

PREFACE

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To understand the networks of AIDS and its distribution of crises, it seems useful to recount the social, organizing, and creative affinities that inspired this anthology. In 2014 the three editors of the collection presented papers at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) conference in Seattle on different panels. Alexandra (Alex) and Nishant attended Jih-Fei's panel discussion, where he presented his work on the documentary *How to Survive a Plague* (2012). On a panel titled "Queer Contexts," organized and facilitated by film and media studies scholar Lucas Hilderbrand, Jih-Fei's presentation grappled with the contemporary cultural revisitations of the early years of the US AIDS crisis and the erasure of women and people of color in the telling of white male heroism leading up to the advent of antiretrovirals—an intervention that drew upon Alex's scholarship on AIDS media activism and historiography. The paper resonated with Nishant's own work on the whitewashing of AIDS history in relation to the same documentary. Alex and Jih-Fei first became acquainted at that conference, with Alex mentoring Jih-Fei thereafter as he completed his doctoral dissertation and works toward completing his forthcoming monograph. Following the conference, Lucas Hilderbrand initiated a more formal email introduction between the three of us, given our common political and scholarly investments.

Since two of us were in the process of working on essays that grappled with a critique of whiteness and the redemption of biomedical discourse in AIDS representations in the context of the same film, we began to share our work and offer each other feedback. Both our essays were subsequently published in 2016—Jih-Fei's piece in *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* ("How to Survive: AIDS and Its Afterlives in Popular Media," vol. 44, nos. 1 and 2) and Nishant's article in *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* ("How to Survive the Whitewashing of AIDS: Global Pasts, Transnational Futures," vol. 3,

no. 1). While both essays used *How to Survive a Plague* as the focal point to make a larger argument about the representational terms of AIDS historiography and its impacts on the ongoing nature of crises, our broader goals extended beyond recentering the very objects of our critique. Given our shared investments in drawing connections between AIDS and exercises of racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, global capitalism, and colonialism, Nishant proposed to Jih-Fei the idea of curating a larger collection of essays. We both agreed that asking Alex to coedit the volume with us would shape the project in crucial ways, given her pioneering work on (and production of) AIDS representations, particularly around the investments of feminism, lesbians, and women of color in AIDS activist videos. At this time and since, she has been collaborating with the AIDS cultural activist Theodore (Ted) Kerr (and before that with Marty Fink, Bishnupriya Ghosh, and David Oscar Harvey) on a series of written conversations about cultural phenomena, what Kerr named “AIDS Crisis Revisitation”—the sudden, rather unexpected deluge of representations of HIV/AIDS in popular media, after the period of discursive quiet that he has called the “second silence”—the same one that Nishant, Jih-Fei, and so many of our colleagues are also considering in their work.¹

Building on a growing analysis naming whitewashing and other short-changes that seem to be defining many of these revisits, Alex could testify that other stories, people, images, and actions—profoundly linked to the needs and struggles of gay men and also moving in other directions—had occurred in the interlocked and sometimes contestatory interchanges within activist communities, and between that multifaceted alliance and larger institutions, at least during the first outset of American AIDS (video) activism in the late 1980s. Such interventions, from those who had been there and done that, intermixed with research by those who came later or from elsewhere—testifying to or researching other emergences, timelines, and responses—were central to the dynamic flows and interchanges that our collection seeks to engage and draw out.

At this early stage, the three of us discussed our collective commitments to grapple with both repetitions within as well as newer forms of insecurity that were informing and shifting the enduring nature of the pandemic. We thought that a new collection on AIDS could offer a social and political barometer of the present state of the pandemic at precisely the historical moment when dominant scripts insisted on its pastness. We were particularly interested in how frequent and nearly dominant stories of the “end of AIDS,” of AIDS obsolescence, were part of a larger narration bent upon illuminating the supposed “recovery” of the United States from its crisis as a means

to resurrect the exceptionalism of empire and retool the engine of global capitalism. Many of our conversations thus returned to considering how the labor of AIDS activism in contemporary narratives was being assimilated into national fictions of democracy, neoliberal cure, and linear teleologies of progress. As Marita Sturken has pointed out, at stake in AIDS studies, politics, and art, including their embedded place within national and imperial constructions, are the ideological terms by which the epidemic's history is constantly being remembered, deployed, and marketed—not simply as a matter of dispelling a singular and authentic AIDS story but because the memories and political economy of AIDS continue to shape the present and future of the pandemic, as well as the lives of those who remain disproportionately exposed to its impacts.² Drawing on our collective and varied interests in women of color feminisms, queer of color critique, AIDS media production, globalization, activism, and decolonization, our discussions around the book's conceptual scope revolved around how we could focus these connected but diverse investments into a single volume. In many respects, the potentially sprawling scope of the project reflected the very nature of the subject matter under consideration—not just through epidemiological categories (i.e., the unstable viral life of contagion and transmission) but also in structural terms—that is, how HIV travels socially by merging the quotidian with the global in a web of unpredictable and precarious arrangements.

Furthermore, the three of us were personally and spatially scattered in some of the many senses that define the topic and approaches at hand. Namely, we live and thus work on our collaboration across three US time zones (although often one or more of us might also be abroad); we inhabit three states of rank within US higher education; we are trained and situated within different disciplines and intellectual generations albeit all within the humanities; we span multiple possible alignments of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and HIV status; and we enjoy varied and changing states of personal and professional intimacy. These arrangements between the productive tensions experienced through our labor, personal histories and embodiments, and lived places and ideological affiliations paralleled and informed our approach to contemporary AIDS scholarship as we grew the intellectual framework and anticipated the network of authors and their attendant issues that would become this anthology. Of course, they too would be distributed in these many and even more senses (by careful design), although perhaps not as intimately. We asked: How are the durations and intensities of crises experienced in specific contexts, by real people, in their lives, communities, and cultural and political practices? We hope that sharing one personal/

professional anecdote will prove demonstrative of how our own local and lived durations, intensities, and uneven distributions both sustained and stymied our (and any) distributed reckonings with AIDS.

In the late stages of our work on this collection, we organized just one of countless Skype calls, this time to create a to-do list that would respond to our invigorating readers' reports. Nishant was in Mumbai, Alex at home in Brooklyn, and Jih-Fei in Los Angeles without internet access while toggling with phone apps to take notes and thus unable to fully access our Google Drive. We have all been in this scattered "there": interacting via skewed technologies, temporalities, and platforms that should be too familiar to most scholars and many collaborators in the early twenty-first century. We decided that it might be useful for Alex to write a paragraph, much like this one, because she remarked that when we had started working together, we barely knew each other outside our shared scholarly commitments, and that taking the risk of collaborating with near strangers had proven to pay off, even as you never quite know. We agreed: we work together very well, in a productive, professional, and friendly fashion, contributing our discrete skills as writers and editors, our varied networks of colleagues, connections, and foundational texts, all the while staying mindful and respectful of our differences in perspectives and position.

Then, Alex took a tentative step in a new direction. She named her sense of place as a white, middle-aged, cisgender, HIV-negative queer woman who had been working on AIDS, in particular women of color and AIDS, for more than thirty years. Her move was not much of a risk in itself as Alex is often more effusive, self-reflexive, or outgoing (in professional contexts) than are Jih-Fei or Nishant, and she is the senior scholar in this group. This risk was theirs. And as is true across this effort, this risk was further differentiated by our distinct experiences. Alex's words served as an implicit invitation, but given the tender state of our collaboration and individual selves, it was not a demand. Even so, Jih-Fei engaged. He narrated his own coming to HIV/AIDS—as an (as of this writing) HIV-negative and East Asian American queer cisgender-presenting man; his first sexual experience after high school with an older HIV-positive white gay man who had an Asian fetish; followed with his involvement in HIV/AIDS social services and research, cultural productions, and activism during the late 1990s to mid-2000s; and his later decision to continue to focus on AIDS in his doctoral research. There was a pause, a rather lengthy one, and, as might be expected, Nishant began to speak. But then, something unexpected happened. He did not disclose. Instead, Nishant glazed forward, saying something benign or polite; his words served as a

graceful transition elsewhere. It seemed that the sensitivities lived between us were too real, too alive, too important to engage through the scatterings of technology and place and personhood that underwrote this conversation. Alex felt like she had made an inappropriate gesture; Jih-Fei, with his inimitable grace and reserve, moved the conversation forward.

We got back to work. There were places of AIDS we would not share, at least not this time; there was a time for HIV that was not this one. The next day, Nishant sent an email written with his characteristic gentle, professional attentions. He explained that the felt pause had been real. However, it was precipitated not by a withholding but by the unexpected entrance of his father into the room, just as the conversation had become more personal, and just out of our camera sight. He apologized for not being able to contribute some details about his own positionality during this moment of shared vulnerability and possible openings. The lessons of this one small and subtle interaction—how lived, personal, interpersonal discordances and connections will produce what we can know and learn about HIV; bound by technology; happening in space; as tender as an unspoken word; as deep as cultural norms; as powerful as rank and fathers and friends; how possible or missed interactions and connections sit in alignment and tension with more scholarly ways of speaking, writing, and making sense of HIV/AIDS; how AIDS is an everyday phenomenon ever ready to inspire new crises or cures (big and small)—reflect the shared and building understanding of the AIDS crises that we hope this anthology might help to reveal by distributing approaches, as well as authors, topics, places, and connections.

Given our many investments in theorizing the ongoing nature of AIDS crises, we thus decided there would be several scattered logics for our volume—temporal and spatial, ethnographic and political-economic, local and global, many voiced and differently oriented—that would frame attention to the distribution of the pandemic by thinking about AIDS not simply as “the most perfect metaphor for globalization” but as globalization’s most apposite and indexical expression.³ In this regard, our volume would be distinct from AIDS scholarship that conceptualized its “local” and “global” distributions as discrete entities. For example, in theorizing memory politics subtending the “unremembering” of AIDS, Christopher Castiglia suggests that the global turn in AIDS scholarship comes at the cost of attention to the material specificities of crises that are more “homegrown” in nature. He contends:

When AIDS in the United States disappeared from queer theory, it vanished from American Studies as well because of a move toward the trans-

national, the hemispheric, and the global. Although focusing attention on transnational paradigms correctly stretches our understanding of the border crossings of capital, populations, and ideology (allowing us, for instance, to understand the global spread of HIV/AIDS), it has also made local freedom struggles within the United States seem provincial and narrow, tainted with the bad smell of national exceptionalism.⁴

The idea of local erasure ostensibly performed by a transnational turn in AIDS studies, however, fails to account for the inextricable relation between the two, especially when considering the global political economies of neoliberalism and their impacts on activist practices and local communities. American studies critics such as David Eng and Jodi Melamed have pointed to the importance of considering how neoliberal multiculturalism in the United States assumes transnational proportions by obscuring race—locally and globally—in the service of “an ever-increasing global system of capitalist exploitation and domination” that is predicated on the “hyperextraction of surplus value from racialized bodies.”⁵ In considering the mutual imbrications of local and global, we thus collectively ask: How is the advent of AIDS structured by and structuring of the neoliberal logic of crisis as it remains autochthonous but also as it migrates across various transnational, cultural, and geopolitical sites and legal institutions? How have AIDS’ aesthetic expressions and political practices been linked, delinked, and taken up across national, transnational, and diasporic contexts to shift the terms for blame, “risk,” and responsibility? What social, material, political, and cultural circumstances have enabled AIDS crises to become global and yet, in a sense, unremarkable? And, in which moments are the historical, cultural, and political contexts of AIDS erased, repackaged, incorporated into, and wielded by US empire?

In keeping with the capacious scope of these questions, we decided that the forms of writing in the book needed to reflect the wide array of voices in AIDS scholarship and activism not only in terms of who would be theorizing but also the subject positions who, or subject matters that, were being theorized. We began the process of identifying contributors by each creating lists of scholars, activists, and artists who have and continue to importantly signal the broadly defined field of “AIDS studies” (while simultaneously recognizing that the constitutive boundaries of such a field have and will always, of necessity, be contingent and amorphous). We culled names from our personal, activist, and artistic webs as well as by scouring conference abstracts and published scholarship from at least the late 1990s, when AIDS studies seemed to dwindle, to the present. Not surprisingly, we began with a

combined list of more than seventy names. One of the reasons for organizing three “Dispatches” in addition to the nine full-length chapters, original and reprinted, was to expand the number of contributors to the volume, thus including as many of the insights available from our impressive list. Needless to say, a list of this magnitude itself represents something about the current shape, places, and persistence of AIDS. Additionally, and more significantly than a simple accommodation of numbers, we felt like the dispatches would allow conversations regarding the past, present, and future of AIDS to take place at a different register—one that would be more dialogic and less formulaic in scope. We each “ran” one of the dispatches: naming the questions, communicating with our contributors, editing their responses, and writing an introduction. Thus, these three efforts represent not simply diverse approaches to the temporalities of AIDS but also our unique (if connected) orientations and commitments.

It is also important to note, and begin to attend to here, that no matter the force behind our close care, commitment, and attention, Black women kept sliding off, disappearing from, or moving ever so slightly out of our sight lines. We name who we could not always see in the most capacious and fleeting ways: women representing the complex diasporic histories of Africa, including African women, African American women, Black women from other locales and nations, as well as gender nonconforming Black people who identify with femininity. These subjects were not being adequately centered or seen by our processes—as authors, agents, interlocutors, or collaborators—despite our best intentions and many efforts. While it might appear that this has been somewhat “corrected” through our selection of chapters and authors, an invitation for all the participants in the anthology to attend as thoroughly to Black women as is appropriate for their topic and method, and our discussions of our attempts at full attention here and elsewhere, we did not want this structuring absence to be paved over and obscured. It was only late (although every conversation we had about the anthology attended to this “issue”) that we understood our ongoing predicament as indicative of yet another tender disruption, mistemporality, or disalignment of power, privilege, and position from which we must learn about AIDS: socially, professionally, theoretically, structurally, in ways that matter most for the health of all people and communities affected by HIV. Recentering Black women is not simply a tactic, gesture, or commitment because it starts with a center that cannot hold: an absent presence that throws the work and forms of scholarship and other forms of writing into crisis, lack of focus, or inability to attend to carefully. But why is this?

In her reprinted piece for this anthology, Julia S. Jordan-Zachery demonstrates how some Black women's writing about HIV/AIDS—from politicians, popular magazines, and blogs—itsself creates gaps and disappearances. She asks, “Is it a crisis if it is not seen?” We are certain that this is perhaps one of the most severe crises underlying the (im)possibilities of good health for all individuals and communities impacted by HIV. Thus, recentering our attention to Black women and HIV returned us, again and again, to the central preoccupations that motivated this book—that is, an attention to the impacts of AIDS beyond the demographic centrality of cisgender white gay men who have become, and still are, the primary default setting for academic theorizations, public health and medical initiatives, and popular culture revisitations. But we learned that recentering is only the first step of a much more nuanced, refined, and systematic process. So, we selected and engaged with contributors whose work reflects what Cathy J. Cohen calls “cross-cutting” activist practice⁶—that is, an understanding of AIDS that challenges the confines of single issue politics in order to consider exploitative measures, including the upward distribution of resources and downward distribution of suffering, land dispossession, occupation, gentrification, surveillance, policing, border patrols, criminalization, an extensive carceral apparatus, the mass buildup of arms, antiterrorism and the suspension of rights, slavery, various forms of under- and no-wage labor, the lack of housing and food security, privatized health care and inadequate medical care, and more. And our selections also took into account the generational shifts in AIDS scholarship, activism, and cultural production—not to privilege the “new” over “old,” or vice versa, but to address different temporal registers, historical repetitions, and age- and place-specific interpretations. Our goal with these selections from different generational perspectives was to investigate how the presences (and futures) of AIDS encountered its pasts through the persistent distributive networks of crises and connections. We wanted to inquire about what remained (of use) from earlier theorizations and modes of political action, and also what warranted continued critique and perhaps different forms of collective imagining and organizing.

And still we had more work to do. Readers will find traces of our efforts and successes at working with our authors and focusing ourselves on the meanings of Black women's visibility and erasure, as well as their presence and power, across the anthology. But we wanted this to remain visible as an effort, rupture, process, ongoing problem, and gratifying solution. Once selected and loosely aligned through the offering of the terms discussed above or by way of the questions we posed for our three dispatches, our authors

got to work. At the end of the process, we asked the authors of our seven original chapters to engage with Black women and other women of color, each other's now completed chapters, and the vibrant, diverse fields of contemporary AIDS cultural studies in which this anthology sits. Although our authors' disciplinary fields and training differ, as do their generations and the situations of their attention, one shared starting point and focus for the contributors emerged and grew. Our many contributors break down into local, marginal, and discrete studies something that otherwise had and has been more commonly understood to be overwhelming (crisis-like) in its scale and costs and ominous in its force of devastation. Each of the anthology's efforts draws its larger conclusions from close attention to a specific, grounded study of one outbreak of crisis for one local community. The methods and conclusions drawn in each contribution are distinct but complementary: theoretical about the state of HIV/AIDS and crises; practical in the sense of addressing collective cure, well-being, or better health; political in their rousing calls for effective formats for and outcomes from shared struggle; artistic in their voice and ongoing interventional efforts; spiritual in their compassion; or a unique amalgam of these approaches to best outline the crises under consideration. Notably, by honoring specificity, another definitive move is shared and performed: the distance traveled from the local exceeds individualism, exceptionalism, and myopia in order to foster much-needed collectivity, continuity, and connection.

Notes

- 1 Juhasz and Kerr wrote six conversations about AIDS crisis revisitation and the second silence between 2015 and 2017. Those form the basis of their forthcoming book on these topics, *We Are Having This Conversation Again: The Times of AIDS Cultural Production*. See also Fink et al., "Ghost Stories."
- 2 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 145–47.
- 3 Cazdyn, *Already Dead*, 117.
- 4 Castiglia, "Past Burning," 102.
- 5 Eng, *Feeling of Kinship*, 6; Melamed, "Spirit of Neoliberalism."
- 6 Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 15.

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