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*Viral Cultures* opens with a description of artist-activist collective fierce pussy's *For the Record* (2013), a text-based piece that straddles the past and present of the HIV/AIDS epidemic by invoking the memory of friends, artists, and comrades who died from AIDS-related complications by imagining them in present space. The author of the monograph is scholar Marika Cifor, an archival ethnographer by training, who carefully guides the reader through a close reading of the piece's import, showing the ways that its recurrent invocations of the past make political use of the nostalgic yearning that often inflects contemporary art grappling with AIDS and loss by rooting the viewer's gazer firmly in the present. In doing so, Cifor argues, *For the Record* straddles time and space through creative use not just of memory, but also of the archives of the epidemic. It does not resist nostalgia, but rather reflects its emotional potency outward—insisting on the ongoing urgency of the questions that animated previous generations of activists and archivists.

Cifor's reading of the piece ensures that it is a fitting opening object for *Viral Cultures*, which explores the acts of curating and archiving information as not just labors of love or acts of bearing witness, but rather as a kind of generative care work. Writing in the wake of two ongoing epidemics prematurely deemed “over,” Cifor argues that archiving in the age of AIDS transforms the link between the past and the present into a live connection that is seen, felt, and experienced as a robust call to action. Throughout the course of five chapters, Cifor deftly demonstrates how activist archival and curatorial practices create a space from within which artists, activists, scholars, and others may productively resist the triumphalist impulse that undergirds so much contemporary AIDS coverage.
Viral Cultures is part of a growing body of work examining not just the events and actors that shaped the early years HIV/AIDS epidemic, but also how cultural memory of the era has been constituted over time. Cifor’s method—an interdisciplinary archival ethnography—lends itself particularly well to such a task. The monograph sets out to explore the cultural life of archival objects and their stewards by tracing how the care and maintenance of historical memory can function as a political act through three institutions engaged in a manner of archival or curatorial practice—the New York Public Library, the New York University Fales Library and Special Collections, and Visual AIDS—as well as interviews with over thirty artists, archivists, and AIDS-cultural workers.

Arguing that archives and archival practices have become “as important to understanding AIDS as the biomedical event of HIV/AIDS itself,” Cifor’s close readings of these spaces and the people who maintain them makes a compelling case for how practices of collecting, maintaining, cataloging, and making accessible AIDS archives afford scholars and artists new ways of thinking about the cultural life of HIV/AIDS (p. 4). Cifor terms this work—which she argues is part of a rich legacy of cultural activism—“curatorial care work” that is essential to public understandings of the AIDS epidemic as a complicated and ongoing crisis (p. 26).

There are a few key interventions and recurrent themes that make Viral Cultures a particularly compelling text. The first is Cifor’s analytic engagement with the concept of nostalgia, a nearly inescapable force when interpreting the records, memories, and history of HIV/AIDS in the United States. In an era when much of the popular cultural memory of the epidemic seems to be limited and preserved in amber due to the simplistic temptations of a kind of nostalgia, Cifor offers readers another framework: vital nostalgia. Cifor argues that rather than being a simplifying or obfuscating force, vital nostalgia structures the ways that AIDS has been recorded, remembered, and preserved. Unlike a nostalgia that might be interpreted as politically conservative or overly individuated, Cifor argues that vital nostalgia as a “generative practice” is rooted in the “bittersweet longing for past time or space” while remaining committed to addressing and repairing imbalances of power across those same vectors (p. 6). In Cifor’s words, it is a practice that enables the archive to be a site that affords AIDS a history and prompts contemporary viewers to interrogate the present with an eye toward the past. Rather than relegating the structural factors that shaped the epidemic to a bygone era, Cifor argues that vital nostalgia insists upon the ongoing and unfinished nature of the past within the present.

Cifor’s analytic removes “nostalgia” from its often ahistorical and apolitical trappings and instead makes it an active word—a force that has the ability to catalyze individual experiences of loss, longing, and sadness into collective prompts to action by naming a “shared language, feeling, or memory” (p. 26). In other words, it names archival practice as a new tool for a new kind of politics.

The argument at the heart of Viral Cultures is that the labors of archiving, curating, and preserving can themselves assume a political valence. It is an important one for historians in particular to grapple with. The archive, after all, is often the foundation of the historical method. The fact that the archive is where historians find evidence to support our interpretations of the past can, at times, lead to a reflexive attachment to the notion that the archive as a space is an objective one. Cifor’s important book both reminds us that such a conceit is just that, and invites us to grapple with the ensuing implications.