIV,” shifting public understanding to reflect “current life-realities. That means first and foremost: The images of dangerous and irresponsible individuals or of wretched people devoid of personal responsibility are disclaimed” (Ibid). This group thus highlighted the potential for undetectability not just to counter false understandings of HIV as a biological death sentence, but also to counter social death.

The model of “treatment as prevention” currently dominates public health approaches to HIV. This is an agenda that promotes the desirability of undetectability, and materially enables its possibility. Treatment as prevention is the cornerstone of strategies to stop the epidemic by global, national, and local health-governing institutions and patient-advocacy groups. For example, this model is reflected in the central pillars of the UNAIDS strategy to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030 issued in 2014 (UNAIDS 2014). The UNAIDS strategy relies on increasing the percentage of persons living with HIV/AIDS who are aware of their serostatus. It also focuses on increasing the number of persons on ARVs and under medical supervision. Definitions of the end of AIDS in a public health context have come to mean the significant decrease in rates of transmission, rather than a cure for those already living with HIV or AIDS.41 A complete cure is rapidly becoming beyond the boundaries of both the imaginable and enactable (Gallagher 2014).

There is an emergent engagement with the cultural and political meanings of undetectability in the arts through the creation of new artworks, exhibitions, and writing. Undetectable a 2012 exhibition curated by Nathan Lee with the assistance of Rachel Cook for Visual AIDS at LaMama LaGalleria in New York City tackled through artworks and essays the complex realities

and meanings of this status. In his essay Lee describes how by containing and yet eluding understandings of both negative and positive serostatus, “undetectable” has become “an elusive third term belonging to those who were simultaneously both” (2012, 11). Lee describes undetectability as “signifying a presence that is absent, predicated on suppression and surveillance, the undetectable occupies an indeterminate space and produces new modes of connectivity, at once increasing the capacity of a body and subjecting it to a relentless regime of control” (Ibid). These comments highlight the concerns of bodily autonomy and the political economy at play in undetectability and in the crisis at large. In his essay, Andy Campbell asks, “How to best convey the feelings of confidence, defeat, survivorship, guilt, power, love, boredom, dailyness, relief, haunting, imbrication, and trauma that no doubt such persons experience?” (2012, 15). The quotidian aspects of HIV treatment are an important consideration in the quality of life of those impacted. Both Campbell’s essay and the exhibition itself are premised on “the specificity of ‘undetectable’ as an embodied identity that warrants consideration as a part of, and apart from, seronegative and seropositive statuses” (Ibid). This author’s comments reflect the concerns raised by Rhein. Campbell reports that the artworks featured in that exhibition are often appropriately “oblique” in their “reference to such a status, which may, in fact, describe the particular geometry of being undetectable” (2012, 15). Most recently, in a special issue of Drain Magazine on AIDS and Memory, Katrin Köppert and Todd Sekuler (2016) have an essay, “Sick Memory: On the Un-detectable in Archiving Aids.” The authors employ epistemological approaches from public health, queer studies, and humanities engagements with the archives to examine a recent exhibition of HIV/AIDS posters, AIDS. Based on a true story. Images +++ Media +++ Art at the Deutsche-Hygiene-Museum. Köppert
and Sekuler’s concern about the extent to which “undetectability” affects the memorializing of an ongoing disease through exhibitions is taken up in this chapter.

Archives and Temporality

In its modern iteration, like undetectability, nostalgia denotes a particular relation to time. Popularly it is conceptualized as a longing for a time that is past and that one cannot return to. Since the 17th century in the Western world a sense of temporality has been “characterized by the radical asymmetries of the past, present and future” (Huyssen 2006, 7). Simultaneously with the past nostalgia, as Boym (2001, xvi) astutely asserts, is about the present and the future as well. Nostalgia thus troubles linear understandings about the progress of time in significant ways. In the archives the past is both present in its material traces and yet no longer fully accessible, making the archives a powerful trigger for nostalgia on personal and collective levels. Archives are deeply concerned with concepts of time and are in turn central in the construction of temporality, the multiplicity of relationships emerging from existing within time. Eric Ketelaar (2002) employs the metaphor of a “time machine” to describe archives. He writes, “archiving – all the activities from creation and management to use of records and archives – has always been directed towards transmitting human activity and experience through time and, secondly, through space” (Ibid, 578, 580). The archival literature on temporality is small, but has had significant influence on understandings of the record and the role of archives in constructing identity. This chapter contributes to the discourse on archival roles in conceptualizing and representing temporality.

Brien Brothman (2010) does the most sustained and conceptual examination of the relationship of the archives to temporality in his article, “Perfect Present, Perfect Gift: Finding a
Place for Archival Consciousness in Social Theory.” Brothman suggests that the “preservation and transmission of records as archives can play a crucial role in shaping the human experience of temporality” (Ibid, 159). Temporal orientations influence deeply the construction of self. As Brothman posits, records can “evolve a sense of temporal continuity of the self,” be it on individual, collective or national scales (Ibid). Archives also play a meaningful role in “the arrangement of a community’s past, and, at the same time (through appraisal in the form of acquisition policy, appraisal, preservation policies and priorities), also foster a society’s imagination of its future,” effectually “establishing the quality and tensile strength of a community’s composite temporality” (Ibid). The support of certain archives by communities reflects their “imagination” of themselves as “a temporal community,” with a particular “degree of proximity [to] and integration with past and future generations” (Ibid). Archives and their records are uniquely situated within the societal construction of temporal consciousness and are crucial to the building as well as to the breaking down of intergenerational and historical solidarities (Ibid, 162).

The archival studies literature on temporality focuses primarily on its relation to the concept of the record. Kimberly Anderson’s (2013) article, “The Footprint and the Stepping Foot: Archival Records, Evidence, and Time,” devotes the most significant attention of these pieces to temporality. Anderson examines the temporal disconnection between the context of the record’s creation and its use. She writes, “The externalization of the record is still seen to create trustworthiness not otherwise possible. It is this untouched, external record that ‘just tells’”(Anderson 2013, 6). In other words, a temporal disconnection and externalizing of the record in line with a temporal threshold is required for a record to become understood as such in Western archival paradigms. Anderson proposes that the archival field redefine the record to
depend instead upon an intentional, stable, and semantic structure. Her proposed definition still includes a temporal engagement whereas a relationship to processes in time is what makes structure possible (Ibid, 15). Amelia Acker (2015) builds on Anderson’s work in her discussion of biorecords, which as living objects present meaningful challenge to linear concepts of time and externality in relation to definitions of the record. Each of these information artifacts carries within it “multiple layers of time…in their use as an experimental tool, disposition in management as an object of reference, as well as in the intention of their creation and establishment” (Ibid, 5). In Brothman’s (2002) work he employs the metaphor of “afterglow” to describe the complex politics of temporality that separate archival understandings of the “record” and “evidence.”

Discussions of the Australian concept of the records continuum as a model in contrast to the record’s lifecycle model also raise important temporal concerns for archives. The former is highly cognizant of its temporal implications. The continuum is influenced by postmodern theorizing and views “recordkeeping as a continually interacting and evolving set of contingent activities with individual, institutional, and societal aspects” (McKemmish and Gilliland 2012, 93). In his work on the meaning of “the past” in the contexts of history and memory in relation to archives Brothman argues that particular elements of the records continuum model “are more compatible with the idea of societal and organizational memory than the records life cycle, and further, that, on an archival reading, the records continuum is a more coherent temporal concept than the records life cycle” (2001, 48).

There is abundant engagement with concerns of temporality by queer theorists (Ferguson et al. 2007). Jamie A. Lee (2015) brings this work into the archival field as part of her development of a “Queer/ed Archival Methodology.” She argues in favor of reimagining
archival temporalities to “instantiate that past, present, and future and what came first are always blurring lines” (Ibid, 62). Lee continues,

the record can be further enriched by an understanding of the influential nature of temporal perspectives, an archival paradigm that acknowledges distinct and diverse temporal perspectives can thus elicit transdisciplinary and generative understandings of even the normativized—what has become normal and normative through repetition and consent—progressions of time, everyday rhythms, and those markers that the traditional archival records might embody (Ibid, 26).

Lee seeks to destabilize “chrononormativity” in an archival context. Chrononormativity comes from the work of queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman, who defines it as the normative ways that time is utilized to organize and structure people in order to promote them reaching their maximum possible productivity (2010, 3). Lee’s work goes beyond looking at merely what temporality might bring to archival definitions of the record. She also pushes at the boundaries of the stories the record tells in relation to temporality. Interrogating the normative temporalities used to situate archives historically is vital to the acknowledgment in the archival field that there are “alternative forms of social life that do not fit neatly into the chrononormative pattern,” Lee writes (2015, 151). Acknowledging alternative temporalities foregrounds the expansion of archives to better serve and resonate with diverse communities (Ibid). While not specifically engaged in queer temporalities, undetectability and nostalgia both makes closely related contributions to the project of questioning linear constructions of archival time and temporality.

There has also been a limited engagement with the particularities of activist materials in relation to temporality in the archival literature. Maryanne Dever (2014) labors to re-imagine the feminist archive in relation to her work with Merle Thornton’s papers. She aims to move away from questions of preserving memory of past feminist activism to anticipation and futurity through envisioning records as the basis for future feminist knowledge production (Ibid, 41). Alycia Sellie et al. (2015) address briefly the temporal particularities of activist archives.
suggest that the quickly shifting temporalities of activist spaces and the operational challenges, especially the financial costs, that are involved in housing collections permanently raise significant questions for activist archives projects. Many activist archives are able only to accommodate short-term projects under these conditions (Ibid, 462). Sellie et al. assert that the collections themselves and the movements they document may have strong associations with “impermanence” and ephemerality. Social activism and its cultures are frequently created “in formats that are difficult to preserve, whether because they have been created using mass production and inexpensive materials, or because they may involve formats—including audio, moving image, or digital materials—that are unstable” (Ibid, 462-463). Lisa Darms’ (2009) reflections on artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz’s “Magic Box” at the Fales Library offer evidence of the impermanence of activist materials in action. The Magic Box will eventually physically disintegrate and disappear. Darms’ argues that this eventual absence orients the archives notably to the future along with the past (Ibid, 153-154).

The extant literature on archives and temporality makes abundantly clear that archives have a meaningful and complex relationship to time. However, these inquiries have been limited in scope and the majority of them focus narrowly on the archival concept of the record. Looking to nostalgia and by extension to undetectability as particular temporal orientations offers much possibility for expanding understandings of time in relation to archives, their outreach and public programming. This chapter asserts that temporality is recorded not only in archival records, but also in exhibitions, descriptions, and documentation.

*Archives, Exhibitions, and Artists in Archives*
The archival studies literature on exhibitions is quite small. It is found, explicitly and implicitly, within the broader topic of outreach and public programming. The first guide to developing exhibitions in archives by the Society of American Archivists (SAA) was issued in 1980 (Casterline 1980). However, it was not until the early 1990s, with the larger shift in the literature and the archival profession towards outreach as a core archival function, that the topic of exhibitions began to receive attention. Beginning in that period strong arguments have been made for the value of exhibitions and related public programming to archival institutions, the archival profession, and the public (Blais and Enns 1990-1991; Cox 1993; Ericson 1990; Nosworthy 1994; Pederson 1993; Wilson 1990-1991). Much of the early literature called for a user centered approach to outreach (Wilson 1995). For example, Ian Wilson argued for reorienting public programming activities in archives to emulate aspects of museum environments and exhibitions (1990-1991). Such an approach encourages archivists to have a greater presence in the interpretation of their materials (Ibid). While supportive of this larger trend towards outreach, Terry Cook cautioned that records themselves must be at the center of public programming (1990-1991, 23). In the 2000s literature on archival exhibitions has taken the form of case studies. Catherine Nicholls (2003) used a contextualized case study of an Australian archival exhibition in order to develop a model of the components that contribute to “successful” exhibition activities for archives. She identified the following considerations for exhibition effectiveness: “clearly defined goals and objectives”; “an understanding/knowledge of the target audience”; “evidence of an evaluation process”; “application of strong design/presentation skills”; “a realistic and well organized use of available resources”; and “support from marketing activities, in particular publicity activities” (Ibid, 30). There is little indication as to whether others have taken up such a model. With the development of the Web
calls for exhibitions to be mounted online and the analysis of such exhibition activities emerged (Lester 2006). This literature highlights the new forms of user interaction available in such virtual exhibitions (Ibid, 90). Case studies, such as the Smithsonian’s use of the Flickr Commons, for digital exhibitions offer analysis of digital exhibition efforts with an eye to user interaction and technological innovation (Kalfatovic et al. 2008). More recently, archival scholars have addressed exhibitions in the context of larger digitization efforts by cultural heritage institutions. For example, a recent study by Diana Marsh et al (2016) aimed at assessing and demonstrating the impact of digitized ethnographic collections acknowledges the significance of exhibitions to archival access and storytelling. SAA continues to publish guides for professionals on exhibitions in archives and special collections with the most recent appearing in 2013 (Lacher-Feldman 2013). This guide includes practical topics and case studies on subjects such as marketing and branding for exhibitions, developing engaging exhibit labels, and best practices and policies (Ibid). Similar topics are covered in regularly offered professional development courses across the country (Society of American Archivists).

There is a small body of literature on the specific concerns of curating and exhibiting shows of AIDS activist materials. This work comes from visual culture studies and museum studies as well as the popular press. Two recent articles focus on the same exhibition, *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993*, in two different locations. The exhibition was held first at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard University in 2009 and subsequently at the art gallery White Columns in New York City in 2010. Andrew Weiner’s (2012) article, “Disposable Media, Expendable Populations,” focuses on the Harvard exhibition. He examines the new meanings that activist documentation takes on through display in a museum context. In “From the Streets to the Gallery: Exhibiting the Visual Ephemera of
AIDS Cultural Activism” Tara Burk (2013) focuses on the show at White Columns comparing it with a 2012 exhibition, *Gran Fury: Read My Lips* at New York University’s Steinhardt School Department of Art and Art Professions’ 80WSE gallery. Burk’s in-depth examination of recent curatorial attention to AIDS cultural activism and its attendant public art practices turns to issues surrounding the display of visual activist ephemera. She addresses questions including, “How can materials made for the demonstration be displayed in a gallery setting?” and “What contextualization is required in such settings?” (Ibid, 33). The curatorial strategies Burk focuses on include the presentation of original posters from the archives of such activism, and the reprinting and enlargement of graphic designs originally utilized as posters, billboards, and demonstration placards. She argues that both exhibitions studied employed an “archival aesthetic” to distinct purposes (Ibid). *ACT UP New York* was organized to evoke affective engagement, while *Gran Fury* emphasized the socio-cultural presentation of political art. While both Weiner and Burk focus on particular exhibitions their analyses extend beyond that of reviews. It is, however, largely in the limited form of exhibition reviews (Boyle 2010; Kim 2009; Myles 2010; Ryan 2013; Wasserman 2009) that greatly vary in depth and critical engagement that most of the analysis of exhibitions of AIDS cultural production from archives has been done to this point. It is worth noting that there is no literature available on the particularities of exhibiting AIDS activist materials within their archival context as is done in the cases examined here.

This chapter addresses the commissioning of new creative works for archival exhibitions. There is an emergent literature in archival studies on how artists understand, use, and critically respond to archives and archival records. Through the ethnographic study of an artist residency program Kathy Carbone’s scholarship is foundational to this area of inquiry. Carbone (2015; 2016) examines how artists conceptualize, use, exhibit, perform, and create with archives, how
and where archival records circulate as artworks of various forms, and how relationships are
developed around the use and reuse of records. Previously, Rachel Bracha (2013) examined the
artistic use of visual and audiovisual records in creative interpretation and re-creation of the
archival record in the context of a documentary film on the Holocaust. In a 2011 article
archivists Karl Magee and Susannah Waters (2011) examine a collaboration between a university
archives and a local art school on a number of projects. This collaboration of an archives with
artists, designers, and galleries resulted in the creation of new artworks inspired by the study of
the archives’ collection. It also helped to introduce the archives to new audiences, especially
those in the art world. Magee and Waters call for greater collaborations and focus on aesthetic
implications of archives and records. In a recent editorial, archivist Sue Breakell (2015) traces
through literature and example the potential of the convergence between the visual arts and
archives, including through exhibitions and engagement of artists with the archives to create new
works. These examples of recent scholarship in archival studies build on numerous examples in
arts literature of artists’ engagements as archival users (Spieker 2008; Enwezor 2008;
Merewether 2006; Borggreen and Gade 2013; Ostho 2009; Purdy 2007; Schaffner et al 1998;
Simon 2002). This chapter contributes to studies on the use of archives by artists as inspiration
for their creative works and on their display in exhibitions curated and/or hosted by archival
institutions.

Three Exhibitions

This chapter now examines in three short case studies exhibitions of AIDS activist materials
within the context of archival institutions that hold those records. It also examines the
commissioning and display of new creative works by artists and activists for these archival
exhibitions. The three cases emerged from and through collaborations across my research sites, the NYPL, the Fales, and Visual AIDS. All of the shows analyzed took place in 2013 and 2014 in New York City. The first case looks at the exhibition Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism held at the NYPL which featured archival records drawn from the Library’s collections on AIDS activism from the 1980s and early 1990s. The second case examines the work of the Undetectable Collective that was commissioned by the NYPL to accompany Why We Fight. The Collective’s work was inspired by the exhibition and their final product was exhibited at library branches and by Visual AIDS. The third case is an exhibition, Not Only This But ‘New Language Beckons Us,’ held at the Fales Library. This exhibition for Visual AIDS displayed materials from the Downtown Collection along with commissioned creative works from contemporary artists, writers, and activists. Together these exhibitions make important interventions around the representation and temporality of AIDS activism and cultural production of the past in the present and with a critical eye for the future. The lens of undetectability exposes these interventions by highlighting concerns of the contemporary AIDS epidemic, including representation, visibility, contagion and transmission, bodies and embodiment, and temporality.

“To Make This Moment Enter People’s Existence Again”

Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism showcased posters, pamphlets, artifacts, and video footage from the 1980s and 1990s from the NYPL’s collections of organizations and individuals pivotal in their responses to the AIDS epidemic. It ran from October 4, 2013 to April 6, 2014 at the Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III Gallery in the Stephen A. Schwartzman Building in Midtown Manhattan. The Wachenheim Gallery is a small room off Astor Hall, making it a prime location for attracting visitors while also constricting the scale of exhibitions. The show was named after
a 1988 speech of the same name by ACT UP activist Vito Russo, the same portion of which
opened the introduction to this dissertation and was included in the first panel. During Why We
Fight the gallery was completely packed with archival materials. Jason Baumann, Coordinator of
Humanities and LGBT Collections, and the archivist who had done much of the processing of
these collections, Laura Karas, curated the show. It was Baumann who took the lead on
curatorial decisions and strategy. He rejected the common linear temporal exhibition structure.
Baumann describes the exhibition narrative developed as “like a constellation” rather than “a
linear narrative” (Baumann 2016). The exhibition was organized topically. It included sections
on: “Changing Perceptions of People Living with HIV,” “Safer Sex and Needle Exchanges,”
“Public Mourning,” “Healthcare Activism,” and in the final panel, “HIV Today.” It was intended
to inform and inspire visitors, both those who have participated in AIDS activism and a general
public new to the subject.

The checklist for the show reveals that the materials on display were largely from the
Archives and Manuscripts Division as well as from the General Research Division and
Periodicals. The show also included a few items on loan from the Keith Haring Foundation, the
Fales Library, and the NYPL’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Reflecting
archival collections that are largely paper-based, the exhibition featured these materials along
with activist ephemera in a range of formats. The use of ephemera (including posters, pamphlets,
fliers, stickers, T-shirts, placards and buttons) is particularly important in this context insofar as
scholars have highlights its use, between 1981 and 1996, in galvanizing support for campaigns,
and demanding adequate attention to the crisis from the public, the media, corporations, and the
government (Burk 2013, 34). Activists often produced such materials cheaply and on a large-
scale with the hope for achieving far-ranging distribution. In addition to the strategic uses of such
ephemera Weiner identifies a “symbolic charge” to AIDS activists’ reliance on ephemeral objects which served to literalize and “transvalue the prevalent view that HIV-infected populations were expendable” (2012, 108). The sheer quantity of such records and ephemera on display in *Why We Fight* made it difficult for visitors to spend a great deal of time in considering each individual object. The exhibition in its form thus reflected the more significant challenge of understanding AIDS activism and the AIDS epidemic as a whole.

Baumann (2016) notes that he needed “some other texture” to counter the show’s inclusion of “lots of little bits of paper” a challenge particularly for archival exhibitions. The inclusion of a video installation playing on a loop in the gallery was part of such “texture.” The installation also showed off the significant digitization of audiovisual materials done as part of the LGBT Initiative. The sound could be heard throughout the room, getting louder and louder as visitors approached the back wall installation. Activists’ shouts and chants such as “We’re fired up. We won’t take no more” literally filled the small gallery (Colucci 2013). Visitors thus were immersed within the sound and feel of the crowd that characterized AIDS activism. Baumann (2016) said, “I like having just the ambient noise and not having it on headphones…because activism is noisy.” He also wanted visitors to consider what it actually felt to participate in a demonstration, an embodied and affectively charged experience, and the use of video allowed him to “recreate” part of that experience (Ibid). Surrounded by posters, documents, and photographs, the videos added a palpable, visceral, affective, and embodied dimension to the exhibition.

The footage shown in the installation was of three different ACT UP demonstrations. Exhibit labels contextualizing each action accompanied the video. The first footage was of a needle exchange action at City Hall. It was selected both for its subject and because of the nature
of the demonstration. This demonstration, Baumann (2015) said, “was really small and it was a little boring . . . they’re just walking in circles, and you chant and you’re walking in circles to get that feeling of what’s its like to be in that.” The second demonstration footage was from the 1992 Ashes Action. Baumann included this action as it was one of the “most dramatic” and “powerful” of ACT UP’s political funerals and yet Baumann said, it was “something that I didn’t think the general public knew” (Ibid). The demonstration was also “a pivotal personal moment” for him (Baumann 2016).\(^\text{42}\) The third footage featured was from the 1991 Day of Desperation action in which ACT UP took over Grand Central station in a massive demonstration. In the video, activists flood the grand halls of the station unfurling enormous banners, which read “Money for AIDS not War.” It was an action that showed the scale of activism in the early 1990s when ACT UP could easily draw thousands of participants. Baumann (2015) also included this footage because it was “local history.” The action took place a mere four blocks away from the gallery. The geographic location of the exhibition thus intensified the circuits of reference (Burk 2013, 38). All three actions are by ACT UP activists. However, it was worth noting that the first two demonstrations are ones in which ACT UP collaborated with other activist groups. The inclusion of such footage showed that despite garnering much of the attention ACT UP did not work in isolation, they were part of larger community and a social movement that “cross-pollinated” (Baumann 2015).

As a curator Baumann was not interested in telling “unitary kinds of stories about people and their unfolding” (Ibid). He wanted to showcase “things that go out in lots of different directions and might upset you in some kind of way” (Ibid). The show included materials by

\(^{42}\) Baumann’s history as a participant in ACT UP and the ways it figures into this exhibition are discussed in detail in Chapters Two and Three.
activist organizations, groups, and collectives as well as materials from individual creators. However, Baumann was careful to avoid featuring very much material on individual activists. He said, “I felt like if I put a picture of one individual then that makes that individual more important than everybody else” and that “one of the exhibition’s major points is that this was a multifaceted, mass movement” (Baumann 2015). The show focused on surfacing organizations, rather than individual participants. Membership in activist groups was fluid and they appropriated imagery and tactics from one another. The show reflected these qualities of AIDS activism, as materials from various groups and individuals were interspersed by topic, rather than arranged in terms of individual groups or chronologically. The inclusion of artwork by Haring, in addition to contributing visual interest, offered a limited but still significant view into artwork produced in an activist milieu. Similarly, the inclusion of Wojnarowicz’s journal, borrowed from his collection at the Fales Library, functioned to demonstrate the productive and reciprocal exchange between tactical and formal approaches in art and activism. By presenting a wide range of activists, approaches, and materials the show ensured that the archives of AIDS activism were presented not as definitive or unitary, but rather as partial and idiosyncratic. One exhibition wall named organizations, including many based in racialized communities, from which there were no archival materials available to put on display.

The embodied experiences of the activists who were the subject of the show as well as of exhibition visitors were taken into account. The importance of embodied realities in relation to discussions and exhibitions of protest materials are highlighted by art historian Ara Merjian

These organizations, groups, and collectives include Gay Men’s Health Crisis, People with AIDS Coalition, ACT UP/NY, Gran Fury, the Advisory Committee of People with AIDS, the Minority Task Force on AIDS, Community Health Services, Philadelphia, the Safer Sex Committee of New York, the Mattachine Society, and New York AIDS Network.

These individuals include Keith Haring, Douglass Rowell, Roger McFarlane, Tony Davis, Joseph Sonnabend, and John Michael Williams.
(2010). Merjian writes, “What of the individuals involved with these objects – with their making, display, and distribution? Bodies waving these posters and distributing pamphlets; bodies carrying out ACT UP’s Days of Action, which entailed massive, public kiss-ins, die-ins and the physical occupation of the New York Stock Exchange, hospitals, and City Hall; bodies ill and healthy, strident and silent?” (Ibid). His words highlight the reality that activist graphics and other ephemera were often held by and worn by participants during demonstrations. A crucial function of the exhibition’s presentation was to remind viewers of this relationship between archival objects and embodiment. Acknowledging that archives can only give partial access to bodies and embodiments, Baumann (2015) said, “You have the signs. You have the things that people held. But that’s part of why…having installation of the [video] footage was so important.”

In addition, embodiment was addressed by the topic “Healthcare Activism” which featured two pieces of clothing. The first is an ACT UP t-shirt with a logo that reads “Enjoy AZT” a clear play on the Coca-Cola logo (Gagliostro and Finkelstein 1989). Above the logo is text, “10 YEARS – 1 BILLION DOLLARS – 1 DRUG,” and below it text reads in large type, “BIG DEAL.” The FDA had approved AZT in 1987 to treat AIDS. The drug quickly proved both toxic and ineffective. AIDS activists responded by demanding that drug companies invest in developing alternative treatments. The logo offers a comparison between AZT and Coca-Cola, equivocating them as consumer products while condemning AZT as product that profits from human suffering (Ibid). The appropriation of contemporary advertising and mass culture characterizes AIDS activist graphics (Burk 2013, 42). The t-shirt was displayed empty and neatly folded in a vitrine. The second item of clothing, a lab coat, includes on the left arm the famed bloody handprint. Bloody Hands (1988) was considered the art collective Gran Fury’s “most

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45 T-Shift is from the Tony Davis Act UP Records, NYPL.
46 Lab coat is from the ACT UP/ New York Records, NYPL.

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successful activist graphic” (Burk 2013, 50). It was designed for accessibility through an instant legibility and a widespread distribution on posters, property, placards, and T-shirts. It “came to signify the directed rage of collective action, as its appearance on city streets was coincident with a series of controversial and well-publicized ACT UP demonstrations” (Ibid). It was at one of those demonstrations, the Seize Control of the FDA action on October 11, 1988, that this coat was worn. In the exhibit the coat hung empty in front of a hot pink backdrop. The inclusion of this clothing in the exhibition underscored the significance of embodiment to AIDS activism. This clothing was not just made, held, or distributed by human hands; it was worn as a part of the daily experience of activism. The display of these two items as empty of bodies also underscored that the persons whose bodies once wore these T-shirts have often died (Ibid, 42).

The walls of the exhibition themselves served as installation pieces. One was entirely made up of posters which were wheat pasted to the surface, including iconic designs such as “Silence=Death” and Gran Fury’s “Kissing Doesn’t Kill.” Through the installation wall, Baumann (2016) said, “I got quantity, I got a lot more voices on the page.” In the late 1980s and early 1990s such wheat pasted posters were ubiquitous, especially in New York City with its pedestrian culture. The posters were vital public forums for exchanging information and for public, political image-based activism. The opportunities for such engagement through public art dissipated when such non-commercial wheat pasting became a target of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s “Quality of Life” policing of misdemeanor crimes in the mid-1990s (Burk 2013, 35). It was by reproducing these images from digital copies of the posters in the NYPL’s collections that Baumann (2016) sought to “make those objects real” for visitors. Recreation was a means towards authenticity, Baumann said, “If I showed the poster in a frame than it’s not really the

47 They were designed with the assistance of graphic design firm, DresserJohnson.
poster, because the poster would never have been framed, it would just have been slapped onto a street corner, or a lamppost or something, framing it almost makes them not really what they are” (Ibid). He continued, “The only way to turn them back into what they were really were” was to do “what I would have done to the original, just wheat paste it to a wall, and rip it” (Ibid). This was similar to the curatorial strategy of including video footage for its affective and visceral power. The poster wall was a means “to make this moment enter people’s existence again,” animating the archival materials and bringing them into the present (Ibid).

The text of the final exhibition wall text, “HIV Today,” begins “The AIDS epidemic is far from over.” It offers current statistics about the epidemic in the United States and globally. It concludes by referencing the World Health Organization and UNAIDS shared focus on prevention and treatment including plans to achieve universal access to prevention, diagnosis, treatment, care, and support of all those in need by 2015. The text thus makes reference to undetectability and to the “treatment as prevention” model implicitly. It is for the frame of “remembering” included in the exhibition’s title and for its on focus on displaying materials from the 1980s and early 1990s that the show faced criticism from some in the AIDS activist community. It is this perceived historicization of AIDS activism to which ACT UP/NY responded by staged a die-in on opening night. Art writer and curator Emily Colucci (2013), in a post titled “More Demonstrations and Less Memorials In ‘Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism,” exemplifies this critical position. Her title plays with the famous text from David Wojnarowicz’s journal included in the exhibition in which he wrote, “If I die of AIDS, don’t give me a memorial, give me a demonstration.” She writes of attending Why We Fight, “I felt that I was watching a long-ago historical event, rather than a demonstration about a crisis that

48 This action is described in detail in Chapter Two.
continues to rage on” (Ibid). She and others called into question why the coverage of AIDS activism in the show ended at approximately the same time that the successful cocktail of antiretroviral drugs emerged in 1996. For some the inclusion of the final wall text is not enough of an acknowledgment of the ongoing crisis to counter the representation of AIDS activism as over and done with in the show. Colucci concludes, “David Wojnarowicz did not want a memorial and the AIDS crisis and activism shouldn’t have one either” (Ibid).

Baumann acknowledges in a measured way the validity of the criticism of the show’s temporal focus. However, he frames this temporal limitation as reflecting the limits of the archives itself. The show “didn’t tell the story of the activism that’s happening today,” he said because, “I don’t have that archive…what’s happening today, that’s not history yet” (Baumann 2015). It was not just though the final panel that as a curator he worked to include the present. The label for any record on display that included a statistic was updated to reflect contemporary statistics. For example, the exhibit label for Gran Fury’s “Women Don’t Get AIDS: They Just Die from It” notes that many activists were concerned about the specifics of the crisis for women. It also charts their educational efforts and challenging of the Centers for Disease Control’s initial definitions of AIDS, which left out infections suffered only by women and made it more difficult for them to obtain both treatment and benefits. The text ends, “This early concern for women was prescient, as they now account for half the people living with HIV, and AIDS is the leading cause of death among women of reproductive age worldwide.” The show did extend time in the other direction, countering dominant narratives of AIDS that begin only in 1981. Through the inclusion of materials such a 1966 flyer from the Mattachine Society of New York, “V.D. is No Camp,” the curators showed that safer sex discourses reached back to pre-AIDS era efforts by
the community to protect its members. Baumann (2015) ambivalently concludes, “in retrospect I might have wanted to make the show come up more to the present, but I think, I don’t know.”

“The Collective is Indeed a Flash”

In our interview Avram Finkelstein (2016) told me “We are being told people don’t care about AIDS, but I disagree after a decade of speaking around the world and having people ask the same question: What can we do now?” In response Finkelstein said,

I have come to realize that the answer to the question of how to re-engage a public with the issues surrounding HIV/AIDS in the present doesn’t lie in looking at the canon of cultural production from those early days, such as Silence=Death. It’s in looking through these works, to the resistance strategies that brought them into being in the first place. That’s how we might imagine alternative models for the activation of our social spaces (Finkelstein in Fialho 2015).

Finkelstein, an activist, artist, and writer, is a founding member of the Silence=Death and Gran Fury collectives and a member of ACT UP. In addition to an exhibition, Why We Fight included a programming series held at the NYPL in 2013 and 2014. It was Baumann who reached out to Finkelstein to invite him to write a series of blog posts to accompany the exhibition. Finkelstein agreed but also made a counter-proposal to organize a “flash collective.” Flash collectives are Finkelstein’s approach to activating social spaces that emerged from his work with Gran Fury and ACT UP in the 1980s and 1990s. As Undetectable Collective member Nick Kleist described, “With flash collectivization, there is an instantaneous community that emerges, focused around the intersection of art and activism” (Kleist in Fialho 2015). Each collective spends a brief duration engaging in “a social practice” (Finkelstein 2016) of political art making that employs “skills drawn on in collective decision-making with a surgical and fast-paced format intended to cut directly to the point of the work, content” (Finkelstein in Fialho 2015). The support for the collective is evidence of a curatorial strategy that emphasized bringing the exhibition of archival
materials documenting AIDS activism from 1980s and 1990s into the present. The Undetectable Collective itself called needed attention to the contemporary utility of earlier periods of AIDS activism, its graphics and its strategies. By turning to a pressing contemporary issue, undetectability, the collective also articulated an ongoing need for AIDS cultural activism.

The flash collective offered Baumann (2016) the opportunity to “bring the narrative up to date,” “to get a local current voice into” the exhibition and “to have a dialogue with the community of people who saw the show.” Fundraising afforded the opportunity to commission and promote creative work as part of the show. Baumann set aside about $20,000 for producing the collective’s product. The logistics of doing creative work as a large public institution presented a challenge. The NYPL is accustomed to curating exhibitions of its holdings; they do not often commission pieces or borrow external materials. A series of concerns around ownership, institutional approval, as well as the scope and aim of the project, had to be negotiated. It was determined that any product made by the Collective would be owned by the participants and that pending approval it would be displayed by the Library. Baumann saw this as an opportunity to reach not only beyond the temporal orientation of the collections, but also beyond *Why We Fight’s* Midtown location. This project offered the opportunity to work with the branch libraries. Logistical complications meant that the Collective’s project didn’t launch until after the exhibition had closed, making it “a coda” to the show (Baumann 2016).

Visual AIDS provided curatorial assistance for the Collective. Together Finkelstein, the NYPL, and Visual AIDS issued a call for participation. “The pedagogy” of the flash collective requires “having interdisciplinary participants in order to have diversity in skills and perspectives,” a condition reflecting Finkelstein’s experiences with the successful interdisciplinarity of early AIDS activism (Finkelstein in Buhl 2014). The fifteen people who
responded were artists, writers, activists, curators, journalists, policy wonks, and Radical Faeries. As Baumann (2016) said, “The participants selected themselves.” Despite the wide net cast, Finkelstein (2016) has hoped for an even greater representation of disciplinary diversity. The very vastness of HIV/AIDS Finkelstein says means, that “I believe that in any room, there are people who have something to say [about HIV/AIDS] whether they know it or not” (Ibid).

The only guidelines stipulated for the project were that it had to address HIV/AIDS and had to be engaged with contemporary concerns. The exhibition was to serve as its inspiration. At their first meeting, Finkelstein called upon members to consider art as a means of intervention that can lead to social engagement and collective action (Buhl 2014). He also pushed them to confront difficult ideas and to develop innovative ways of communicating them. The members were not told what the budget for their project was at the outset so as to encourage creativity.

Kleist said, “The flash collective provides support for one another because it brings varied persons together in physical space; however, when we needed to separate and perform tasks for the collective outside of our time at the New York Public Library…The collective is indeed a flash, it is a sudden rush of energy that occurs when all points touch. It was at this point that our discussion was at its most kinetic” (Kleist in Fialho 2015). Together the group completed a series of mapping exercises about the definition and meaning of HIV/AIDS today. Out of these exercises the major themes arose. These themes included: the ongoing nature of HIV/AIDS crisis; the impacts of pharmaceutical intervention; the fear and stigma that continue to be associated with HIV/AIDS; the complexity of disclosure; the unequal impacts of criminalization,

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49 Collective members included: Avram Finkelstein, Alex Fialho, Alina Oswald, Brendan Mahoney, Conrad Ventur, Filip Condeescu, Gerald Mocarsky, hucklefaery, Jano Cortijo, Jorge Sanchez, Kenneth Pietrobono, Lanai Daniels, Mark Blane, Nick Kleist, Pablo Herrera, and Spear Minteh.
along lines of race and class; and the significance of the serodivide (Buhl 2014). It was here that the term, undetectable, emerged.

Choosing to do work on undetectability meant that the newly christened Undetectable Collective had “to define what it was from a medical perspective,” Finkelstein (2016) said, “we had to talk about why that was a problem from a political perspective, we had to talk about class access, gender and race, and we had to make a political analysis of it.” As member Alina Oswald said, “Like HIV/AIDS, undetectable is not only a medical term, but it involves every aspect of one’s life” (Oswald in Fialho 2015). It represents a health status as well a person’s ability to maintain and access that status, encompassing both the personal and the public. Oswald made another comparison with HIV/AIDS in its totality, she said, “maybe the face of undetectability will be a fluid one, always changing. It defines a status some people can afford only for finite periods of time. But, with advances in technology and medicine, what defines undetectability can change too” (Ibid). Undetectable as a status is also connected to the concept of a cure for HIV/AIDS. It is not a cure, yet Oswald asked, “Could an undetectable status…add to the already rising AIDS complacency? And how would that affect the fight for an actual, affordable cure for all individuals living with the virus?...Can we afford not to want it all and to want it now?” (Ibid).

The difficulty of collective work is part of the aim of the flash collectives. Flash collectives are focused on sharing skills, activating spaces, and giving participants “the tools and the experience of what it is like to be in a community, however curated it might be, momentary, it is still an exposure to the skills” needed for political art making and engagement (Finkelstein 2016). With three meetings and independent work between them their work stretched over a period of two months. The collective’s process was “painful” Finkelstein said (Ibid). Member Jano Cortijo described it as “a fruitful and challenging experience” in which the whole group
“openly contribute[d] and respectfully discuss[ed] each other’s ideas to arrive at an agreement about what our message would be” (Corijo in Fialho 2015). It is the challenges of collectivity that empower participants to find their own voices, to work towards agreement, and that make them “willing to go on the record, to do it in public space” (Finkelstein 2016). Finkelstein continued, “This one was a little unwieldy, it spun out of control, it got very disagreeable at some points” (Ibid).

In their second meeting the collective turned to the issue of a final product. The themes of the project are clearly evident in their early works. Their Tumblr site includes a series of animated gifs created at this stage. A post by hucklefaery includes a gif posted in which a rapidly multiplying HIV virus quickly fills a plus sign. The plus sign is emptied only with a funnel of dollar signs that transform into Rx signs. In the final image a Band-Aid appears over a text about the efficacy of HIV treatment in reducing transmissibility, but also about the significant costs, financial and personal, of such drugs (Undetectable Collective 2014). The Collective had to come to a consensus as to how to visually communicate the complex and interconnected ideas that fall under the rubric of undetectability. They also had to do so in way that would engage the public at four library branches in which thousands of people circulate every month who are likely not there for the art and who are not necessarily thinking about HIV/AIDS.

The final product they settled on was four light boxes and 2,500 outreach postcards (Figure 7). A collective member suggested a lenticular printing technique that gives the visual illusion of depth and changeability when viewed from different angles. The displays and postcards include the same short text. “What is Undetectable?” reads in all-caps,

We’re at a crossroads in HIV treatment. HIV positive & HIV negative are no longer the only possibilities when discussing serostatus. The word undetectable has emerged in this conversation. Undetectable originated as a medical term for an “acceptably” low presence of HIV in the bloodstream dependent on strict compliance with “successful”
antiretroviral treatments. Maintaining undetectable viral levels significantly reduces HIV transmission, but it is not a cure for AIDS & does not remove stigma. Not everyone has access to information or treatments, so the emphasis on achieving undetectability reinforces racial & socioeconomic divides. Because there is more money in lifelong treatment, profit-driven drug companies have no financial incentive to find a cure. Undetectability saves lives. But whose lives? & Who profits? Where’s the cure? (Undetectable Collective 2014).

The complicated conversations the group had about medicine, economics, and gendered and racialized experiences of undetectability were activated within this short text. Kleist said, “Our final product describes our process, as an artifact of our discussions. It describes how we came together and took notation of how we came to understand the stigma surrounding not only the term ‘undetectable’ but also our understanding of the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS” (Kleist in Fialho 2015). Lenticular printing allowed for the print to flash “undetectable” in a plus sign over the text. As a “visualization of the medical term” it reflects that HIV status is in flux through the appearance and disappearance of the plus sign (Fialho 2016).
The selection of four library branches for the installation of light boxes and postcard distribution was a point of contention between the Collective and Baumann. Baumann sought a wide geographic distribution around the city and sites with strong leadership. The first branch, Jefferson Market, is in Greenwich Village. The Village is a neighborhood that had been heavily affected by the crisis, and, especially in its early days, had been the site of major demonstrations.
The second, Saint George, is the main branch on Staten Island. Having an intervention in this historically more conservative borough was important to Baumann. The third branch, Hunts Point, in the Bronx, had the space and was located in a predominately Spanish-speaking community. The final branch, Washington Heights, had just reopened and represented another area of the city. As part of their process the collective had visited all of these neighborhoods and done research on their demographics in relation to HIV/AIDS. These exercises led to some push back about branch selection, as none of aforementioned branches are in the neighborhoods with the highest current rates of transmission. While acknowledging the group’s concerns Baumann stuck by his location selections. For Finkelstein (2016), these locations were ideal as they were “completely mixed class, mixed race, mixed language it was as close as you could get to a public street in New York.” None of the selected libraries have formal galleries; the light boxes and cards were conceptualized as an installation that interacts with the library space. The displays in Washington Heights and the Bronx were in Spanish; those in Staten Island and the Village were in English. The outreach cards with identical text at all sites were distributed in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Russian.

Visual AIDS was so taken with the Collective’s work that they decided to use them as a basis for a major 2015 public program at the New Museum’s IDEAS CITY Festival (Visual AIDS 2015). The theme of the Festival was “The Invisible City.” Visual AIDS “wanted to think about undetectability.” They used the collective’s visual product to create “a public dialogue.” Together Finkelstein and Program Manager Alex Fialho developed the concept of using balloons, on the back of which the collective’s text, “What is Undetectable?,” was printed. At the event Visual AIDS and Undetectable Collective members asked people passing by that same question. Over 300 people wrote on the balloons blank side, giving their definitions that were not
necessarily HIV specific. Visual AIDS and collective members then had one-on-one conversations about undetectability. The Collective members were able to use their dialogue around undetectability, Fialho (2016) said, “to continue to have that process with people from the general public…the idea of the collective becoming even more outward facing.”

The invisibility of HIV/AIDS in contemporary American society was not a topic related to undetectability discussed in detail by the Collective. The relative invisibility of the AIDS crisis relates directly to the biomedical progress that has created undetectability. Scholars have read HIV/AIDS as a crisis of visual representation. The very invisibility of the HIV virus to the naked eye means that HIV/AIDS is outwardly undetectable. It is only in the late stages of AIDS that the “visually legible symptoms manifest in the body” including “severe weight loss, purplish sarcoma lesions, and the wasting away of limbs from muscle atrophy” (Keller and Snyder, 2011, 97). In the 1980s and 1990s the presence of the visible and legible symptoms marking infected bodies were much more common as was media attention to the dead and dying. With improved, if far from perfect, treatments the embodied visibility of AIDS has decreased even while infection rates in many communities have not. The frequent invisibility of the HIV/AIDS has contributed to the perception of it and those that are infected as a dangerous others. HIV is thus seen as a silent killer, living in the bodies of others who remain in our midst and unidentifiable until the public reveal of symptoms far too late.

“What History Surfaces in the Present Day”

The 2013 exhibition Not Only This But ‘New Language Beckons Us’ at the Fales Library’s Tracey-Barry Gallery was comprised of archival records from the Downtown Collection coupled
with commissioned works from contemporary visual artists, filmmakers, writers, and activists. It was curated by Andrew Blackley as part of Visual AIDS’ Not Over series of exhibitions and public programming to mark their 25th anniversary. The goal of the series was to “contemplate the deep cultural history of the epidemic, along with contemporary realities, in an interactive exploration of where art, AIDS and activism has been, where it is now and where it is going. While much has changed in the past quarter century, what remains is AIDS IS NOT OVER” (Visual AIDS 2013). By pairing archival records and creative works, this exhibition aimed to illuminate for viewers the interpersonal “affinities and adjacencies, influences and recollections” between them (Blackley 2016). In each vitrine the objects were arranged next to one another. The show was thus not spatially organized to progress from past to present, rather its temporal progression required visitors to move back and forth in time and space continuously. This exhibition strategy made an argument about the continuity and interrelations of art, activism, and HIV/AIDS in the past, in the present, and for the future. As Blackley described his curatorial philosophy, “I’m interested in archives being used to facilitate inquiry or exhibitions in the present moment. I’m less interested in history. I’m interested in what history surfaces in the present day” (Ibid).

It was through an earlier collaboration with visual artist John Neff that Blackley became involved with Visual AIDS and with the Fales Library. Somewhere in the mid-2000s while scrolling through Visual AIDS web galleries, Neff had discovered “Untitled (eye frame),” a 1998 piece by artist Robert Blanchon (Visual AIDS, n.d.). The eye frame of its title is a monocle, it is Blanchon’s response to the cytomegalovirus (CMV) associated with AIDS which left him visually impaired. Blanchon was a gay artist and educator who lived in Chicago, New York City and Los Angeles until his death from AIDS in 1999 at the age of 33 (Visual AIDS, “Robert
This image stuck with Neff and he became “completely enthralled” with Blanchon (Neff 2016). In 2011 Neff proposed reactivating, through an exhibition and performance, another of Blanchon’s pieces, a 1995 photo-based conceptual work, “Untitled (aroma/1981).” Blackley, then a curator for Chicago’s Golden Gallery, became an enthusiastic partner in these efforts.

“Untitled (aroma/1981)” consists of ad clippings, likely pulled from the back of gay porn magazines. These “gay lifestyle” ads are for products including poppers (amyl nitrite), leather gear, cock rings, portraits commissioned from the Tom of Finland studio, life insurance, and a variety of sexual enhancements. The “1981” of the title likely references the year that HIV was identified. The work charts gay aesthetics and desires in a pre-AIDS era. It was intended to be a dynamic object. The ads are presented as delicate sepia photographs that were to be left unfixed. This meant that the images would still be sensitive to light and therefore would fade away slowly with every showing. Since Blanchon’s death, the 100 negatives he described making have disappeared; however, an assorted 55 of the supposedly ephemeral prints that were crafted in the 2000s survive. These posthumous prints are held by the Fales Library, which acquired them from Visual AIDS, as part of Blanchon’s collection (Fales Library 2016). Fales Library Director Marvin Taylor (2016) was more than happy to loan them as the proposed show was in keeping with their “desire to take up the cause of artists who had passed away and bring their work back in front of the public.”

At Golden Gallery Neff displayed on a first wall the borrowed extant posthumous prints; what Blackley (2016) calls the “situationally frozen-in-time version, or material state, of the

\[\text{50 In many of the clippings, poppers, a drug taken for its euphoric effect during sex, are featured. In the early 1980s HIV causes were unknown, some scientists speculated that unknown chemicals were to blame for the emergence of this new “cancer” and pointed to poppers as a likely culprit (Foumberg 2011). By 1995, when Blanchon made this work, the poppers accusation was outdated and absurd news, but there was still no cure or completely effective treatment for HIV/AIDS (Ibid).}\]
work.” Within the gallery Neff used those remnants to recreate the negative transparencies. He then filled a second wall with the new prints that were left unfixed so as to ensure that the sepia prints would disappear as Blanchon had intended. Neff left all of the pins in place on the first wall, providing an elegiac reminder of what has passed and a mapping of new possibilities (Froumberg 2011). The new prints and the process of creating them were “a way to learn about Robert’s work, making a new experience of it while keeping alive—a changing and indistinct—memory of the 1995 piece,” Neff (2016) said. The piece was not intended to restore Blanchon’s work to an “original” state, or to commemorate it. Rather, the effort aimed to develop production and presentation methods that engaged Blanchon’s “daring, difficult work with the levels of attention and risk it deserves” (Golden Gallery 2011). Neff’s negatives now reside in two legal size manila folders in the Robert Blanchon Papers and Collection in series VIII, “Memorials and Posthumous Files” (Fales Library 2016). A contribution of this form to a collection at the Fales Taylor (2016) says is “fairly unique.” It was the “quasi-preservation” aspect of Neff’s project that made the archival contribution a natural fit for them (Ibid). The negatives at Fales can be remade and redisplayed as Blanchon intended.

Then-Visual AIDS Programs Manager Ted Kerr (2016) described Blackley as “strategic in understanding the role of Visual AIDS and the role of Fales and how they could interact with each other.” Kerr continued, “I think he’s a certain kind genius that understands that institutions or organizations legitimize your work by cosigning and I think that exhibition which already is already powerful and strong was made stronger because it came from these two organizations and Andrew’s brain…” (Ibid). Not Only This was an ideal fit for Taylor’s (2016) programming agenda, as it was a “meta-conceptual project with archives.” After successfully proposing the exhibition, Blackley (2016) “became very nervous” as a young curator to do justice to “25 years
of an organization, and more so: to 25 years of a hugely significant social (and artistic) problem in the United States.” He highlighted the difficulties of telling a complex and nuanced story through institutional archives. There was no way to adequately “tell the full story of Visual AIDS, of HIV/AIDS, through this set of material” (Ibid). The Downtown Collection “no matter how wide and expansive it is or may become, by virtue of being discreet there are histories it does not, and can not, include. It is not the history of New York, its also not the history of art, it is not a history of activism… and yet, it is a history of New York, of art, of activism... ” Blackley said (Ibid). While not exclusively their purview, successful white male artists are still the voices that dominate in the archives.

It quickly became apparent to Blackley that there needed to be “more voices here than my own” (Ibid). Blackley invited 30 people to participate, a way of “asking other people to be in this problem with me” (Ibid). He asked each participant to make a response to an object in the Downtown Collection. The format of participants’ contributions was not subject to curatorial restriction. Blackley (2016) described this process of making the works as “a call and response” between the archives and the artists. Through this participation Blackley hoped to develop conversations around the intersections of the Fales and HIV/AIDS, the history of AIDS, and the narratives of it emerging. The temporal aspects of this curatorial work are significant. Blackley

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51 The contemporary works were made by Julie Ault, Dodie Bellamy, Gregg Bordowitz, Nancy Brooks Brody, Elijah Burgher, Kathe Burkhart, Sean Carrillo, Peter Cramer, Matthias Herrmann, Jim Hubbard, Doug Ischar, William E. Jones, John Keene, Kevin Killian, Nathanaël, John Neff, Uzi Parnes, Mary Patten, Nina Sobell, Ela Troyano, Ultra-red, Jack Waters, Joe Westmoreland, and Danh Vo.

52 These included items from the collections of Kathy Acker, Robert Blanchon, Valerie Caris, Dennis Cooper, Lou Maletta, the MIX Collection, Frank Moore, Cookie Mueller, Polysexuality, Hunter Reynolds, Stuart Sherman, Jack Smith, James Wentzy, David Wojnarowicz, and Martin Wong.
wanted to make it clear in the exhibition that “the issue of AIDS is as relevant in March 2013 as it [was] in March 1986” (Ibid).

By pairing archival records and new artworks Blackley illuminated the “kinship” between them (Ibid). This was about the adjacency rather than the equalization of these objects. Blackley described how when “those two things were adjacent to one another, they had a dialogue – while they were from different time periods, they had a relationship as art objects, as things in the world, as documents” (Ibid). Within a single vitrine there could be twelve items, six archival objects and six new pieces of paper. Blackley sought to display them in way that “they could be observed, equalized on the same level, but also they have different textures and velocities and perspectives” (Ibid). The juxtaposition of different works was important in leading audiences to the realization “that history operates in a variety of movements and from different places to different places and there need not be a particular, a singular genealogy” (Ibid). That juxtaposition of objects imbued all of them with fresh and reflective perspectives that offered testimony to their continued significance and power in the present. The inclusion of new works helped to show that AIDS activism and cultural production exceed reductive summation, as well as a history with complications that a modestly scaled exhibition could only hope to gesture to.

The nature of the relations between contemporary and archival participants was multiple. For example, writer John Keene selected painter Martin Wong (1946-1999), who he did not know personally. However, Keene “could come to this project and speak to that work and the larger issue at hand. He had access to that in a way archives provide” (Blackley 2016). Some participants did their own research at Fales, others did research together with Blackley, and for a third group Blackley did the on-site research and sent images at the participant’s request. The contributors were not instructed to work with particular collections. Artist and scholar Julie Ault
had done extensive research and archival processing at the Fales, but this invitation gave her a new opportunity to engage with the archives. “There was this freedom to come into the collection, this invitation to be a researcher without the demand of lengthy research or research that would result in any conventional scholarly way. Nonetheless a chance to work as an artist, as a writer, editor, curator...” Ault (2016) said. She compared Blackley’s invitation to “diving into the archive and in a sense diving for pearls” (Ibid). The bounds of the connection materials selected to HIV/AIDS were broadly defined. Contributor and artist Julie Ault was drawn to “this structure that we were working with, of the archive, choose something and relate to it in a written or visual, whatever, form, there was a certain freedom of in terms of ok, the parameters [were only] the archive and also background or foreground or middle-ground a relation to AIDS” (Ibid).

For example, artist Dodie Bellamy had known artist Kathy Acker, whose materials she chose. “The specifics of Dodie selecting Kathy Acker posed interesting questions: Acker did not live with HIV, and yet – given her life – of course she lived with (within, alongside) it.” In the structure of this curatorial work Blackley saw the category of AIDS as extended beyond the virus itself; “…it was about trauma both social and medical, about art and activism. None stop so distinctly or neatly so as to be able to exclude somebody like Dodie Bellamy or Kathy Acker from the conversation” (Ibid). AIDS requires such loose bounds as Blackley said it is in the “air we breath, ideologically, institutionally” (Ibid).

Neff returned for the exhibition to the transparencies he had made of Blanchon’s “Untitled/aroma 1981.” His contribution took the form of a letter to Blackley. In the vitrine the transparencies were displayed, bound in a stack, next to Neff’s letter. In returning to the transparencies Neff (2016) saw “themes of care and repair, illness and fading at work in the work

53 Images taken of the Not Only This exhibition are available in an online gallery (Olivo 2016).
before I entered it.” The opportunity to reconsider the work led to new attractions beyond the form of the piece itself. In his letter Neff describes the piece through the frames of “silence” and “ghosts” (Neff 2013). He articulated both the impossibility and necessity of words to explain a photograph. As tempting as it might be, Neff wrote, “Sometimes, silence equals luxury.

Certainly Robert [Blanchon] – by all reports a loudmouthed queen – couldn’t afford to keep quiet…The challenge is: how to act and talk through the image without presuming to explain, without mystifying, without resorting – in the end - to silence. I’m working on it” (Ibid). A letter offered Neff (2016) the perfect form of response to Blanchon as letters both “document and solicit intimate relations.” His letter also reflects and documents an “intimacy” through long-term engagement with Blanchon, who Neff never met in the flesh, and with Blackley (Neff 2016). This is a letter that is “simultaneously public and private,” that blurring of the lines between public and private “seemed like something Robert would enjoy. An exchange between friends that, publicized, also does a different kind of work” (Ibid). He signs off, “As always, with affection, John” (Neff 2013).

Writer Joe Westmoreland’s contribution also took the form of a letter. He wrote to poet Dennis Cooper as a response to the letters he had written to Cooper in the 1980s and early 1990s. The letter is a form that Westmoreland (2016) said is “conversational, you are able to tell a story or a few stories and in a short amount of time and its simple.” Displayed next to his 2013 letter is an open envelope with a 1991 postmark addressed to Dennis Cooper in Los Angeles. In addition to a letter, the enclosed includes a flier for a screening of Westmoreland’s film, Betty Page: Setting the Record Straight. The flier features a portrait of the star and describes the film as a “No budget masterpiece production” (Westmoreland 2013). Hearing Cooper read in San Francisco in the early 1980s was “one of those life changing moments” for Westmoreland (2016).
After that reading they became pen pals, writing for the next five years or so. “I love it” that my letters are in Cooper’s collection he told me (Ibid). His new letter moves back and forth between past and present, recounting events, works, and responses. AIDS is omnipresent in the letter appearing in memories of debates about the relations of art and activism in the late 1980s, notes about the “devastation” of the crisis and the need to write about it, the recounting of the summer of 1995 when Westmoreland became increasingly sicker and how that illness consumed his life, the messy savior of antiretroviral drugs, and the meaning of writing through it all (Westmoreland 2013). Though he ends this letter, “I’ll try not to wait so long before I write you again” (Ibid), Westmoreland hasn’t written to Cooper since the exhibition.

“So it was the best of times. It was the worst of times and the times we had they gone now. They’ll never come again. And all those sweet kids used to run the streets with Mikey wonder what they’re running now and where…and you know if these walls could speak they’d probably be subpoenaed. Even now it’s like the moment in these paintings never existed,” Martin Wong wrote in his 1986 press release (Ault 2013). Julie Ault’s contribution begins with Wong’s final line, she writes about this piece from Wong’s collection. Ault is deeply invested in the archive. Wong did these “hand drawn, handwritten, poetic and just very exceptional articulations…[that he] sometimes used as a press release to accompany his exhibitions at Semaphore” (Ault 2016). This press release accompanied Wong’s “The Last Picture Show,” a solo show of paintings at the Semaphore Gallery. Ault knew Wong and had an ongoing relationship with his work and papers through writings and curatorial work. Wong’s piece Ault said, “symbolized the recent disappearance from the Lower East Side neighborhood that had profoundly contributed to his personal history with an exhibition of life-size paintings depicting defunct storefronts” (Ibid). Those “replica” paintings of the Lower East Side “compassionately
rendered the casualties of yuppification—from churches to drug establishments to restaurants and a ‘poetry store’—sat silent and gated, on the cusp of uninvited redevelopment” (Ault 2013). As she writes, Ault saw Wong as revealing vital “glimpses of empirical circumstances, sensations, and reveries that the shuttered facades opened up for him. The evoked embodiments stood for relationships with intimates and friends, and friends of friends, with acquaintances and familiar strangers, many of whom, were, by then lost from Wong’s daily life” (Ibid). The tone of the press release is one of remembrance and longing, and Wong’s show is a creative replication, but not a restoration. He writes that this is the “last picture show” where things are being “cleared out…everything must go. Like ice, Like fire, Like smoke, like lightening, like a dream, everything must go” (Ibid). This show, was as Ault wrote in her contribution, “A series of places and the lived experiences in and around them. A context of concurrences. An era. Eras end constantly. Sometimes an era comes to an end because of massive change, sometimes by degree, and sometimes inconspicuously. Now and then it happens with the death of a single person” (Ibid). Ault (2016) chose to use this particular piece of Wong’s as it “addresses issues of gentrification…that seemed to be very poignant in the moment, 2013, just as it is now.” It was in part the contemporary element of Not Only This project that excited her; it was about “what do you want to talk about, to show people right now, and finding the language to do that in the archive, to engage” (Ibid).

The relations of the audience to the archive, its material, and the largely textual creative works in this exhibition are significant. It “wasn’t lost on” Blackley (2016) that this exhibition utilized vitrines and that “a lot of the things we were showing were works on paper.” The show contextualized AIDS art and activist materials in terms of relationality between objects and between participants, this was done through showing that “paper […] is a nexus, a technology
that mediates the connection not just of ‘people’ but of bodies. Paper facilitates affection” (Piepmeier quoted in Brager and Sailor 2012, 47). The textual and paper based form of the show and its works reflects the form of the archives itself. This show was “deeply about the archive and what the archive means” (Taylor 2016). Taylor also “liked the fact that” Blackley “curates art shows that have a lot of writing in them and he [that] is unapologetic about people having to read. That show was the epitome of that” (Ibid). Blackley (2016) acknowledged that the size of audience that would be attentive to this project may have been a smaller one. He said “a visitor would arrive to the exhibition only to find themselves bending over multiple vitrines, reading some 50 sheets of paper. I understood it might not end up being a ‘crowd pleaser’…but I was ok with the project being a slower project. You could go in to the exhibition and read there, or you could look at it later online or in the archive…no version or mode was necessarily celebratory.” The slow pace of the exhibition was important while it privileged feelings of contemplation, sadness, and left crucial space for other complex feelings. Furthermore, the show created time for contemplation and reflection in a way that was not often possible within the early years of the crisis, and within an AIDS activism that created a fast and furious pace that allowed little space for such slow percolating affects.

Blackley (2016) describes it as a “great achievement” that the Fales acquired the exhibition documentation. Taylor (2016) was supportive of acquisition as the show “start to end” was “about the process of creating primary documentation.” Blackley described the documentation of the show through the example of Gregg Bordowitz’s contribution in response to Frank Moore’s sketchbook. Blackley photographed the pages of Moore’s sketchbook that had been displayed and placed a copy of the photograph adjacent to the text Bordowitz had written in response to it within the same archival folder. He repeated this process for every record in exhibition. The
documentation of the exhibition provides an entrée point to other things, other objects, and other collections. For example, Nancy Brooks Brody’s text, along with six or seven snapshots, connects users to 700 snapshots that Martin Wong took. The inclusion of this material within the Fales’ collections for Blackley “was really important” as “it became more than being a temporary exhibition, or a set of commissions. It became an archival initiative, an intervention in the history of the Fales and the time the Fales documents” (Blackley 2016). That temporal aspect of the intervention is significant. Blackley noted, “we celebrate and focus on Downtown art from ‘65 to ’95, with later additions as well, but the spirit and also a lot of the figures that are involved, invested…are still living and have these perspectives from 2013 to look back upon this time…” (Ibid). He contrasted the brief temporality, the temporariness of exhibitions spanning only a few weeks or a couple of months with the archival collection of these materials. Blackley said, “This is a permanent addition to the Fales Library, it’s not going to be their most popular collection, ever, but it will always be there for somebody to reference… you have a photocopy of the archival object, the text, and a piece of paper that tells you the location of that archival object, box number, folder number, series number so you can track in the same way that I organized it archival object, new object adjacent to one another it also spread these threads, these paths through the entire collection…” (Ibid).

**Undetectability, Archival Exhibitions, and a Critical Nostalgia**

Undetectability has altered the contemporary landscape and meaning of HIV/AIDS. It raises a set of concerns particularly around temporality, ephemerality, and in/visibility. Undetectability has fundamentally reoriented discourse around HIV/AIDS towards the future, instead of just past and present. The three exhibitions analyzed demonstrate the utility of these concerns as a model for
curating work with AIDS activist materials from the 1980s and 1990s, and for commissioning new creative works from artists, writers, and activists in the context of archival exhibitions. These exhibitions effectively mined the structural and symbolic qualities of the archival materials on display. The exhibitions conveyed through innovative curatorial practices the considerable contemporary importance of AIDS cultural activism. These approaches encourage archivists to have a greater presence in the interpretation of their materials in the exhibitions they curate and support, the new works they commission, and through the cross-institutional collaborations they develop. This section illuminates how undetectability as a curatorial strategy shifts archives towards serving HIV/AIDS activist communities in ways that are ethical and productive.

Archives arrange and contextualize the past in ways that shape a society’s ability to live in the present and imagine its future. Archives thus shape the ability to construct communal identities and to engage in direct action. AIDS was from the start a temporal disruption. It shifted and shorted the lives and life expectancies of the individuals and communities affected, especially before 1996, in the pre-cocktail era. Responses to HIV/AIDS by activists had a crucially temporal element, speeding up time in the attempt to fight an epidemic that always seemed to be a step ahead. Archiving efforts around AIDS emerged in this moment from within the crisis. Undetectability has shifted the temporality of HIV/AIDS again, slowing down the disease and the perceived urgency of addressing it. That slowing down is reflected in the temporality of Not Only This. The exhibition required visitors to engage with largely textual materials, forcing them to slow down to bend over vitrines, to read, to look carefully, and to reflect. That reflective space was not one afforded by previous temporalities of AIDS activism. In this moment moving slowly is required to engage audiences with AIDS as both contemporary
and historical, and with archives. Ault (2016) reflected on particularities of archival temporalities, including shows such as the one discussed, and what they bring to those who engage. She described the Fales Library as place she goes to “for information, but also for rejuvenation and reinvesting political, social, artistic convergence… It’s a certain kind of fortification to go spend time there” (Ibid). Ault identifies a few reasons for the shift in temporality in this archival space. “I feel like I’m going to this special place, where its not about, ‘okay, I only have a few minutes I got to race through this material,’ I slow down my pace so I that can spend time with whatever it is I’m looking at,” Ault said (Ibid). This experience is also about the particularities of the Downtown Collection itself as based in a particular location and time period, Ault said, “…it’s the language of contemporary promotional culture that I feel out of step with, I’m not invested in. So time at the Fales takes me to a different place in my thinking as well as the chance to engage the works and processes of the practitioners and the groups and entities that are no longer active, except in the archive” (Ibid). She continued, “it’s the documents themselves that slow you down…I start reading or looking at something and its like ‘wow, I didn’t know that or look at this’ and I get involved and once that happens its like, actually in a certain funny way, the outside world can recede for that time that I’m there, because I get really involved in the contents and in the intangibles that are suddenly tangible in my hands and in my mind through the documents and objects” (Ibid). Not Only This required from all visitors that same type of slowness and deep engagement with the archives. That slowing down allowed for a non-linear and non-celebratory narrative of AIDS activism and cultural production. It provided visitors the space and the time to slow down, to contemplate and maybe even to mourn. That kind of slowness, as Ault highlights, is a release as well for the restrictions of living solely in the present,
it allows visitors to explore the presence of the past in the present, and pushes them to reflect on what that might mean for the future of the epidemic.

A crucial part of the temporal work of archives is community and solidarity building across bounds of space and time. The archives can afford opportunities to develop understandings of oneself and one’s community as proximal to and integrated into past and future generations (Brothman 2010, 162). Each of the archival exhibitions analyzed disrupt linear notions of temporal progression from past to present to future. Each emphasized continuity through the lens of HIV/AIDS. All three exhibitions arranged materials and strategies of AIDS’ past in service of the present and future. While fair critiques can be levied at Why We Fight as an exhibition for largely displaying the past of AIDS activism, thus risking of framing the epidemic and AIDS activism only as history, the programming series that Baumann developed for it tells another story. The Undetectable Collective worked with an explicit mandate from the NYPL to use the exhibition and its archives of AIDS activism as an inspiration. However, they were called upon to do so in order to address HIV/AIDS in the present. The Collective’s process and products demonstrate the utility of the past for the present. They drew on image driven strategies at the intersection of art and activism employed so effectively in the 1980s and early 1990s, and used and to adapted them for contemporary social, cultural, and political struggles with the virus. Not Only This moved explicitly between past and present by placing archival materials in dialogue with contemporary creative works. The curatorial strategies at play here attempted to bring attention to the present realities of the ongoing AIDS epidemic by acknowledging that although the temporality of HIV/AIDS may have shifted through moves such as undetectability, fighting AIDS remains a vital concern in the present. This chapter draws attention to the roles of
archival exhibitions in shaping temporality. Exposing temporal concerns in the areas of archival use and users also opens possibilities for future research.

This chapter also expands and extends the work on activist materials in archives, materials that are often intended to be “impermanent” (Sellie et al. 2015, 462-463) contributing meaningfully to the discussion of archiving such materials in relation to the values and practices of the activist movements from which they emerge. The instability of many activist materials means they may eventually fall apart and disappear at least in their original form—this is a temporal orientation towards the past, but also the future (Darms 2009, 153-154). The status of undetectability is also ephemeral. Attaining and maintaining such a status depends upon continuing access to medical treatment and to a host of costly pharmaceuticals. Biomedical regimes enable new life and health possibilities, but are grounded in suppression and surveillance, subjecting HIV positive persons to their control. Access to information and to such treatments is limited in gendered, racialized, and classed ways. The work of the Undetectable Collective engages directly with these issues in its form. It was intended only to be a brief and curated exercise in creating community and collectivity. The use of text by the Collective and its distribution by outreach postcards at different library sites also engaged with ephemerality in meaningful ways. The work they created was intended to disappear and to spread out into the hands of library users; like much earlier activist productions, it is ephemeral in nature. The ephemerality of much of AIDS activist materials from the 1980s and early 1990s mirrored the disappearance of those who died from AIDS-related causes. Those same activist materials displayed today in Why We Fight and in Not Only This in turn mirror a new form of ephemerality and fragility in the contemporary epidemic, undetectability. Exhibitions are generally an ephemeral form, lasting only a few months. The acquisition of the exhibition documentation of
*Not Only This* mirrors again the move of earlier activists who, in recognizing the importance of their work, sought an archival home where it would endure beyond the tenure of the event itself.

The curatorial gestures in all three exhibitions made the past of HIV/AIDS activism newly visible in 2013 and 2014. They did so in the context of the age of undetectability for HIV not only in science, health, and medicine, but also in a context where it is often invisible culturally. Each exhibition worked with a combination of small-scale installations and public programming to emphasize partial histories of AIDS activism, and the links forged with AIDS activism and other social justice movements in the twenty-first century. They used archival materials to bring the past into critical focus in service of the present and future of HIV/AIDS, its activism and cultural production. These exhibitions each narrate the non-linear relationship between past, present, and future. This is the work of a critical nostalgia. This is a nostalgia that emphasizes the longing for past time and space in order to attend to its ambivalences and complexities. These curatorial gestures called visitors’ attention to the contemporary utility of AIDS activism and its projects that are now decades old. Each of the exhibitions also underscored that the archives and consequently the cultural memory of AIDS are only partial and contested. These actions serve as a reminder of the continued political necessity for AIDS activism now. This is about a past that inserts itself into the present. The past here is used to open multiple potentialities. It is about the process of reflecting on history and the passage of time. A critical nostalgia offers multiple through-lines. It explores how to live in multiple times and places simultaneously presenting ethical and productive challenges. This is a nostalgia in which critical thinking and longing are not oppositional or incommensurate approaches.

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Chapter Six: Conclusion: Towards A Critical Nostalgia

This dissertation has examined the critical potential of the emotions and memories that are recorded and produced by three archives documenting 1980s and 1990s HIV/AIDS activism in the United States. Looking at the relationship of the present to both the past and the future, I have discussed a series of archival collections and collaborations between activists, artists, and archivists at the New York Public Library, New York University, and Visual AIDS. An analysis of the data collected through ethnographic fieldwork has resulted in the rich description of these phenomena that is fundamental to the project of building theory around the concept of critical nostalgia. The nostalgias produced and reproduced, along with the materials in these archives, matter so deeply because they simultaneously infuse and constrain contemporary HIV/AIDS activism, cultural production, and the lives and life chances of those living with HIV and AIDS today. This dissertation begins the larger project of exposing the ways that a critical nostalgia should play a significant role in how we record and remember in, with, and through archives. It makes a number of contributions to the fields of archival studies, memory studies, cultural studies, and gender and sexuality studies.

Critical Nostalgia

This study contributes new concerns, methodology, and content to a longstanding conversation on nostalgia. It highlights the necessity of connecting nostalgia to personal and professional ethics; contributes new methods and means to the study of nostalgia, namely ethnographic work and the study of archives; and it applies nostalgia to the territory of work on HIV/AIDS. This
dissertation develops the concept of critical nostalgia as an ethical mode of analysis in the context of HIV/AIDS archives. Conceptualizing critical nostalgia as an ethical approach is an important contribution of this study. In this work I build on an emergent body of literature that since the late 1990s has highlighted the critical potentiality of nostalgia for a range of disciplines and contexts. Scholarship by Svetlana Boym (2001) delineating types of nostalgia, including “reflective nostalgia,” has been foundational to this line of inquiry. A few scholars in this vein have employed the term “critical nostalgia,” however the use of the term remains unusual and the concept lacks a standard definition (Cashman 2006; de Szegheo Lang 2015; Dinshaw 2011; McDermott 2002). In Chapter One I trace the history and cross-disciplinary literature on nostalgia in order to develop my own concept of a critical nostalgia. Critical nostalgia is a mode of coherent and self-conscious ethical critique grounded in a bittersweet longing for both past times and spaces. It is an analytic mode, a feeling, and a memory practice that is political and socially engaged in the present and foregrounds work for future ethical action for social change. Many earlier studies centered the object of nostalgia as that which offered its radical or creative potential. By developing nostalgia as an ethical mode of critique its radical and critical potentiality is understood in this study as part of the very structure of nostalgia itself. The potentiality of critical nostalgia for aiding in the development of a more ethical archival practice is seen in Chapter Two. In that chapter I assert that it is through attentiveness to an ethics of care formed through practices of critical nostalgia that archivists are able to build and maintain productive and responsible relationships with the AIDS activist communities whose records they hold and the larger communities implicated by them. In addition, such nostalgia expands ethical considerations to consider the ongoing relationships of records creators and records subjects to their materials.
In addition, this study posits that critical nostalgia is a temporal relation; it is a mode of critique focused on a past that inserts itself continually into the present with critical implications for the future. This is a nostalgia that emphasizes the value of a temporal relation of longing for past times and spaces while also remaining attentive to the dangers, ambivalences, and complexities of that past. Prior studies of nostalgia have often acknowledged its temporal implications as a non-chrononormative practice, force, or feeling. Through the development of critical nostalgia this study deepens and contextualizes the implications of nostalgia as a temporal relation. Critical nostalgia offers crucial possibilities for people to express what is disappointing, lacking, or threatened in the present, and to examine the contemporary utility of the past in addressing them. In this way, it opens the possibility for unsettling the present, opening space to make the present less restrictive and the future more livable. Such temporal reorientations are especially important for those marginalized subjects to whom many spaces have been historically closed, including many HIV/AIDS activists. In its disturbance of the linear chronological ordering of life and being, critical nostalgia blurs lines between past, present and future. It is an orientation to time that contradicts modernity’s temporal emphasis on unending forward progress. Critical nostalgia thus prevents attempts to impose seamless, simple, and inevitable chronological narratives (McDermott 2002, 4). In Chapter Three the complex and tense negotiation of such historical narratives can been seen between generations of AIDS activists around the poster project, “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!” Through the development of the concept of undetectability in Chapter Five the temporal significance of critical nostalgia for curating with archives of AIDS cultural activism is shown. Each of the exhibitions analyzed narrate through a nostalgic lens the non-linear relationship between past, present, and future. These curatorial gestures thus bring visitors’ attention to the contemporary utility of past AIDS
activism. Each exhibition also underscored that the archives as well as the cultural memory of AIDS are partial and contested, thereby disrupting dominant narratives of linear progress. Critical nostalgia thus serves as a reminder of the continued political necessity for AIDS activism now. As a temporal relation, critical nostalgia allows for the self-aware, the complex, the selective, or the strategic retrieval and use of the past. It explores how to live in multiple times and places simultaneously presenting ethical and generative challenges in archives. This is a nostalgia in which critical thinking, longing, and action for social change are not oppositional or incommensurate approaches.

Scholars in memory studies and in gender and sexuality studies have noted that AIDS has significant temporal implications. It is a keen sense of urgency that these scholars and many of my participants noted as characterizing the period of the AIDS crisis before the development of more effective treatments in 1996. That sense of urgency brought a heightened awareness of mortality and destruction that drove many people to participate in and to commit their lives to HIV/AIDS activism. Archives of HIV/AIDS activism, including the ones included in this study, began their collecting in that context of urgency and a sped-up temporality. Memory scholar Marita Sturken writes, the activist work these archives “contain was meant to be immediate, in the moment, on the street, and carried a particular kind of temporal meaning” (2012). The shift in the mid-1990s to an improved medical management of HIV/AIDS has in turn rendered another temporal shift in the epidemic. This is a time that gender studies scholar Julian Gill-Peterson terms “endemic,” one characterized by the “continuous biopolitical management of death in life” (2013, 280). This is a temporal reorientation that that pushes for a different kind of politics and shifts the public perceptions away from AIDS as an urgent, real, and local epidemic. Sturken (2012) acknowledges the impacts of this new temporal regime on HIV/AIDS archives. In the
archives the objects that held activists’ urgent messages become transformed into historical documents, “the uncanny distance that these images now tell of another time, of a moment of emergency in which the image was understood to be a crucial element in the battle over AIDS” (Ibid). In combination with critical nostalgia HIV/AIDS archives now occupy a generative temporal space. Such archives center attention on the past while also serving as crucial reminders that HIV/AIDS remains unresolved and subject to erasure in the present. In Chapter Four I demonstrate how Visual AIDS employs its archival records strategically to illustrate the continued immediacy activism and AIDS itself.

Archives are deeply concerned with concepts of time and are in turn central in the construction of temporality, the multiplicity of relationships emerging from existing within time. It is therefore significant to the archival field that nostalgia is a temporal relation naming both the affective relationships of individuals and communities to time. Nostalgia names a temporality that is non-chrononormative. Since the 17th century in the Western world a sense of temporality has been “characterized by the radical asymmetries of the past, present and future” (Huyssen 2006, 7). Critical nostalgia is an orientation towards the past that is always at the same time equally about the present and the future, thereby disrupting neat distinctions between them. In archives it is clear that the past is both present in the material traces held and yet no longer fully accessible, making archives a powerful trigger for nostalgia on personal and collective levels. The available literature on temporality in archival studies is small and is focused primarily on the concept of the record. The focus on nostalgia as a temporal orientation that recognizes the presence of the past in the present offers much possibility for expanding understandings of time in relation to archives. This contributes to the questioning of assumptions about temporality that are recorded not only in archival records, but also in archival descriptions and other apparatuses.
Nostalgia for AIDS activism contributes an important, if surprising, entry point for the study of nostalgia in a field more often associated in collective memory with tragedy, destruction, and death. It contributes to a literature in gender and sexuality studies, within the larger topic of AIDS and cultural memory, on nostalgia for AIDS activism and cultural production (Hilderbrand 2006; Juhasz 2006). This previous scholarship served to briefly introduce nostalgic longings as the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s. I extending such scholarship and bringing it to the subject of archives. In Chapter Three I posit that considering how quotidian aspects of daily life were affected by both HIV/AIDS and the activism created in response to it is essential to understanding the very real desire for a collectively imagined, more socially engaged, and communal past. Nostalgia for ACT UP does not mean that anyone actually wants to revive or relive the death, discrimination, and mass destruction that marked the height of the AIDS crisis in the United States. However, a critical nostalgia for ACT UP’s brand of direct action AIDS activism, both by those who participated and by younger generations who did not, has become a common language through which people express their disappointments and frustrations with the shortcomings of contemporary attention in the media, public policy, and by the general public to HIV/AIDS and to HIV/AIDS activism. Both Alexandra Juhasz (2006) and Lucas Hilderbrand (2006) focus on video and film as a medium in relation to nostalgia for ACT UP. In Chapter Three I expand that focus beyond a narrow range of formats to assert that ACT UP nostalgia is an analytic mode, a feeling, and a memory practice that is in part mediated and formed through a broad range of archival materials. Such work on nostalgia stands to complicate the dominant narratives on HIV/AIDS that are forming in gender and sexuality studies by shifting their temporality, subjects, and consideration of archives. In Chapter Five I analyze contemporary artists, activists, and writers seeking of and complex relations to the past of AIDS activism in
generating contemporary creative works as evidence of a critical nostalgia in practice. In their new works these creators do not try to recreate or restore such a previous activist past. Their work complicates and problematizes narratives of the AIDS epidemic and its activism through an active longing for a more complicated historicization.

**Methods and Means of Nostalgia**

This study enriches empirical research on nostalgia as one of few substantial works to this point to ground nostalgia the method of ethnographic fieldwork. It is from within that interdisciplinary field of memory studies that much of the scholarship on critical nostalgia has developed. The larger social scientific trend towards interest in issues of memory has included the development of anthropological and sociological work on nostalgia since the mid-1990s. However, there are still relatively few ethnographic or otherwise empirically grounded studies of nostalgia. There are a few notable exceptions, including work by anthropologists including David Berliner (2012) on nostalgia as a major driving force in heritage making in Luang Prabang, William Bissel (2005) on “colonial nostalgia” in Zanzibar, and work on nostalgia in the former countries of the Soviet Union (Berdahl 1999; Lankauskas 2014; Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2014; Tordova and Gille 2010). In a recent volume, *Anthropology and Nostalgia*, Olivia Ange and David Berliner (2014) describe a number of approaches to the ethnographic study of nostalgia including its appearances in interactions, communication, places and times, and through objects and technologies. Exploring nostalgia through ethnographic research deepens description of context and makes critical nostalgia more than just theoretical.

Archives are uniquely poised in relation to nostalgia while they are intended to hold and make accessible the material traces of the past. There is a small body of scholarship on nostalgia
and cultural heritage institutions. These studies including Berliner’s (2012) work addresses cultural heritage sites and a number of other recent works that look at museums and memorials as sites for nostalgia (Simine 2013; Sodaro 2013; Wilks and Kelly 2008). However, none of these studies have engaged with archives as either the subject or the site of nostalgia. This study demonstrates that archives are worthy of such deep engagement in the study of nostalgia within archival studies, memory studies, and cultural studies. Archives acknowledge that, despite documentation, the past is not fully captured or accessible in the present, yet they insist upon the value of a relationship to it. These factors mean that nostalgia is felt and practiced by, within, and through archives.

Undetectability

This dissertation introduces the concept of undetectability to discourses on temporality, archives, and nostalgia. The phenomenon of undetectability, in which HIV is rendered undetectable through still always present in the bloodstream through medical intervention, has radically altered discourse around HIV/AIDS. Undetectability pushes for a focus on the future, instead of just on the past and present in understandings of HIV/AIDS. As an archival condition as well, undetectability has great potential for enriching discussions of presence, absence, and invisibility. For example, undetectability affords new language in at the intersections of LGBTQ identity and archives naming the relationships of closeted individuals whose materials enter non-LGBT archives or where the archival apparatus does not surface their queer identities for one reason or another. In Chapter Five this study extends temporal concerns rendered by undetectability to the examination of archival exhibitions. Temporality is a particularly important concern in the context of HIV/AIDS insofar as AIDS has itself shifted experiences and perceptions of time,
speeding it up. Archives in their exhibitions crucially provide a space to in turn to slow down, offering space for reflection and alternate affective experiences. In that chapter I address the place of activist materials in archives, materials that are frequently intended by their creators to be ephemeral and impermanent. This chapter also examines how archives construct and mediate temporalities, with significant implications for users and larger communities. Looking to nostalgia and by extension to undetectability as particular temporal orientations offers much possibility for expanding understandings of time in relation to archives, their outreach and public programming.

Activism, Archives, and Ethics

This study contributes to recent work in archival studies on both “archiving activism” and “archival activism” (Flinn and Alexander 2015) by enhancing understandings of activists’ archiving practices, the ethics of such work for both activists and archivists, and the particularities of documenting HIV/AIDS activism. As Flinn and Alexander define it, “archiving activism” describes “an archivist or archival institution, whether formal or independent,” who “act[s] to collect and document political, social movement and other activist groups and campaigns” (Ibid, 331). Activist collections are found in the archives of communities, universities, and governments among others locations. In this study these records are collected and housed within archives at a community-based arts organization, at a public library, and at a private university. The literature on “archiving activism” focuses both on the creative and innovative archival processes used for working with these materials, and the particularities of documenting political, human rights, and other social movement activism engaged in by individuals, groups, and organizations. Chapter Two contributes to these studies a detailed
examination of self-documentation practices by AIDS activists as a component of their activist labors. It is noteworthy that these activists self-consciously completed these documentation activities during the height of their involvement in AIDS activism. This chapter exposes the motivations and conditions that afforded such a keen investment in archiving. The marked awareness of activists of the value and need to document their own social movement as it was happening is highly unusual. Chapter Two also addresses the critical question of where such activist materials belong, whether in a community-based institution or an institutional archives, from the perspective of various activists involved. The particular characteristics of activist materials and ways in which have an impact upon archival work, particularly their ephemerality, are addressed in Chapter Five. While it has been previously discussed briefly within a few articles (Darms 2009; Sellie et al. 2015; Burk 2013) this dissertation positions HIV/AIDS as a major focus in the literature on archiving activism for the first time.

As Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander define it, “activist archiving” comprises the “activities in which archivists…seek to campaign on issues such as access rights or participatory rights within records’ control systems or act to deploy their archival collections to support activist groups and social justice aims” (2015, 331). In Chapter Two archivists’ deployment of their materials to support social justice aims in the present is explored through an exhibition and programming series at the New York Public Library. These programming efforts display the contemporary utility of materials documenting AIDS activism in an earlier period. They now serve as an inspiration for activists who also draw on them for strategic purposes and knowledge production. This study also addresses Visual AIDS’ community-based archiving practices in Chapter Four as an example of activist archiving practice. That chapter positions nostalgia as a component of activist archiving for the first time. Nostalgia, a means of looking to the past, is
understood by the organization as part of a holistic understanding of the “cure” for HIV/AIDS. Looking backwards thus offers a way forward for the impacted community, utilizing archival approaches to access, preservation, and care as a way to enable healing and survival by community members.

This study contributes to a larger conversation in the archival field on developing a more ethical practice across archival contexts. Chapter Two posits that activists have ongoing responsibilities for their materials that are grounded in a feminist ethics of care. Developed through a reading of literature on nostalgia and archives I contribute to this discourse “home” as a lens. Home offers archivists an ethical orientation to their work that is grounded in a feminist ethics of care. Such a positioning challenges archivists to engage more deeply and continuously in affective relationships to records creators, records subjects, and larger communities (Caswell and Cifor 2016). An ethical relationship as demonstrated in that chapter calls on archivists to reconceptualize the archives as a community’s home for their materials and memories. In order to create and sustain the archives as a home not only for AIDS activists’ records, but also for that community, archivists are beholden to a certain ethics of care. Home as a lens extends also to activists looking to the archives as a space of belonging. Like any other sort of home, archives can provide such a refuge. However, they are never free from conflict, exclusion, or complexity. Activists in caring for their materials do not wish to cede control over their history and narratives, which are central to their collective memories and communal identity. It is by being attentive to an ethics of care formed through critical nostalgia that archivists can build and maintain productive and responsible relationships with the communities implicated, including AIDS activists, in their records.
This study acknowledges that none of these archives are able to provide a cure for HIV/AIDS, even just as a cultural phenomenon. Archives alone cannot end discrimination, stigma, and fear. Yet, archives are doing important work to address these social injustices. This study points to archival materials and programming as a crucial resource in the fight against fear and stigma that still pervade even in the wake of more effective treatments for HIV/AIDS and lowered transmission rates of the virus in some communities.

**Archival Outreach and Public Programming**

Despite having become a common practice in and across the archival field, the extant literature on archival outreach and public programming, particularly in the form of exhibitions, is quite small. This study explores the roles of the archivist as curator and of archivists in working collaboratively with curators, artists, writers, and activists to exhibit their materials and to produce new creative works. Extending archival work to include curating is part of a larger shift in “archival practice which, rejecting professional advocacy of neutrality and passivity, acknowledges the role of the recordkeeper in ‘actively’ participating in the creation, management and pluralization of archives and seeks to understand and guide the impact of that active role” (Flinn and Alexander 2015, 331). Examining curatorial work with archival materials supports the understanding that archivists are indeed participating in the work of interpreting their materials. In Chapter Two, it is an exhibition and a series of public programming, *Why We Fight*, that allowed the archival institution to rebuild and to strengthen its relationship to the AIDS activist community documented and implicated in their records. In that case the archivist served as curator of the exhibition and through community outreach opened up a space for the AIDS activist community to develop its own set of public programs that suited their interests and needs.
Outreach was crucial to reaching non-traditional archival users, including activists and artists, who were previously unaware of the availability and access to those archival materials. In Chapter Four, Visual AIDS’ public programming including exhibitions and the creation of new creative works are discussed. The organization’s programming efforts are always strategically grounded in the Archive Project and the work of the artists documented. This programming strategy allows Visual AIDS to deploy interest in AIDS cultural production from the 1980s and 1990s to move audiences towards engagement with the present of the crisis, and to bring attention to the work of under known artists. Finally, Chapter Five focuses on concerns of representation and temporality in contemporary exhibitions of archival materials documenting AIDS activism and cultural production from the 1980s and 1990s. It looks at three such exhibitions held at or in collaboration between my research sites. It also considers the commissioning of new creative works inspired by and utilizing these archival records by contemporary artists, writers, and activists. This study also contributes to emergent scholarship on the particularities of exhibiting activist materials, including ephemera. It is also noteworthy that much of the outreach work discussed in this study is done in collaborations, formal and informal, between different types of archival institutions, and archives and community members. This project firmly positions outreach and public programming as a core archival function worthy of critical study.

HIV/AIDS archives are instrumental in connecting multiple generations of AIDS activist communities to each other. Outreach and public programming are central to building such relationships and collective identities. Generational concerns are receiving greater attention in recent archival literature, particularly that on community archives (Caswell 2014; Chazan et al. 2015; Flinn 2011; Flinn et al. 2009; Ormond-Parker and Sloggett 2012; Wakimoto et al. 2013).
This study contributes to this emergent body of literature, turning attention to AIDS activists and archives as a subject for the first time. This study contributes new understandings of the transmission of knowledge across generational lines through archival materials, apparatuses, and archival outreach and public programming. In Chapter Two the concern of ACT UP activists over access to their records includes a focus on the accessibility for youth of archival materials created by previous generations of youth activists. In both Chapter Two and Chapter Three the deep concern of an older activist generation about the transmission of their knowledge, strategies, memories, and histories is evident. It is also clear from the programming for *Why We Fight* analyzed in both of these chapters that there is marked desire among younger generations of activists to engage, learn from, and share knowledge and strategies with older generations.

Nostalgia for ACT UP is conceptualized in Chapter Three as a cross-generational experience and concern. Critical nostalgia is setup in this chapter as a force that can build discourse across difficult and tense generational lines in archives. This study documents the oft-cited tensions between generations of AIDS activists, but also highlights the potential of the archives through outreach and programming for inciting cross-generational dialogues, experiences, and actions.

**Gendered Dimensions of Archiving and HIV/AIDS Historiography**

The three archives examined in this study each have significant race, gender, class, and geographic limitations in their representations of AIDS activism and cultural production, both past and present. This study examines the gendered dimensions of archiving with new focus and greater depth. Within the archival field the gendered dimensions of archival labors and of archiving more broadly are openly acknowledged, however there is little literature available on the topic. In Chapter Two the ways in which documentation of AIDS activism was shaped by
gender are discussed in relation to ACT UP and its records. The role of women, and particularly lesbians, in AIDS activism has been largely under-recognized in the literature on AIDS, its history, activism and in cultural representations of them whether in film, television, or exhibitions. Scholars and writers including Ann Cvetkovich (2003) and Sarah Schulman (2012) have attempted to destabilize such narratives and to highlight the prominence of women. Many of my participants noted that such erasures that were taking place in the historicization of the epidemic. Most of my activist participants, regardless of their own gender identification, openly acknowledged that women contributed much of the activist knowledge and strategy drawing on their long-term work in the women’s, anti-war, and civil rights movements. Women also served important leadership roles. The overlap of AIDS activists, including a number of my participants with feminist archiving efforts, specifically at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, has not been previously explored. As discussed in Chapter Two that these women saw the need to document their work as AIDS activists in order to ensure women’s place in the history of these movements, is significant. Gender and gender-based oppression also crucially shapes the self-understanding of one’s records, work, and history as worthy of archival capture. In Chapter Four, the influence of gender is addressed in relation to women’s self-understanding of themselves as artists, and the ways in which that self-understanding shapes their contributions to the Archive Project and the outreach work of the organization’s staff. In Chapter Five, the limitations of dominant narratives are avoided by exhibitions that open space for women to represent their own relationships, lives, experiences, identifications, and longings for a more complex and gendered history of the AIDS epidemic and its activism. Their acts form a crucial refusal of women’s erasure from AIDS narratives and archives. The gendered dimensions of archival documentation and labors are opened up by this study for further inquiry in archival studies and in gender and sexuality studies.
Future Directions for Research

This dissertation will eventually be transformed into a book project. The book will introduce the central role of archives in HIV/AIDS activism and cultural production, as well as nostalgia and cultural memory processes to audiences in information studies, gender and sexuality studies, cultural studies, and memory studies. Additional ethnographic research is required to complete the manuscript. Further research will examine the affective roles of new media in the revisitation and commodification of the AIDS crisis. This was explored in Chapter Three through the examination of “Your Nostalgia is Killing Me!,” and offered a view into the meaningful roles of new media in remembering and engaging with the past of HIV/AIDS and its archives. This case gestures towards the way that digital media has created new affective economies where archival materials documenting early AIDS activism and cultural productions frequently circulate and are appropriated in ways divorced from the context of their production. Archival images are disseminated across new media in ways that shape and are shaped by the platforms’ affordances as well as social, political, and cultural values. Additionally, activists and artists’ widespread use of digital technologies and new media to activate archival materials in social critique necessitates their deeper examination in future research. The contemporary allure of 1990s digital aesthetics in new media as evidenced in Chapter Three also calls for a more profound investigation of the aesthetic components of nostalgia and of archival materials in future research.

This study counters the dismissal and disavowal of nostalgia by both scholars and popular commentators as an overly indulgent and unproductive wallowing. Nostalgia has often been conceived of as that which gets one stuck in the past, thereby doing a disservice to the present and impeding forward progress into the future. Nostalgia in such a view stands actively
in the way of social change and action. This dissertation contends that rather than it being antithetical to scholarly research, to archival work, or to activism for social change, a critical nostalgia is crucial to all of these practices. I argue that critical nostalgia, as an ethical mode of critique and a temporal relation is a generative lens at every moment of collaboration between HIV/AIDS archives and the AIDS activist communities they document and serve. Critical nostalgia is a bittersweet longing for past time and space that is political and socially engaged in the present and foregrounds work for future possibilities. Such a nostalgia emphasizes the value of a longing for past times and spaces while also remaining attentive to ambivalences and complexities of that past. Nostalgia is a shared language for people in the present to voice their disappointments and frustrations with the present, while examining the contemporary utility of that past. Critical nostalgia draws on the past, whether real or imagined, to imagine a different and more just future. It explores how to live in multiple times and places at once presenting ethical and creative challenges for archives. Archives, like nostalgia, are frequently conceived beyond the archival field as dusty, outmoded, and focused solely on outdated if fondly recalled elements of the past. Much like nostalgia, on the surface archives can appear to be about the past, but they are more productively understood as oriented to the present and future. This dissertation demonstrates that archives and critical nostalgia are together an essential means to reflect on the past in a contextualized manner that is required to construct of communal identity and to engage in direct action in the present. Ultimately, a responsible and ethical activist archiving practice needs to harness critical nostalgia to actively engage and to serve archival constituencies with an eye to the past, present, and future.

References

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

| Interview Protocol Title: |
| Date: __________ |
| Time: __________ |
| Location: __________________________________________________________ |
| Interviewer: _______________________________________________________ |
| Interviewee(s): ___________________________________________________ |

Opening statement/brief description of project will be made including the investigator’s motive; purpose of study; protection of respondents, including confidentiality, willingness to continue participation, use of data, access to final report, and permission to record interview.

| What is your title? |
| What is your academic and professional background? |

Do you consider yourself to be a HIV/AIDS activist? Why or why not? If so, please describe your experiences as an activist. What does HIV/AIDS activism mean to you? What did it feel like to be part of that activism? Were you involved in self-documentation efforts within activist organizations? What does involvement with [name of site] bring to your role as an activist? When you think back on your activist experiences now, how does it make you feel?

How long have you been involved with [name of site]? How did you come to be involved in this organization? Why did you think it was important to get involved in this organization?

Please describe the scope of your responsibilities at [name of site]. What do you hope to accomplish in this role?

How does documenting HIV/AIDS figure into your organization’s mission? How long has this archives been involved in documenting HIV/AIDS? How did HIV/AIDS become a collecting focus for [name of site]? What kinds of archival materials does the organization have? Does the organization continue to collect materials from HIV/AIDS activists?

Please describe your responsibilities in relation to the HIV/AIDS archival materials specifically.
What knowledge of the events you documented in the materials did you have before beginning working with them?

How would you describe your own relationship to these materials? How does your work with [name of site]’s materials make you feel?

How have these materials been used? Who is using them and for what purposes?

Have you used these archival materials? If so, how?

Do the materials accurately represent and reflect AIDS activism? Why or why not? Do the materials accurately reflect your own experiences as an activist? What is captured in the materials? What is not captured in the materials?

Do you think certain community actions and successes of AIDS activists have been recognized and celebrated more than others? Why or why not? If so, which ones?

How would you describe the relationship between your organization and the HIV/AIDS activist communities it documents? Have the activists involved interacted with their materials following their donation? If so, how?

What sorts of projects are you currently working on with HIV/AIDS records? Describe a recent project, small or large. Tell me how the project came into being and what you did, or are doing, to complete the project. How do you feel about the results you achieved with the project? Were you satisfied with the final product? How do you think others perceived the results?

How does outreach, exhibitions or other public programming figure into your responsibilities? Please describe outreach activities in which you have engaged in or are planning currently in relation to HIV/AIDS records. Please describe one particular project in which you engaged in outreach based in this collection. Please describe the challenges and successes of this project.

Has there been significant digitization of HIV/AIDS materials at [name of site]? Can you speak about what is gained in digitization of these records and what is lost? How have your archival materials been used in the digital realm? Have they maintained their contextual information?

Has your institution engaged in a collaboration or other partnership with another organization to work jointly on a HIV/AIDS project? If so, please describe the project briefly, including a breakdown of which activities were performed by which organization.

How would you describe AIDS activism in the present? What relationship does it have to AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s? To the archival materials you work with? Do you
see your organization’s materials contributing to current efforts of AIDS activists? If so, how?

Please describe how you see AIDS activism from the 1980s and 1990s being remembered today, if at all. Do you see your sites archival materials contributing to the memory of AIDS activism? Why or why not?

Is there anything we haven’t asked that you would like to discuss?

[Researcher thoughts bracketed here during interview]

Probes used:

[Thank participants]

Post Interview Comments or Leads:
Appendix B: Observation Protocol

Date: ________
Time: ________
Length of activity: ____ minutes
Site: ________
Participants: _____________________________________________________________

Questions asked by researcher:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Notes</th>
<th>Reflective Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical setting: visual layout</td>
<td>[Reflective comments: questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, my interpretations]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<p>| Description of participants | Description of activities | Description of individuals engaged in activity | Sequence of activity over time | Interactions | Unplanned events | Participants comments: expressed in quotes | [Reflective comments: questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, my interpretations] |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary</th>
<th>[The researcher’s observation of what seems to be occurring]</th>
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