Beyond ACT UP: The Ambivalent Affinities of Personal AIDS Documentaries

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Abstract

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In an attempt to move beyond the activist re-imaginings of the AIDS pandemic that saturate the current media landscape, this thesis professes an alternate archive of personalized documentaries that articulate a counter-history of the AIDS crisis. Rather than merely frame these videos as solipsistic accounts of self-misery during a politicized pandemic, the thesis argues that these texts embody an ambivalent address that not only converses with the dominant politics of activist histories (epitomized by organizations like ACT UP) but also offer differing modes of constructing the self under the shadow of HIV/AIDS. Although it discusses a variety of texts from varying national contexts, the primary focus of this thesis is on four films from Canada, the United States, India, and Iran. Divided temporally, the thesis argues for the ways in which these films underscore the corporeal, existential, and familial dimensions of living in the shadow of AIDS. Moving from the negotiation of the altered body in *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* and *Silverlake Life* (1993) to a queer-of-color critique of a dichotomous understanding of kinship during the AIDS crisis in *Summer in My Veins* (1999), the thesis underscores the myriad ways in which these personalized documents unsettle the established discourses laid forth by dominant AIDS politics. Finally, in order to draw attention to an ongoing global pandemic, the thesis concludes with *Meteor* (2023) to re-think notions of AIDS activist struggles first envisioned by AIDS coalitions. By bringing these hitherto marginalized archives into focus, the thesis aims to contribute to a multifaceted understanding of the AIDS crisis beyond the interventions of activist histories.

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In his acceptance speech for winning the Best Screenplay at the 77th Golden Globe Awards, Quentin Tarantino, in classic tongue-in-cheek fashion, laid aside the effusive rhetoric endemic to award speeches and proclaimed, “I did it!” Put simply, Tarantino’s insinuation at this seemingly egoistic pronouncement was the underlying belief that writing a screenplay was an individual endeavor that did not require the aid of others (unlike the collaborative process of filmmaking), and hence, it was not really needed for him to indulge in the usual business of thanking anyone else. If such logic were to be emulated by all writers, it would come at an egregious negation of the support, guidance, and help writing as a process requires. Hence, even though I inscribed this thesis, it could not have been written without the immense generosity and support of the people in my life.

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I am also grateful to John Greyson at York University, who gave me access to the Viral Interventions Program and exposed me to a range of AIDS videos in the contemporary. I am

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Introduction

In her polemic, *The Gentrification of the Mind* (published in 2012), author-activist Sarah Schulman lamented the violent effacement of AIDS history from the collective cultural memory of the United States (69). With the iconoclastic activism of the AIDS struggle forgotten for conservative and assimilatory discourses in the contemporary, she expressed disbelief over the ongoing cultural amnesia in an age of gentrified politics. "AIDS most often appears as a banal subplot point in some yuppie's inconsequential novel, or a morose distortion in a stupid movie. But no true, accurate, complex, deeply felt and accountable engagement with the AIDS crisis has become integrated into the American self-perception," Schulman wrote, underscoring the dearth of cultural representations of a pivotal moment in queer history (69-70). However, in a case of irony, or as a reparative rebuttal to Schulman's complaints, the years following the publication of *The Gentrification* saw such a proliferation of AIDS media that a once-obscure history became the prime focus of the decade's mainstream gay cinema and television.

Ranging from documentaries chronicling the memories of loss and struggle during the early years, such as *We Were Here* (2011) and *How to Survive a Plague* (2012), to heavily fictionalized recounting of the crisis with star-studded melodramas with the likes of *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013), *The Normal Heart* (2014), and *Tick, Tick... Boom!* (2021)—the tumultuous period of the eighties, fraught with catastrophic deaths, agitated activism, and personal losses, was revitalized on Hollywood screens. As these films garnered commercial success and accolades, this revival moved beyond the American movie screens, as television producers and transnational filmmakers soon followed the lead. Robin Campillo's Queer Palm winning *120 BPM (Beats per Minute)* (2017), Dustin Lance Black's miniseries *When We Rise* (2017), Russell T. Davies's raunchy and heartfelt UK drama *It's A Sin* (2022), and most recently Ron Nyswaner's *Fellow Travelers* (2023)—all offered a semi-fictionalized

recounting of queer activism during the peak of the AIDS crisis in France, America, and the United Kingdom. Noting the rise of these period films (both fictional and documentary) looking back into a forgotten history after a substantial period of silence in popular culture, AIDS activist and cultural critic Theodore Kerr labeled this phenomenon as "AIDS Crisis Revisitation" to describe a growing body of work (in various artistic mediums) concerned with the early responses to the pandemic (Juhasz and Kerr 64). Apart from the recurring retrospective propensity in these revisitations, as Kerr highlighted, a majority of these works also brought renewed attention to the polemic and zealous legacy of activist collectives during the crisis, especially the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP).

First formed in New York by playwright-activist Larry Kramer in response to continued government apathy and bureaucratic negligence regarding the ongoing deaths in the queer community, ACT UP developed as a grassroots organization united to end the pandemic by advocating for social and legislative changes. As it slowly branched into other cities and nations in Europe, ACT UP, and its various activist and artistic factions employed disruptive practices to draw attention to the ongoing and widespread deaths due to the crisis, most notably via vociferous marches and civil disobedient tactics. Moreover, with the availability of cheap recording technology and video equipment, the activists documented a counter-representation of the AIDS struggle against the mainstream media's erasure or worse, condescending portrait of the pandemic—producing what Alexandra Juhasz famously termed "alternative AIDS media" (Juhasz *AIDS TV* 4). Comprising of various factions (sometimes even those in antagonism with one other), ACT UP, as a collective, re-ignited a queer struggle under a genocidal state as it sought to pressure the medical establishment in advancing the research on the virus and gaining access to life-saving drugs. Best epitomizing the credo of the collective was a poster designed by Gran Fury (an activist faction of ACT UP) that provocatively stressed, "TURN ANGER, FEAR, AND GRIEF INTO ACTION. ACT UP!"

With its indelible legacy both in American politics and culture, it was inevitable that ACT UP and its histories marked their way into the aforementioned AIDS retrospectives.

While offering a necessary addition to an already marginalized microhistory, the ongoing project of "AIDS Crisis Revisitation" has itself been met with skepticism from queer scholars. On the affirmative side, Hallas sees the renewed return to the AIDS crisis in the eighties in these media forms as symptomatic of the fact that "the individual and collective trauma of that time remains open, unresolved" and hence necessary for revisitation (Hallas in Cheng et al. 190). Similarly, while noting their limitations, Kang-Nguyễn locates the nostalgic impulse of these texts as a form of testimony and engaging in active remembering of a forgotten past (Kang-Nguyễn in Cheng et al. 197). On the contrary, other queer scholars express doubt over both the representational and temporal underpinnings outlined in these films. By noting how the overt focus on nostalgia runs the risk of treating the AIDS crisis as a thing of the past, Stanley highlights how such backward glances serve as a "deadly erasure of both our current moment and the future of HIV/AIDS" especially as the pandemic continues to plague the most marginalized in an increasingly capitalist and racialized world (Stanley in Cheng et al. 50). Moreover, as many queer-of-color scholars suggest, these revisitations, with their narrative revolving around middle class white gay individuals marginalize, or worse, erase the contributions of queer and trans people of color. In their respective critiques of France's *How to Survive a Plague*, Cheng and Shahani critique the film's whitewashing of ACT UP's diverse and multifarious histories, which overemphasizes narratives of white heroism to make it palatable for mainstream consumption (Cheng 73-92, Shahani 1-33). Even though these films might seem to restore these forgotten histories, Shahani suggests that they inevitably end up performing a "visual gentrification of the queer past" (4). Hence, while the current AIDS-saturated queer media landscape might assuage Schulman's complaints about the dearth of such cultural representations of the period, the continued visual gentrification of

the past in these narratives keeps the central concern of her polemic on de-gentrifying queer history all-the more pressing.

However, as the recent scholarship on the AIDS crisis suggests, the critique of a gentrified history should not be merely relegated to cultural texts. In the past decade, multiple scholars have brought renewed critical attention to ACT UP itself, scrutinizing the organization's racialized history that struggled to move beyond the narrow objective of gaining access to life-saving drugs against more pressing concerns (Gould 56-57). Others, while acknowledging the legacy of the organization, questioned the hegemony of ACT UP in dominant AIDS discourses. Why did most of these media texts, in one way or another, stress an activist history of the pandemic following a similar narrative trajectory—commencing with anarchic protests in the streets, moving synergistically to pressure the state, and in the end, emerging victorious? In a provocative piece titled "Forgetting ACT UP," Juhasz, herself closely associated with the group during its zenith, suggested moving beyond this repetitive history of the group:

> When ACT UP is remembered—again and again and again—other places, people, and forms of AIDS activism are disremembered….other forms and forums of activism that were taking place during that time-practices that were linked, related, just modern, in dialogue or even opposition to ACT UP's "confrontational activism"—are forgotten…In just this way, other principled, debated, and quieter acts—like those of the many friends and activists I knew who didn't go to meetings—are thereby written out of history. (Juhasz "Forgetting" 69-70).

Despite the insinuation, Juhasz's assertion does not entail a *literal* forgetting of the veteran organization and its pioneering legacies. Instead, she suggests that if we persist with a hagiographic repetition of a confrontational activist history, we risk forgetting 'quieter acts'

that did not subscribe to these paradigms (71-72)[1]. In a similar vein, Kang-Nguyễn reiterates, "Where are the other stories, about those who were not so lucky, who did not survive; whose battles with HIV/AIDS were mundane, took place outside urban gay ghettos, and did not have a happy Hollywood ending?" (Kang-Nguyễn in Cheng et al. 198).

In an attempt to draw attention to these quieter and private histories that did not necessarily conform to an activist rhetoric, this thesis, titled *Beyond ACT UP: The Ambivalent Affinities of Personal AIDS Documentaries*, studies a group of personalized films that articulate a counter-history of the AIDS pandemic. While it discusses a variety of video texts from varying national contexts, the primary focus of this thesis is on four relatively overlooked films from Canada, the United States, India, and Iran—in an attempt to accentuate an alternate visual rendering of the AIDS crisis. Even though the umbrella category of 'AIDS documentaries' encompasses an extensive catalog of videos, ranging from performative critiques, activist footage, and experimental films, the choice to focus on a personal corpus of videos stems from the initial skepticism leveraged at these private documentations of the AIDS crisis, as I delineate below.

When The 'Personal' Is Not 'Political'

Towards the end of the 1980s, when the AIDS pandemic (exacerbated by government inaction and moral hysteria) had cemented itself as a calamity of unspeakable trauma and loss, the publication of the 1987 issue of the academic journal *October* (edited by Douglas Crimp) marked a rebelliously political turn in the arts and arts criticism of the time. Inspired

[1] Similarly, while noting its limitations, filmmaker Cecilia Aldarondo cautions against the sidelining of ACT UP and AIDS activism by stressing how queer history itself remains ephemeral and peripheral to the national history: "…the space occupied by the AIDS crisis in our national memory is disproportionately tiny relative to its horrors…" (Aldarondo in Cheng et al. 189)

by the disruptive activism of groups like ACT UP (established earlier that year), Crimp, in his manifesto, called for a critical activist body of artwork over the sentimental elegiac personal responses that had flourished in the media over the decade (Crimp, *October* 15). In his critique of these artistic responses to the pandemic, Crimp specifically admonished the extensive coverage of artists and celebrity deaths due to AIDS (such as of Hollywood heartthrob Rock Hudson and musician Liberace), which sought to relegate an issue of bureaucratic negligence and homophobia to an individual matter. The publication of *October,* coupled with the incendiary performative activism of ACT UP, registered an urgent upheaval in the AIDS politics of the country, both politically and socially. Challenging both the mainstream media as well Hollywood representations of guilt and victimhood associated with HIV/AIDS, queer activists of the time sought to create a counter-archive of images and videos that laid grounds for AIDS as a collective social experience, united to end the epidemic. Against Hollywood's maudlin, depoliticized, and latently homophobic depictions of the AIDS 'victim,' the direct-action videos produced by ACT UP rallied against this media's condescending humanist attempt to give a voice to people with AIDS—championing a homespun pedagogic approach directed primarily towards People with AIDS (PWAs) and not the cis-white heterosexual audience of the 'general population' (Hallas 78). In 1988, a faction of ACT UP protested against the photography exhibition "Pictures of People" by Nicholas Nixon—critiquing Nixon's fetishistic approach to documenting PWAs by relegating them to mere pathetic figures who are "alone, desperate, but resigned to their "inevitable" deaths" (Crimp, *Melancholia* 85). Alongside several disruptive interventions spearheaded by ACT UP, the Nixon protest best epitomized the resilient struggles of AIDS activists to counter the mournful images of victimhood and resignation.

Against this activist-militant era, the emergence of an incredibly personalized genre of AIDS videos was obviously met with skepticism. While differing in their formal approach

and narrative scope, these films seemed to steer away from the activist rhetoric of ACT UP to document the quotidian struggles of living under the shadow of AIDS. With subjectivity in documentaries already seen as distracting from the utilitarian function of the form, the rise of these personal AIDS films during an increasingly politicized pandemic faced the double conundrum of focusing on the self against the communitarian demands of the crisis. Amidst this charge of myopic solipsism and depoliticization (that ACT UP similarly levied against the AIDS memorial project), where do these personal documents of the crisis situate themselves within the larger canon of AIDS media?

Contrary to this position of documenting the self as solely individualistic, or worse, egocentric, theorists of autobiographical media suggest that by drawing attention to personal histories, these forms offer a counter-discourse that challenges the hegemony of exclusive historiography (Renov xvi). More importantly, as Lebow observes in her study of first-person Jewish videos (and I extend to the personal AIDS videos in question), the address in these films is, if ever, rarely focused solely on the individual, as they often embody a form of relationality that constructs the self by posing it in relation to the other (*First Person* xi). By borrowing from these theorists of documentary media, autobiographical filmmaking, and counter-AIDS discourses, this thesis situates the corpus of these personal videos as offering an alternate historiography of the pandemic that brings into focus the corporeal, existential, and familial dimensions of living in the shadow of AIDS. While far from dismissing them as apolitical documents of self-misery, the thesis argues that these films, as the title suggests, embody an 'ambivalent' politicized address that disturbs the neat distinction of political/sentimental binary in AIDS discourses. The ambiguous indication of the word 'ambivalent' does not suggest diluted rhetoric but instead stresses the differing ways in which these addresses converse with the dominant AIDS politics of activist histories. While these works do not subscribe to the 'political' template generated by ACT UP, they are far from the

gentrified accounts of AIDS history that have constituted the project of AIDS revisitation. Against the heroic and individualist melodramatic retellings of the queer past, these texts profess an ambivalent approach to understanding the self during the crisis. More importantly, 'ambivalence,' as a theoretical method, also proves helpful in accounting for transnational queer-of-color interventions that offer a polyvalent account of resisting the discourses laid forth by Western AIDS politics. Bringing these ambivalences into focus not only expands the complex history of the AIDS pandemic, as Juhasz advocates, but also further offers insight into other queer discourses hitherto marginalized by dominant archives.

However, before proceeding with an examination of these texts, it also becomes crucial to remark upon the category of 'personal documentaries' that I employ here. To label a genre of films as simply 'personal' is to open a whole can of worms, as Lebow similarly stresses with regard to her category of 'first-person' documentaries (*The Cinema* 2). Isn't every film personal to the filmmaker in one or another? Moreover, if I employ the word 'personal' to suggest the focus on individuals rather than the group, then most of the documentaries that constitute a part of the AIDS crisis revisitation would form a part of this category since all of them underscore individual struggles during the pandemic via talking-head interviews and archival testimonies. While such charges are appropriate, and I do not imply a specious dichotomy between these texts and the ones under consideration in this thesis, the categorization of films with similar conventions is nevertheless paramount to the structuralist undertaking of this project. By employing the word 'personal,' I suggest a wide range of modes, such as home videos, first-person films, autoethnographies, television tapes, and autobiographical portraits, to club together a corpus of texts that focus exclusively on an individual (in most cases, the filmmaker themselves) as a central subject of the narrative. While these texts occasionally reference the ongoing crisis outside the domestic vicinity, they are mostly pivoted around the individual struggles borne out of the pandemic. However, 'the

personal,' far from suggesting a private and individualist approach that lends itself to critiques of gentrification, is always imagined in relation to others, whether it be the seropositive partner, the family, or a queer friend. Although the term 'first-person documentary' or, more broadly, AIDS autoethnography could be substituted here, not all of the texts in question are made by seropositive individuals. In some instances, HIV/AIDS does not even figure primarily in the film, although the discourses generated by it remain central to the narrative. A rationale for highlighting these narratives is to underscore HIV/AIDS as more than mere biological reality or reducible to medical interventions (Juhasz and Kerr 70), but rather, as Paula Treichler famously suggested, as an "epidemic of meanings and significations" (32). By reading these texts beyond merely the serostatus of their protagonists, the thesis re-visits the AIDS crisis as generating multiple sets of affinities and discourses against which these films frame their central address. Further, using a transnational framework allows one to locate histories and modes of solidarity beyond the dominant AIDS histories of the Global North.

Chapter Overview

This thesis is divided temporally into three chapters, taking cues from the chronological timelines of AIDS representation that Juhasz and Kerr outline in their analysis (66). The first chapter, titled "The Diaries of The Dead:' The Politics of Filming Corporeal Descent During The Personal Turn in AIDS Documentaries," locates the emergence of personal AIDS filmmaking against an activist video tradition during the period of "AIDS crisis culture" between the years 1987 and 1996 (Juhasz and Kerr 66). By situating these texts both during a demoralized period of AIDS activism and the emergence of video technology, the chapter primarily focuses on two films released during the same year, *The Broadcast*

Tapes of Dr. Peter (1993, Canada) and *Silverlake Life* (1993, USA). Rather than merely regard them as documents of individual suffering, the chapter juxtaposes these two documentaries by noting the ways in which the protagonists of these films embody a form of corporeal negotiation that subverts the codes of gay masculine performances of a previous era. Moreover, by focusing on the politics of death as is contrasted in these texts, the chapter stresses their testimonial function of recording trauma and loss that resists the easy charge of sensational sentimentalism. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the overlooked *Silverlake Life: Epilogue* (2003) to probe the position of these texts as retroactivist archives.

Bringing the familial into focus, the second chapter analyzes *Summer in My Veins* (1999), a coming-out personal account by late Indian queer filmmaker Nishit Saran. By placing the film against the return of the family into queer discourses during the pandemic, the chapter stresses the ways in which the film as a queer-of-color text distinguishes itself in re-thinking these notions of family against a dichotomous understanding of kinship during the AIDS crisis. Further, moving beyond its mere status as a 'coming-out' film, the chapter argues about the ways in which the text refuses to conform to neoliberal and conservative assimilation of the queer subject into homonormative ideals. Bringing the film's negated narrative thread around HIV/AIDS into central focus, the chapter concludes by re-thinking notions of queer solidarity beyond the serostatus of its subjects.

In their temporal delineation of AIDS representations over the decade, Juhasz and Kerr draw attention to the dearth of media that locates the pandemic in the present rather than in retrospect (68). To account for such representations in the contemporary, this thesis concludes with a brief third chapter analyzing the recent short film *Meteor* (2023) by Atefeh Khademolreza. Borrowing from recent queer-of-color scholarship re-thinking the distribution of the AIDS crisis in the contemporary, the chapter analyzes the grim formal and narrative elements of the text to probe into these concerns beyond Western geographies. Finally, by

noting its intersectional evocation of solidarities and justice, the thesis concludes by re-thinking notions of AIDS activist struggles first envisioned by ACT UP and other AIDS coalitions—in an attempt to bring the arguments of this thesis full circle.

As this overview suggests, the personal films clubbed under this thesis are from distinct periods and were made by filmmakers of varying races, genders, nationalities, and serostatus. However, even as they profess differing accounts of the AIDS pandemic, a recurring ambivalence towards dominant discourses remains a central concern in all of these texts. By drawing attention to these intimate, quieter, sadder (yet never solipsistic), and private documents of the pandemic, the thesis hopes to contribute to an alternate archive of the AIDS pandemic with the aim of remembering the legacy of an ongoing global crisis and its multifaceted histories.

Chapter 1. 'The Diaries of The Dead:' The Politics of Filming Corporeal Descent During The Personal Turn in AIDS Documentaries

In "Remission," a short story by Adam Mars-Jones, the unnamed seropositive protagonist begins recording a recovery tape to celebrate his brief convalescing period after a depressive bout of nauseating illness. Using his small Sony recorder, the languished yet amusingly sardonic protagonist commences his recovery tape, hoping to hoard this audio in his small library, which includes recordings titled as putridly intimate as the "shits-and-vomits tape" (Mars-Jones 166). As the narrative progresses, the uninhibited cathartic tapes of the protagonist, which he uses primarily to vent his mental angst, begin to reveal something depressingly ominous about his condition. Recalling an episode about his inability to sign a cheque, the mortified protagonist intimates the onslaught of dementia brought forth by his condition. "The words are all there, but I can't seem to spell them. That's what makes this recorder such a good idea," he mentions (176). His acknowledgment of the tape recorder implicitly validates his oral capacities, which have not betrayed him, unlike his written ones. The short story, which first appeared in the seminal AIDS anthology *A Darker Proof: Stories From A Crisis* (Mars-Jones and White, 1988), exposes a certain incongruity about the medium of personal address—hinted at by its protagonist's Wojnarowiczian[2] impulse to *record* his despair using an analog technology rather than inscribing his frustrations. Hence, even though literary theorists like Monica B. Pearl have argued (and not unjustifiably so) about print culture's primacy as the medium of representation during the AIDS pandemic (Pearl 3), the usage of analog technology as the tool employed by the dying protagonist in

[2] David Wojnarowicz, a radical AIDS activist and artist, famously recorded several audio tapes during his lifetime—capturing both his intimate life as well as his increased disillusionment with the government response to the crisis. Equal parts acrid and polemic, the tapes formed the basis of a transcribed book as well as Chris McKim's documentary *Wojnarowicz: F**k You F*ggot F**ker* (2020).

"Remission" raises a specter that haunts the lineage of self-representations during the AIDS crisis. Why, instead of writing (the popular mode of confessional accounts in the twentieth century), would the protagonist (and his real-life counterparts) in Mars-Jones's story rely on recording technology to reveal the personal? Is it the mere feasibility of the tape or video recorder that allows a person succumbing to AIDS a physically less-arduous means of self-representation than writing, or the McLuhanian promise of this new emerging medium in the eighties harbor a more immediate resonance during the AIDS pandemic? However, more importantly, where do these personalized addresses, mediated through the aforementioned technology, situate themselves amidst an activist culture that stresses the urgency of politicizing the personal? Do the "shits-and-vomits" tapes of the unnamed protagonist in the story have a place alongside the polemic activist cries of ACT UP and other revolutionary collectives of the time?

Similar to the private tapes recorded by Jones's protagonist, there emerged a personalized genre of AIDS videos in the late eighties and early nineties—facilitated by the availability of home video and camcorder technology. Moving away from the iconoclastic rhetoric of ACT UP to focus on the PWAs themselves, documentary portraits such as *Chuck Solomon: Coming of Age* (1986), *Hero of My Own Life* (1986), *Danny* (1987), *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* (1993), *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* (1993), *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1994) and *Life and Death on the A-List* (1996) offered an intimately existential odyssey of living (and in most of these cases also dying) with AIDS. Moreover, the focus on the quotidian struggles of being seropositive (both corporeal and psychological) allowed room for an intimate engagement with the PWA while underscoring the complex support networks of chosen friends and family amidst illness. Despite this, these elegiac accounts and their seeming dissociation from the activist struggles during the pandemic cannot help but appear as depoliticized documents, especially as their overt focus on the cripplingly

worsening state of the person with AIDS instantly recalling ACT UP's militant criticism of images of resigning oneself to death (such as the one documented by photographer Nicholas Nixon). If one of the most celebrated images from ACT UP's protests remained that of Jim Jensen, a PWA who wheeled in his dripping apparatus from the hospital to join ACT UP at the NIH protest—then the images of dying alone in one's bed suggested a diluted image of corporeal protest. Worse, with most of these tapes publicly broadcasted and screened (in contrast to the more privatized networks of circulation of ACT UP's videos), these accounts of 'real' gay men dying on camera run the risk of validating the general homophobic population's vicarious desire to celebrate the deaths of a marginalized group it always tacitly wanted to eradicate—a chilling notion that Crimp similarly delineates in his critique of the AIDS Memorial Quilt (Crimp, *Melancholia* 200).

Keeping in focus the various ambiguities that haunt these personalized articulations of living (and dying) with AIDS, this chapter seeks to focus on *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* and *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter*—two documentaries from the United States and Canada respectively, released in the same year. Owing to their overlapping releases, Walter Goodman for *The New York Times* even merged the films in a single review—calling out *Silverlake Life* for its grimy nature while praising *The Broadcast Tapes* for being "movingly unemotional." ("Review/Television") "If one AIDS video diary in a few weeks is enough for you, I'd suggest waiting for Dr. Peter," advised Goodman—as if watching one gay man die on camera was burdensome enough for the audience that they couldn't make room for two ("Review/Television"). In addition to their shared release date, both the films employ the diary form of recording the routine existence of three white gay men living with HIV/AIDS and share a narrative trajectory endemic to many personalized documentaries of the time. While *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* is directed and produced by David Paperny, who compiled the various televised tapes of its eponymous protagonist, *Silverlake Life* is a work

of first-person documentary by Tom Joslin, which was only later stitched together after Tom's death by his student and co-director Peter Friedman. Moreover, in contrast to the other personalized documentaries of the time, both films had a significant outreach beyond their intended audience. *Silverlake Life* won the Grand Jury Prize at the 1993 Sundance Film Festival, while *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* was nominated for Best Documentary Feature at the 66th Academy Awards—their respective acclaim and accolades at venues infamous for rewarding narratives of sentimental suffering further hinting at the inherent contradiction of universalizing a political epidemic.

By temporally situating these texts in an era of increasing despair exacerbated by sluggish medical advancements, this chapter commences by framing these texts against an era of 'demoralization.' Noting the ways in which these films represent the corporeal decline of their subjects, the chapter argues the ways in which the subjects of these texts enact a negotiation of their altered corporeality that subvert the codes of gay masculine performances of a pre-AIDS era. Further, juxtaposing the treatment of death and mourning as depicted in these two documentaries from different national contexts, the chapter argues about the contradictory ways these texts deal with the death of their protagonists. Since the representative strategies during the crisis vacillated between sentimentalizing and politicizing the erasure of its subjects, both *The Broadcast Tapes* and *Silverlake Life* navigate this fraught terrain by evoking an ambivalent mode of 'dying' address that disturbs the fixed categorization of the sentimental vs. the political. Finally, the chapter concludes by looking at the often overlooked "Epilogue" to *Silverlake Life* to contemplate the afterlife of these videos. Borrowing from Lucas Hilderbrand, the chapter argues to expand his idea of 'retroactivism' to locate the ways in which these personalized documentaries perform a form of political affect amidst the larger AIDS project of remembrance and mourning.

However, before moving on to examine these individual texts, it also becomes imperative to remark that the respective forms of address in these films are greatly facilitated by the class-based and racial positions of their protagonists. Noting that the majority of AIDS witnessing in the early years was undertaken overwhelmingly by middle-class white gay men, Chambers remarks upon this group's position that allowed access to both record, write, and publish their works in contrast to other disadvantaged groups for whom everyday survival alone was a struggle (18). Hence, even when these films cite the larger gay community in question, the suffering endured by their protagonists is still framed as personal rather than communal—in sharp contrast to the works of queer-of-color filmmakers like Marlon Riggs, whereby the address is always plural. Thus, the politics of death and dying, upon which this chapter rests its focus, is deeply embedded with the racial positionings of its subjects.

Negotiating Corporeal Alteration During Demoralization

In the Hollywood film *It's My Party* (1996), the seropositive protagonist, Nick Stark (played by Eric Roberts) decides to commit suicide rather than face the crippling horrors of his worsening condition, which has no cure in sight. In the titular farewell party that he hosts to bid goodbye to his loved ones, a vivacious Nick mentions his credo, "Live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse" (*It's My Party* 00:29:46-00:29:50)—choosing to die with his senses and body still intact rather than as emaciated and paralyzed as his close friends. With its narrative culminating with the suicide of its central subject, the film epitomized the bleak epoch of the nineties wherein the deaths from AIDS continued to increase tenfold, and the promise of a remedy remained a mere chimera—marking a waning of the robust optimism of the previous decade. In a polemic essay recognizing this increasing despair brought forth by the normalization of AIDS, Crimp juxtaposed two AIDS

documentaries—*Voices From The Front* (1991), capturing ACT UP's fight for an equitable drug trial, and *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1994), a deconstructive autobiographical video made by AIDS activist Gregg Bordowitz. Recognizing that the revolutionary future anticipated by the former had not yet transpired in the wake of continuing federal apathy, Crimp hinted towards an era of 'demoralization,' which, in the face of increasing loss and deaths, began to indicate towards a certain skepticism towards the activist response to AIDS (*Melancholia* 266). Using Bordowitz's cynical film as a paradigm, Crimp argued for self-representations that would embody this "demoralization" instead of ringing false hopeful alarms signaled by the previous decade of AIDS activism (*Melancholia* 266).[3]

These depressive structures of feeling during this era of demoralization entailed not only a reckoning with the existential fear of an inevitable death but also a negotiation with the newly altered body due to the devitalizing outcomes of the virus—as exemplified by Nick's quip in *It's My Party* to leave "a good-looking corpse." While Nick's dire choice to kill himself signals a preventive measure on his part to evade the more horrifyingly debilitating outcome of his inevitable illness, his jibe about leaving "a good-looking corpse" hints at more profound corporeal anxiety symptomatic of the pandemic. If conventionally attractive and muscular bodies remained the paragon of the gay liberation era of the seventies, AIDS announced the difficulties of maintaining this masculine performance. The emaciating effects of the illness, coupled with KS scars on the body and the face, undermined the dominant aesthetics of gay male erotics of the previous decade and thereby projected another anxiety in gay men to negotiate this drastic alteration in one's appearance. In his essay, "Is the Rectum a

[3] This turn towards the acknowledgment of loss and grief ran in sharp contrast to Crimp's earlier dismissive stance towards the elegiac response to AIDS in October. Crimp's own writings would follow a broadening of the idea of AIDS activism—in contrast to his initial formulation in *October.* In an essay "A Day Without Gertrude," Crimp clarified his earlier sneer at the personal elegiac responses to the pandemic and suggested that his intention wasn't to maintain a dichotomous understanding between the personal and activist responses to AIDS (*Melancholia* 166). Moreover, he suggests that one runs a certain risk when we try to essentialize activism into neat binaries (*Melancholia* 166).

Grave?" (also published in *October*), Leo Bersani critiqued the ways in which gay men had historically adopted the hegemonic ideal of machismo, which, in turn, was a part of the heterosexist discourse responsible for their very oppression: "The dead seriousness of the gay commitment to machismo…means that gay men run the risk of idealizing and feeling inferior to certain representations of masculinity on the basis of which they are in fact judged and condemned. The logic of homosexual desire includes the potential for a loving identification with the gay man's enemies" (208). Paradoxically then, Bersani argued, AIDS might allow an emancipatory outcome by making the rectum of gay men (where the dominant masculine ideal is buried) a grave: "It may, finally, be in the gay man's rectum that he demolishes his own perhaps otherwise uncontrollable identification with a murderous judgment against him" (222). While Bersani's argument of the death of the male ego during the AIDS crisis might read naively utopic, his formulation of gay relationality with regard to the erotics of masculine display envisaged the shift in visual body politics borne out of the pandemic.

Although the corpus of personal AIDS films involves negotiation of identity on multiple terrains (as I argue henceforward), a recurring concern in these films features a reformulation of a visual erotics of the self, especially when the performance of traditional male aestheticism proves to be no longer viable. Filmmaker Jay Corcoran's *Life and Death on the A-List* (1996), a short documentary on his friend and Hollywood actor Tom McBride, bases its central premise on the anxieties of this decline. Corcoran begins his film by interviewing admirers and friends of McBride, who all refer to him as an 'A-List' gay—a term designated to describe an elite class of highly sought-after gay men with exceptional faces and physiques. Amidst these recollections, the documentary plays footage of McBride from the various advertisements, soap operas, and films he has been a part of—his six-feet-two tall stature and a chiseled all-American face confirming the adulatory praise the protagonist has received thus far. However, when these recollections are over, the film

jarringly cuts into the present to introduce its central subject, McBride, who, now HIV-positive, seems worn out and nothing like the macho man his acquaintances have just eulogized about. From being considered a gay demigod to a self-described 'damaged good,' McBride expresses his concerns at having fallen off the titular 'A-list'—his once hypereroticized and gym-toned physique unable to maintain itself against the incapacitating effects of the illness. In a section titled "Masturbation," McBride retrospectively recalls his prolific sexual conquests to Corcoran (visualized through McBride's own erotic photography). Running contra to this promiscuously colorful past is the footage of a solitary McBride in the present as he watches a sequence of beefcake pornography, implying his engagement in onanism. McBride's shift from an active sexual participant (as evidenced by his photographs) to a mere masturbatory spectator signifies the macrocosmic shift in the expression of gay male sexuality during the AIDS crisis. Since the physically restorative effects of the cocktail therapy remained years ahead, the demoralization brought forth by the crisis propelled a drastic shift in re-structuring the self (both corporeally and existentially). While temporally locating these personal films during this era of demoralization is not merely enough to hint at their ostensibly individual and depoliticized turn, the despondency brought forth by the epidemic does provide grounds wherein these texts situate their addresses in the face of confirmed decreasing mortality.

Placing his study of AIDS memoirs and diaries (both written and video) against this hopeless social milieu, Chambers suggests that the author of such accounts not only remains fully cognizant of its mortality, but it is the urgency of this limited existence that forces it to bear witness to the ordeal one is facing (Chambers vii). By bearing witness, the person with AIDS resists being a passive victim of the deterioration of his condition as by telling his story, he might also ensure a second kind of survival, i.e., via his story (Chambers viii). Moreover, in sharing an individual account of a shared trauma, the author also ensures a

collective responsibility of recording this trauma—especially when the other witness(es) are no longer present as a testimony of this historical wrong (2). This formulation of an individual bearing witness to both the personal and collective trauma of AIDS (as shared by Chambers and Hallas, amongst other theorists) runs contrary to the initial presumption that art created to transcend oneself after death serves only a solipsistic purpose during a crisis of such collective suffering[4].

This burden of ensuring collective responsibility, even if it might not have been intended as such, does not negate the therapeutic value that an act of narrativizing and recording one's suffering might hold for the afflicted individual. In her study of gay male AIDS fiction, Pearl notes the idea of narrativizing one's illness, especially one as unpredictable and unknowable as HIV/AIDS, was a means by which the author ensured some control over a chaotic and disorganized existence—the meaning and order in the narrative vicariously appeasing the chaos and disorder in his life (25). In a more dire reading, Chambers sees acts of documenting the self during AIDS as "prophylactic," where the author's writing becomes a means to navigate his traumatic thoughts of suicide, depression, and self-hatred brought forth by homophobia (27). However, as illustrated in Mars-Jones's story, the act of recording one's struggles was not relegated to mere artists and writers, as enunciating the everyday struggles via any means allowed for a cathartic release during a socially isolating illness. Further, amidst a physically incapacitating ailment, access to recording technology provided an ease to document such experience since, as Tougaw claims (with regards to AIDS memoirs), the act of writing exerted an already enervated body (249). Notwithstanding this ease of access, this overview that simply credits corporeal decline for

[4] Critiquing these grandiose idealizations of the art surviving the artist, Crimp has famously quipped—"We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it" (*October* 7).

the reliance on such technology would gloss over a more complex history of the emergence of such new mediums and their intrinsic capacity for personal address.

Scholars of video and amateur cinema have attributed the emergence of this medium to a personal turn in documentary cinema—an argument extended by AIDS theorists to account for the prolific private use of technology during the pandemic. Although the camera's intrinsic capacity to provoke emotions that may not emerge otherwise had always been exploited by documentary filmmakers, the video further allowed for such a catharsis to be mediated without the intervention of the other. Renov notes how the video's immediacy allowed the filming of privatized thoughts and emotions without the aid of a technician to process the tapes—rendering the author of such accounts artistic autonomy (198). Also, thanks to this technical immediacy, Renov suggests that video also lends itself easily as a medium for confession—an act more difficult to achieve on film as a crew operates it and usually requires the mediation of the other (204). While this equation of video technology to a therapeutic apparatus might seem exaggerated (and Renov does caution against this aggrandizing), the confessional services offered by video provided an immediate, subversive resonance during the pandemic. Building on Foucault's accounts of the history of confession in the West, Renov suggests how the act of confession necessarily relies on the power relations between the confessor and the confessant, wherein the latter bears the power to forgive or exonerate (193). The various television programs and documentaries during the early years of the pandemic replicated such an apparatus for confession wherein the PWA was framed as an outcast victim whose illicit actions were to be judged by the mainstream public[5].

[5] See Crimp's critique of PBS-produced *Frontline* which milked the hardships of a black gay man to spread mass hysteria amongst the 'general' population (*Melancholia* 92-96). Further in 1989, a television special, salaciously titled, *Todd's Greatest Regrets* followed a member of a church ministry documenting the dying subject, Todd Neese. The four-part series actively follows Todd 'confessing' his homosexual past to the church member and expressing utmost regret at his lifestyle that led to his now pitiable condition. The short docu series combines the repressive apparatus of both the mainstream media as well as the Church, to seek confession from its dying subject—a feat that self-representations of AIDS actively seek to subvert.

The mobility of the video, on the contrary, provided a psychoanalytic tool whereby a person could project his anxieties without fearing being reprimanded by the higher authority or a viewing public. By requiring only a dilettantish interest in the medium and eschewing the need to seek an external medium for developing the footage, the video became a viable tool for the AIDS author who resisted speaking to the sanctimonious mores of his time. As Renov writes, "The screen mirror also becomes a blank surface on which an active projection of the self, rather than a strictly receptive introjection, reigns triumphant. Video becomes the eye that sees and the ear that listens, powerfully but without judgment or reprisal" (206). Hence, even during instances when the camera is not held by the person with AIDS, the immediacy and intimacy fostered both by the apparatus and its aesthetics made video a more favorable medium of self-address during the AIDS crisis.

However, even as queer filmmakers employed these forms of addresses to document their quotidian lives, they also subverted the original ways autobiographical portraits had been hitherto thought of in popular culture. In her study of self-portraits in Western art and film, Laura Rascaroli highlights the narcissism embedded in the genre of depicting oneself to the world—the artist selectively chooses what part of his image he wishes to share with the audience:

> While it is possible to identify paintings that appear to be the product of dispassionate self-awareness, and that offer unforgiving analyses of one's image, self-portraits frequently are a means of narcissistically communicating the idea of the self that an artist is most comfortable with and proud of, and wants us to embrace and remember. (63)

However, contrary to the narcissistic strive for sublimity in one's self-portrait, the personal AIDS videos provide an antithesis of the very form. Rather than present the self as perfect and dignified, the AIDS personal videos locate the artists at their most vulnerable and

self-effacing— the documentation of one's unceasing cadaverous decline (from their glorified past selves) running opposite to the picture-perfect excellence championed in self-portraits. While both *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* and *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* employ different modalities and forms to document the self (and to varying results), the focus on bearing testimony to their corporeal decline is a common thread to both these texts. Unlike Nick in *It's My Party,* who dies leaving a "beautiful corpse," the two films project dying as a prolonged and increasingly arduous enterprise.

The Perils of A Universal Address In *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* (1993)

Nominated at the Academy Awards in the same year that Jonathan Demme's AIDS melodrama *Philadelphia* (1993) would bag two awards at the ceremony, *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* shared much in common with the melodramatic blockbuster than its supposed documentary claims to veracity seemed to suggest.[6] Essentially a collage film shot with some new footage, *The Broadcast Tapes of Dr. Peter* is comprised of videotapes that its protagonist, Peter Jepson-Young, a Vancouver-based doctor, had shot for the CBC-TV news segment titled *The Dr. Peter Diaries.* After having been diagnosed HIV-positive, Peter[7] started a pedagogic television segment to detail his daily experiences of living with his condition while simultaneously educating people about AIDS. *The Broadcast Tapes* employs those one hundred eleven episodes Peter shot for his show while chronicling the final days of his life. Unlike *Silverlake Life, The Broadcast Tapes* is not a first-person documentary, as Peter's quotidian experiences are mediated by the television camera crew. However, Peter still remains the central subject and oftentimes the only person in the camera frame to give the impression that he is talking directly to a personal camera. While this mediation achieved

[6] I will return to the recurring similarities between these apparently distinct texts towards the end of this section.

[7] Since Jepson-Young sought to keep his last name secret from his audience and preferred to be called Dr. Peter, this essay addresses him via his first name.

through a state-owned news channel directed towards the 'general public' actively militates against the unorthodox politics of activist art, its personal address helps obviate the exploitative approach of the talking-head documentary even though it cannot help but eventually succumb to it.

After beginning with a brief montage of family photographs of a young Peter, *The Broadcast Tapes* fades into the inside of a television station where seven television screens feature the eponymous protagonist—the implication that the private life of an individual is to be broadcasted is established right from the start. The camera then slowly zooms in on the central screen to reveal the first broadcast tape where Peter recalls having been given only nine to fourteen months to live by his physician after his initial diagnosis—yet he has surpassed more than four years since that ominous announcement. This sanguine and stoic demeanor characterizes much of the spirit of the tapes as Peter guides the viewers into his declining condition even as he remains determined to face them. Following the opening credits, the film immediately follows Peter describing his loss of sight due to the virus damaging the optic nerve, and by tape six, he is rendered completely blind. In another tape, Peter leads the viewers into the lesions caused by Kaposi's Sarcoma (KS) in his legs, detailing, almost medically, how the cancer spreads—Peter's credentials as a doctor undertaking a self-diagnosis of his KS scars resist the medical gaze prevalent in AIDS representations of the diseased body. Further, as his condition begins to worsen, Peter recalls debilitating and unpredictable fevers, including one particularly harrowing episode where his oxygen tank runs out of air. These recollections are never shown on screen as they happen—these episodes of excruciating suffering always take place in the past and are never mediated 'live' (as they are in *Silverlake Life*). Apart from these physical vexations, Peter also references other gay friends dying of AIDS and his own helpless pessimism amidst these demoralizing times. However, these dreary episodes of chronic illness are often undercut by

Peter's dogged determination to face the inevitable and stick to his credo of *joie de vivre*.

These colloquial addresses in the tapes recorded by Peter enable a dual function of rendering corporeal visibility to the disease while simultaneously engaging in a pedagogic project about the condition—Peter himself envisioning his tapes as a therapeutic, unconventional way of practicing his medicinal profession. Chambers notes how the central trope in AIDS diaries is that of the body as a writing surface, especially as it is covered with KS lesions (11). Not only do these lesions become the embodiment of trauma, but they also bear a symbolic relationship as a pathological signifier of homosexuality. While Chambers notes the ambivalence involved in revealing the lesions (as is demonstrated in the infamous courtroom scene in *Philadelphia*), he also suggests that rendering them conspicuous also becomes a way to assert one's gay identity rather than covering it with make-up (68). In *The Broadcast Tapes,* Peter's body gets increasingly marked with lesions as his condition worsens, but rather than 'confessing' his homosexuality, his body politicizes them, fulfilling the corporeal project of bearing witness that Chambers suggests.

This corporeal politics is further enlivened by the camera, which, despite positioning from a standard talking-head documentary approach[8], supplements its subject's testimony. As Peter loses his vision, the cinematic apparatus becomes a substitute to not just look 'at' him but also for him—substituting his ocular capabilities with the camera's vision. This substitution of the eyes of the HIV-positive person with that of the camera again recalls the altered gay subject who must negotiate his new corporeal self. Shortly after he completely loses his eyesight, Peter mentions meeting a special someone in his life who he has not even seen due to his blindness. "…I wasn't able to form an opinion based on the superficial things, his appearance, the clothes he wears, the car he drives, etc. Instead, what comes through is

[8] In his chapter on the subversion of the talking head documentary conventions by AIDS activists, Hallas extensively locates the governing function of the talking head approach and the disciplinary regimes it supports (18-19).

just a very clear picture of what a great person he is…being blind has been a real eye-opener for me!" Peter mentions sincerely, describing his partner, Andy (*The Broadcast Tapes* 00:13:04-00:13:36). This shift from the 'superficial' things that the body can no longer perceive in oneself or the other are now replaced with qualities no longer associated with the conventional masculine display of the sexual self—imagining a shift in gay relationality outside a dependence on these limiting and oppressive modes (as Bersani argued) of gay masculinity.

As the camera takes over to 'see' for Peter, its role also becomes as a mediator for his experiences. In one pivotal moment, as Peter recalls an epiphanic moment at the beach that solidified his sense of spirituality, the camera cuts to a fictionalized beach setting to incarnate Peter's revelatory excursion. "I wanted to be able to recapture this moment for future reference," Peter recalls as the footage of that particular trip plays—the protagonist's inability to see is substituted by the camera's ability to produce those images even though they might not bear an indexical relation to that *exact* memory (*The Broadcast Tapes* 00:07:16-00:07:18). Several tapes follow Peter's resilience to overcome self-imposed boundaries by skiing from a mountain even as he is blind, undertaking a short water ski behind a motorboat, and doing an amusing interpretive dance about safe-sex at an AIDS benefits concert—the three episodes are witnessed on camera to testify to these claims. The film's focus on managing an alternative way of living (with the support of family and friends) even as the possibilities dwindle affirms what Max Navarre termed as resisting the victim label imposed by the media: "…between what the New York Times recently called "a shattered life" and seeing AIDS as a chance to live life fully on a daily basis, it doesn't take much to realize which view is the more helpful" (Navarre 145). By underscoring Peter's physical agility and unyielding character, *The Broadcast Tapes* does resist the overt victimization of the popular media image (as in Nixon's exhibition) of PWAs as lonely homosexuals resigned to their

deathbeds—even though this valorization of undertaking these strenuous activities runs the risk of propagating an ableist stereotype of overachieving despite your disability.

Figure 1-3: Images of Peter skiing in the snow (00:14:48), water (00:25:08), and performing his interpretive dance (00:34:52) counters the languished images of victimhood—however, this overt fixation of stressing physical mobility of the PWA, it also runs a risk of propagating ableist stereotypes.

With this approach of emphasizing its protagonist's vigor and resolve to make him as relatable as possible to the 'general population' (the primary target of such a broadcast), the film and its subject also yield to the impulse to universalize Peter's experience. Pearl notes that since AIDS narratives revolve around the question of illness and dying, it allows the experiences of an otherwise marginal group to be considered 'universal' and relatable: "Illness and dying are what make gay men in significant ways finally like everyone

else…Now, in death and loss, they are normal, they are like everyone else, they have a universal story, they are comprehensible in their sorrow and tragedy" (40). This universality is further strengthened by its protagonist's racial and social positionings, as a cosmopolitan handsome doctor, as his biographer Daniel Gawthrop argues, "…he wasn't overly effeminate, he was out of the closet, but apolitical, and his outlook on living with AIDS was based on a positive model of coping and survival" ("Whose Death"). Further, throughout the film, Peter euphemistically refers to his partner, Andy, as a 'close friend,' and it is only during Peter's funeral that Andy (notably absent throughout most of the tapes) reveals that he is Peter's lover[9]. Peter's affability in the film and its subsequent reception, thus, becomes attributed to his all-too-human tendencies rather than being gay and HIV-positive—he becomes the universal 'human face' of a politicized tragedy. This, as Gawthrop historicizes, also irked many Canadian gay activists of the time who felt that Peter's depoliticized broadcast stole the spotlight from the grassroots activist who for years had been fighting for drug approvals and anti-discriminatory laws rather than piggyback on one's diagnosis for mass education ("Whose Death").

In his extensive critique of the early biographical AIDS documentaries, Timothy Landers rightly notes how, by prioritizing the personal and the "individual heroism" of the PWA, such texts propagate the idea that HIV/AIDS (like any other disease) is an individual and private matter—a view that negates its homophobic construction and the government's inaction in response to it (23). While Peter in the tapes does address homophobia in the school and in the sex guidebooks he encountered as a teenager, such instances are never explicitly tied to AIDS—it pictures homophobia against gay people and the prejudice against seropositive people as separate forces rather than noting the direct ways the latter informs the

[9] Gawthrop attributes this enterprise of de-queering Peter's personal life to the network show's homophobia which always expressed discomfort regarding the 'gay content' in the series. As Gawthrop mentions that one news anchor felt Peter tackling homophobia was rendering the show a "homosexual rights education" rather than "AIDS education" ("Whose Death").

former. As a result, despite its subject's gay identity, the film projects itself as a universal story of a man dying of an incurable disease—confirming, once again, Crimp's fears that gay men have to die a horrible death to qualify for such universal identifications (*Melancholia* 7).[10] A similar address of depoliticized politics again recurs in Demme's *Philadelphia*, which again features its white, endearing, and desexualized HIV-positive lawyer protagonist to gain approval from a mainstream audience. Just like Andy in *Philadelphia,* who self-describes himself as apolitical and only seeking what's 'right' in his lawsuit against the homophobic firm that expelled him, *The Broadcast Tapes* (despite bearing witness to the protagonist's corporeal decline) prioritizes the universalization of the PWA than address the more prescient issues around the pandemic—a thematic further reverberated in its treatment of the death of its subject.

As Peter's condition deteriorates further, the remaining tapes follow him in getting his affairs into order, especially as they relate to his will and final wishes. Seeking spiritual respite amidst his final days, Peter visits a church with his parents to mark out a burial spot. While he professes a more spiritual overview of the world in contrast to the organized religion espoused by the church, the focus in this episode towards seeking spiritual redemption and planning one's death also fits into the larger neoliberal project against which the film situates itself. Borrowing from Wendy Brown's conception of neoliberal politics, Jennifer Malkowski, in her extensive study about the politics of dying in film, notes that subjects in a neoliberal age must plan their own good deaths through active choices—death becoming a private matter that one must 'achieve': "…neoliberal subjects are conditioned to succeed, to achieve—to succeed at dying well, to achieve the good death" (77-78). It was this privatization of death that AIDS activists in the United States actively resisted by often using

[10] Again, such an act of universalization was also made possible by its subject's racial positionality, further underscored by his masculine performance and general affability. The angry and critical works of queer-of-color artists (such as Riggs) castigating both heterosexism and white supremacy could not afford such universalistic tendencies as Crimp broadly claims.

their selves or the bodies of their loved ones to protest against the necropolitical state—the materiality of the body or the ashes serving as symbolic indictments against the genocidal apathy of the government. Even though the complex socio-cultural situatedness of both the epidemic and the film in Canada might obviate a criticism of radically resisting via one's corpse, its overt focus on the notion of orchestrating a good death accompanied by proper planning and granting closure seeps into the larger individuated (yet aspiring to be universal) project of the film. It is precisely this universal closure via the dead gay body that *Silverlake Life* obviates in its more complex address.

Embodying A 'Gay Death' in *Silverlake Life*

Functioning as what Chambers aptly terms a "dual-autobiography" (7), *Silverlake Life: The View From Here* chronicles the final months in the life of both filmmaker Tom Joslin and his lover, Mark Massi—documenting the quotidian struggles of its protagonists as they navigate their declining health, the fraught relationship with their family members, the fatigue brought forth by the probational treatment, and the eventual loss of one another. Initially pitched as a multi-episode portrait of the titular LA neighborhood (which historically functioned as a crucial safe space for the queer community since the early twentieth century), Joslin quickly abandoned his communal project as the condition of his partner, Massi began to deteriorate with AIDS ("A Case Study" 00:12:30-00:12:50). As the personal project furthered, Joslin's health began to decline more drastically, prompting Massi to take charge of the filmic proceedings. Following Joslin's death, his student and editor, Peter Friedman, shot additional footage with Massi (who died eleven months later) and completed the film. This complex production history of the film provokes insights crucial to AIDS politics. While the film is inevitably an intimately personal project, Joslin's embryonic idea to encapsulate the portrayal of an entire community into his project confirms Renov's thesis about

autobiographical works by subaltern groups as necessarily engaging in a dialogic process of community building and the place of the self within that sphere (xvii). Even as it relegates itself to the personal, *Silverlake Life* makes references to acquaintances of the couple diagnosed with HIV while simultaneously focusing on a queer network of friends and family that assist during these turbulent times. Furthermore, with its apparent paradox of the author filming himself to the point of utter collapse and his work being completed by someone else (in this case, Friedman), the diaries confirm the recurring trope of AIDS memoirs wherein the dying author remains wholly cognizant of his limited existence—envisioned by Joslin's meticulous planning of the screenplay which already puts Friedman to the task lest he should perish before its completion. While scholarly literature abounds on this film, ranging from its ethical address (Chambers 61-80), its verité aesthetics (Seckinger and Jakobsen 144-148), and its corporeal focus (Phelan 379-397) amongst others, this chapter retains its focus on the way the film embodies the death of its protagonist. The potency of the politics of death manifests in the film not merely via the corpse of the subject (as previous literature has argued) but rather via the ways it reveals a 'gay social death' that is thoroughly prophesized even before it is embodied in the frame. This insistence on framing a social death, I argue, navigates the fraught terrain of negotiating the politicization of AIDS amidst a personal (and sentimentally coded) loss.

Contrary to the vivacious beginning of *The Broadcast Tapes,* where Peter resolves about fighting his illness, *Silverlake Life* commences on a gloomy note—the somber and melancholic harmonium music accompanies the shot of Mark Massi as he is sleeping in a dimly lit room. The camera slowly pans to the right to reveal pre-recorded footage of Joslin on the television framed inside a heart bubble with the message "Mark, I Love You!"—footage the viewers later see being filmed in real-time. The presence of Joslin on the camera, accompanied by Massi's voiceover about missing Tom, confirms that the person being

witnessed on the screen has passed away—his presence is only available via his mediated self on the television. The shot cuts to Massi sitting on the sofa (framed via the talking head) and ruminating about the loss of his partner and the distinctive touch of his body. Following Massi's testimony, the point of view shifts to Friedman, who leads a handheld camera into a storage room where Joslin's tapes are kept—while narrating his association with the filmmaker and the unfortunate circumstances that led him to this project. Friedman opens a stack containing all of Joslin's recorded diaries before putting one inside the video tape recorder—commencing the actual journals of the filmmaker. This short preamble to the tapes not only establishes the theme of loss and mourning (a central concern of both AIDS politics and media), but by actually revealing that its central subject is already dead, Friedman resists the exploitative tendency to capitalize on narrative suspense ("Will he make it, or will he die by the end of this film?"). By eschewing chronology to inform about the protagonist's demise, the narrative instead manifests vicarious anxiety in the viewers about the limited time they might have with the subjects they are witnessing on screen (Hallas 127).

The actual diaries, which feature following the preamble, accompany a trajectory akin to *The Broadcast Tapes,* but owing to the dissolution of the filmmaker-subject binary in *Silverlake Life*, the interactions produced are embodied and spontaneous rather than staged and reflective. While Peter's arduous moments of declining health and pain are retrospective in their recounting (for the *actual* moment invoked in the narration is never witnessed on camera), those similar instances are immediate and intimate in *Silverlake Life.* The immediacy lent forth by the video camera is not only able to document the anguish as it is experienced by Joslin but also functions as an extension of his corporeal self (Hallas 120). Hence, rather than orally narrating the experiences of their frail bodies and their incapacities, the employment of a mobile camera that moves with its filmmaker orients the audience's perspective by confining them with the dying body (Malkowski 97). In an early sequence, as

noted by Malkowski, Joslin walks into a Thrifty's store and is unable to lift a tub from a heavy stack—his slow pace and failure to accomplish the mundane task witnessed in the present by the first-person camera (97). This embodiment is also apparent in what is not seen on screen—the abrupt cut in the footage, as Joslin alerts throughout, symptomatic of his own enervation due to constant filming. In an address recorded after recovering from his chronic illness, Joslin mentions with a sly smile to the presumed audience of his tape, "…you're only gonna see me on my good sides" (00:46:48-00:46:51). While this is essentially a meta-reference to cinema's intrinsic propensity to manipulate by showing and hiding, it also signals towards the author's restrictive capacities to film during a time when the self itself is struggling to grasp for life. Considering that Joslin records nearly every encounter related to his health (or lack thereof)—even when he is admitted into an emergency room due to a sudden decline in health—the presence of these disruptions attests to corporeal testimonies when the subject is rendered incapable of communication. The usage of the camera as an extension of the dying self again situates itself around the reorientation of gay subjectivity during the crisis.

In Joslin's previous feature, *Blackstar: Autobiography of a Close Friend* (1976), the filmmaker envisages visibility (through the camera) as a means of gay emancipation. By inserting footage of him and Mark kissing and having sex on camera, *Blackstar* professed a vision of 'out-and-proud' as the pathway to gay liberation, wherein the visual display of erotics was deemed necessary to counter heteronormative claims on sexuality. With AIDS engulfing this culture of sexual expression due to its strong associations with sickness and death, *Silverlake Life* reimagines the camera's role away from embodying visual erotics to a more critical 'necrotics' of capturing the dying. This shift, as I argued in the previous section, is again made possible by the emergence and popularity of video as a medium of address. The spontaneity of the video camera thus not only lends elasticity to the project Joslin is

envisioning (as he mentions during a flight, "*Silverlake Life*…goes where I go" (00:13:40-00:13:50)) but also becomes a therapeutic medium via which the filmmaker can communicate his bodily traumas by speaking about them (Phelan 381). In two sequences filmed in his car, Joslin rants about both his perennial fatigue and frustrations with Massi's inability to read his mind while later also reflecting upon this petulant behavior as a sign of his own physical inadequacies—the mediation of both the frustration and the subsequent reflection via the camera attesting to the therapeutic approach of this first-person address. The subtitle of *View From Here* thus becomes a reflection of the unflinching 'view' of this account brought forth from the privileged position of the PWA (Chambers 62). It is precisely this candidness to lay bare the personal turmoil as it happens to you that led Goodman to term the film as "self-conscious to the point of self-exploitation," as he simultaneously heralded *The Broadcast Tapes* for not taking recourse to bouts of such self-pity ("Review/Television"). However, Goodman's inability to locate the politics of this spontaneous address against the staged one misses the way *Silverlake Life* enacts a project of testimony more potently than state-broadcasted media—an address all the more relevant in the way the film negotiates the death of its subjects.

As aforementioned, the film commences with the acknowledgment of Joslin's death, but it also showcases the visceral sequence where Massi records his dead lover. While I will return to this contentious and often-discussed sequence towards the end of this section, it is also relevant to emphasize the ways the film's engagement with the politics of death is a far more complex enterprise than the sight of the cadaver. Joslin's diaries, set amidst the demoralizing years, explicitly acknowledge the restricted time both lovers have right from the start—the precision of this acknowledgment intensifies with their declining health. However, even with this threat hanging over their head, they resist entirely giving in to the fatalistic scheme of their demise—exemplified by extensive medical visits, schedules with the

therapist, and even taking recourse to alternative spiritual treatment. An early footage shows Mark's visit to a place called Miracle Manor, where he is treated by a histrionic mystic who seeks to purge the 'bad energy' of his soul. While such a sequence can easily be read as a moment of levity and even poking fun at the irrational remedy, it nevertheless serves as a capsule of the dystopic period and the struggle to clutch onto whatever method might provide a panacea to the crippling illnesses. In a later sequence where they are conversing with friends, Mark expresses discomfort about the conception of AIDS as a disease where you are destined to die—even as he and Tom candidly refer to their deaths in personal conversations. This ambivalence comes full circle during their visit to the therapist, where Mark acknowledges his will to live by adhering to the strict treatment, while Tom wishes to make the most of his remaining time. This crestfallen spirit, characterizing much of the film's latter half, can easily lead to a specious argument about the film's egoistic focus on the decaying self. However, the focus on this queer existential crisis supplements the text's criticism of societal homophobia and apathy that propels such ruminations of death and dying.

While the AIDS pandemic became the epitome of the queer community's relationship with loss and death, Pearl notes that a preoccupation with such abject misery has always remained an intrinsic part of the marginalized group (8). From coming out of the closet entailing a symbolic death of the child for the parents to the perennial depressing thoughts of suicide and self-hate due to being socially ostracized, the association of death with queerness precedes (and anticipates) the AIDS crisis (Pearl 8). Since being 'gay' is already assumed to be a certain kind of death, *Silverlake Life* anticipates this association by dwelling on the social death of its protagonists, which in itself serves as a microcosmic view of the gay community during the crisis. Throughout the diaries, Joslin recounts feeling depressed and wishing to end his life, but these ruminations function more than instances of existential ennui or a desire to free oneself from the perpetual struggles of negotiating illness. Chambers

remarks that the recurrence of the theme of suicide features throughout AIDS diaries, but one mustn't read these suicidal ideations as merely a response to the bodily traumas (26). Rather, these morose musings are inevitably a result of homophobia as it is socially sanctioned—AIDS serves simply as a channel via which this homophobia becomes corporeally marked on the homosexual body (Chambers 25). Joslin's diaries hint towards this estrangement in several instances, beginning with the much-dreaded visit to his family at Christmas. While the footage shows Joslin and his family members having a warm and spirited Christmas Eve, a later voiceover suggests that this visit to the family has been unpleasant—belying the actual cheerful footage we just witnessed.

Another covert instance of homophobia follows when the couple goes to a public pool owned by an otherwise genial lady, who later requests Massi to cover himself with a shirt for his lesions might scare other swimmers—mortifying Massi, who already detests his scarred body. Since, as stated before, lesions function not just as a signifier for AIDS but for homosexuality, the covering up of lesions for Massi involves a self-loathing process of shoving oneself back into the closet, although he resists this bigotry by flashing his lesions at the camera in a political performance (Chambers 69). Since the inscription of AIDS renders homosexuality conspicuous, making the PWA more susceptible to discrimination and hate, it makes the latent homophobia emerge explicitly in positioning the gay individual as a dispensable body whose disappearance would not only be allowed but also celebrated (Chambers 19). It is this social death that Joslin inscribes in the aforementioned instances, but also more explicitly in a monologue that follows the swimming incident. In one of the few instances where he is not in front of the camera, Joslin shoots footage of the outside world, including roads, billboards, freeways, and the suburbs—symbols of civilization he has always felt excluded from. Occupying this sequence, replete with such banal imagery, Joslin muses about having never felt a part of this strange world: "…I'm not much of a participant in life

anymore. I am a distant viewer, just watching it all pass by…This civilization is so strange. I have never felt much a part of it. I think being gay separates you a little. Certainly having AIDS and being a walking dead, if you will, separates one from the everyday world" (00:54:57-00:56:12). By ascribing this exclusion to his gay identity and rendering himself absent against the cacophonous footage of an apathetic modernity, Joslin embodies a gay social death via his disembodied presence even before his corporeal self expires on the screen.

The penultimate sequence involving the death of Joslin as his grieving lover films has garnered much scholarly attention, especially regarding the ethics of depiction of the piteous sight. Five days before Joslin's death, Massi films his almost skeletal lover, who hardly resembles the diarist we have known so far—a weeping Massi feeling awful at seeing him thus. The camera then cuts to Joslin's corpse with its eyes wide open and the body emaciated to the point of unrecognition. Massi's focus lingers on Joslin as he promises to finish the tape for him—the former's sobs rendering it a challenging sequence to witness.[11] The documentary's claim to verisimilitude renders the sequence all the more contentious, for the sight is of an actual gay man dying and not an enactment like in Hollywood melodramas—further emphasized by the low-quality and grainy footage of the camcorder, which, as Seckinger and Jakobsen note, had come to signify 'realness' in the eighties (150). This stark presence of death (in contrast to its absence in *The Broadcast Tapes*) also posits some conundrums with regard to AIDS politics.

[11] While editing the film, Friedman himself expressed skepticism about whether people with AIDS viewing this footage might be turned off by its hopelessness (Ehrenstein).

Figure 4: (01:15:52) A still from *Silverlake Life* where a grieving Massi films his dead lover.

Figure 5: (01:18:00) By focusing on not just recording the corpse of its dead subject but also the aftermath of his death, the film enacts a form of testimonial function by laying bare these banal proceedings.

As multiple scholars have argued, this portrayal of a gay man dying on camera and his death being broadcasted (the film was featured in a widely viewed segment on PBS) risks being appropriated for mere sympathy of a tolerant audience, or in worse cases even to homophobic backlash, as Hallas demonstrates in his examination of the viewer's response to the broadcast (Seckinger and Jakobsen 152; Hallas 131-132; Malkowski 104). However, irrespective of the affective reactions generated by the viewer, *Silverlake Life* seeks to politicize the death of its subject. As argued in the case of *The Broadcast Tapes* and its project of dying as embedded within the privatization of death in neoliberal times, the project of rendering death transparent in the film serves a political function—rendering it bare and public when it is supposed to be private (Malkowski 71). Just like *The Broadcast Tapes*, the

film documents the funeral ceremony, but rather than focus on the cathartic function of the proceedings, Friedman situates Joslin's funeral in relation to the broader loss of the gay community. The pastor's officiating sermon emphasizes that AIDS is not a moral affliction for being gay but just an unfortunate disease—challenging the Catholic church's virulent homophobia that ACT UP protested in their famed mass demonstration. Other friends of Joslin who speak for him situate his passing amidst the unceasing loss they are experiencing—the funeral becoming less a ceremony to mourn an individual, but rather to remember the ongoing crisis. This inclusion of not just the agonizing death but also its aftermath entails an ethical responsibility on the part of the viewer to carry on the witnessing project, first envisioned by the now-dead author (Chambers 72).

In its concluding moments, Friedman aptly brings attention to Massi as he laments the loss of his lover while musing about his own limited time. Whereas *The Broadcast Tapes* euphemizes the presence of the clandestine gay lover, the dual-autobiographical structure in *Silverlake Life* resists such an erasure by bringing Massi front and center (over the biological family). In a sequence where Friedman probes Massi about the number of years they were together, the reply of "twenty-two years" sarcastically undercuts the closeup shot of Joslin's death certificate, which declares his marital status as "Never married." To further cement the endearing intimacy of the central relationship that the state continues to efface, Friedman inserts several instances from *Blackstar*, Joslin's coming-out film, arguing for gay visibility as a means of political emancipation. Although *Blackstar* embodies this visibility by featuring on-screen gay sex and love, Friedman eschews these instances of radical carnal love for tamer moments in *Silverlake*—a choice Seckinger and Jakobsen rightly critique for giving into the notion of blaming gay sex for AIDS (153). However, as this chapter has repeatedly argued, the effacement of conventional forms of gay erotic display is not merely a form of erasure but also a re-negotiation with the new ways of being gay that were necessitated by the

AIDS crisis. Notwithstanding this reconfiguration, Friedman's inclusion of the lover's past via *Blackstar* still serves as a political device that refuses to regard AIDS as a retribution for the era of gay emancipation. Noting the inclusion of similar flashback sequences in Bressan Jr.'s *Buddies* (1985) invoking the gay liberation age of the seventies, Waugh remarks how the presence of these moments emphasizes the past as a period to be celebrated and not one to be paid for (224). Similarly, Friedman choosing to conclude *Silverlake Life* with the exact footage that punctuates *Blackstar*—home-movie footage of Joslin and Massi gleefully dancing and kissing to "I Met Him On A Sunday"—serves this doubly affective purpose. True to Waugh's observation, it treasures this ephemeral memory while simultaneously mourning its effacement.

Figure 6: (01:36:08) The concluding scene from *Silverlake Life* borrows from Joslin's previous coming-out film *Blackstar: Autobiography of A Close Friend*.

Figure 7: (01:37:03) By using this footage from *Blackstar*, Friedman retrospectively looks back at this moment with nostalgia rather than moral condemnation. The past and the people in it are now lost, yet their memory lingers.

Conclusion: A Retroactivist Archive of Loss?

Both *The Broadcast Tapes* and *Silverlake Life*, while employing a personal mode of address, enact a political function of witnessing trauma—their ardent testimonies of corporeal decline resisting the charge of sensationalizing the dying body. *The Broadcast Tapes* endorses a counter vision of negotiating illness that disturbs the helpless victim trope, even as it succumbs to the liberalist project of universalization via its empathetic protagonist. *Silverlake Life* wrestles with this representational ambiguity with a more complex address that insists on representing a 'gay' death that evades an easy closure of sentimentalization. While the majority of this chapter has pivoted itself around the question of representation, I wanted to conclude by thinking about the afterlife of these films in the contemporary where the demographics of HIV/AIDS infection, as well as its media representations, have shifted considerably. Since time, as Hallas situates in his extensive study of AIDS archives, drastically alters media objects—what does viewing these texts in the contemporary entail (8)?

In his essay "Retroactivism," Hilderbrand notes the affective power of viewing ACT UP footage, especially for someone who could never experience that revolutionary zeitgeist (303). Despite the trauma of AIDS, viewing these videos entails a historical fascination with the radicalizing spirit of the time and has the potential to re-generate a utopic formation of the queer community (Hilderbrand 308). While Hilderbrand provides engaging insights into the way media archives (especially video) enable an affective encounter with the past, his exclusive focus on the footage of activism and protest hinders the way personalized documents of the pandemic can yield a similar form of retroactivist affect by underscoring individual loss and the refusal to forget the ongoing global pandemic—bearing witness to a history that risks being effaced. More importantly, with its overt focus on ACT UP, Hilderbrand's formulation of a retroactivist affect limits itself to Western geographies,

positing AIDS as a moment in history rather than as a continuing global crisis. It is precisely this expansion of retroactivist political affect that *Silverlake Life: Epilogue* (2003) addresses in its short duration.

Friedman essentially intended the epilogue to address the various queries he received from the viewers about Massi's fate—whose death, while preceding the release of the film in 1993, is never mentioned in the narrative. Attempting a form of closure for its audience (seeking information about a subject they have formed a virtual bond with), Friedman includes sequences shot by a friend of the couple, Elaine Mayes—footage only re-discovered a decade later as the opening title alerts. In the footage, Mayes follows an extraordinarily lean and fatigued Massi during his last days as he struggles with his physical and mental decline, expressing suicidal ideations similar to Joslin. After Massi's death, Mayes and writer Bo Huston (another friend of the couple) head to Los Angeles to sort out his bureaucratic affairs—trying to make sense of the tragedy with only the material remains of the couple left in the household. In contrast to *Silverlake Life,* where the mourning is performed explicitly via the dead body, the epilogue focuses on the aftermath of death and mourns its subjects via their remaining possessions. By its lingering focus on personal objects (especially films and writings of the couple), the epilogue suggests that the horrors of the epidemic will continue to haunt us via these remaining objects—including the one the viewers are just witnessing.

Following this retrospective footage, Friedman cuts to him and Mayes sitting in the editing room (in the twenty-first century), pondering over what to do with this footage. Mayes mentions Huston's death due to AIDS—whose still image we witness on the screen—and challenges that despite the presence of new drugs, the crisis is far from over. She suggests that while access to drugs might have rendered the AIDS crisis invisible in the United States, people in other countries continue to die—their lives are still disposable in the eyes of the greedy pharmaceutical industries. By underscoring the urgency of the AIDS crisis from a

global perspective, the epilogue not only stresses a need for political mobilization beyond the West but also resists announcing the end of the pandemic (as several gay conservatives had following the introduction of antiretroviral therapy). Using Tom and Mark's story as a catalyst, Friedman and Mayes envision the epilogue as a project of remembrance not just for its deceased white gay subjects but also for those whose lives continue to be expendable as the crisis escalates globally.

Chapter 2. Confessions and Coming Out: Ambivalent Queer and Familial Solidarities in Nishit Saran's *Summer in My Veins* (1999)

After he had divulged his seropositive status to the public in a broadcasted interview, author and activist Paul Monette, in his memoir, recalls receiving a despondent letter from another gay man who wrote back about his survivor's guilt of testing negative amidst an ongoing calamity. "When my test came back negative last month, I was overwhelmed with a sadness I hadn't expected. Coming back alive is a guilt, a terrible betrayal, a necessary starting point," wrote Monette's correspondent (165)—encapsulating a prevalent sentiment of anguish borne out of feeling a sense of culpability amidst the continuing loss and death in the community. However, this survivor's guilt, harbored by Monette's penfriend and several others, was not a showcase of a superficial and sanctimonious self-reproach as a snarky reading might suggest, but rather a way to commiserate and extend one's solidarity by recognizing the position of the self as constituted by the larger queer community. Given this sense of solidarity borne out of these affinities, the final sequence in *Summer in My Veins* (1999), a first-person documentary by late queer filmmaker Nishit Saran, cannot help but register a politics wholly at odds with such alliances.

In the aforementioned climactic sequence of the film, the narrative leads us into the confined setting of a pathologist's clinic. Filmed in a long take, the camera centers on Saran as the pathologist (outside the frame) prepares to divulge the results of his HIV test, taken a few weeks ago. After dispensing the necessary medical platitude about the efficacy of such tests, the pathologist reassures Saran that he has tested negative for the antibodies. A wide smile breaks into Saran's hitherto distraught face as he heaves a euphoric sigh of relief. For a film pivoting around the anxiety of testing positive for HIV following an unsafe sexual encounter, the denouement of *Summer in My Veins* seeks to mark an identification with its

seronegative protagonist—encouraging the viewer to join a reassured Saran with this consoling news. However, this choice on the part of a queer-of-color filmmaker to culminate his documentary with testing negative also potentially undermines the project of solidarity of AIDS activism suggested above—further risking repeating the charge of solipsism frequently associated with personal filmmaking during the pandemic. While *Silverlake Life*, as I delineated previously, eschewed the prevalent rhetoric of AIDS activism to enable a politicized critique via the dying self, Saran's documentary ends up locating itself outside the very purview of such corporeal politics—the filmmaker seemingly attempting to absolve himself against the rhetoric of AIDS activism. Even if it is temporally situated during a time when the cocktail therapy made HIV/AIDS a liveable condition in the Global North (in contrast to being a death sentence), Saran's choice to position HIV as only a specter for narrative suspense easily lends itself susceptible to a queer-of-color critique about the text's negation of systemic inequities in an ongoing global pandemic. Amidst this discourse, where does this already obscure film fit within the canon of AIDS media?

One of the earliest works of first-person queer filmmaking in India, *Summer in My Veins* follows Saran as he prepares to come out to his mother, who is visiting the United States for his convocation ceremony at Harvard. During a road trip to see their extended family across different states, Saran wrestles with both his sexuality and an anxiety-inducing secret, gradually revealed as the narrative progresses. As he navigates his identity against the heteronormative expectations of his family, a nervous Saran eventually decides to come out to his mother just before she flies back to India. While visibly taken aback by the revelation, the mother professes her unwavering support for her son, irrespective of his sexuality. With the narrative culminating with the sequence in the clinic, the film ends on an optimistic note for the protagonist—his fears and anxieties quelled by coming out of the closet and testing negative for HIV.

Judging from this crude summary of the film, *Summer in My Veins* might appear as an incongruous text for this study and, more importantly, an anomaly within the larger canon of AIDS media, especially from a queer-of-color framework. The limited scholarship on the film (Gadihoke 2012, Ghosh 2021) has primarily heralded it as a text about gay visibility during the era of economic globalization in India—an observation corroborated by the film's initial screenings at academic institutions and liberal convention centers in the country as a means to affirm a burgeoning LGBT movement. While Saran's oeuvre as a polemic queer activist confirms the thesis of the film as a manifesto for politicizing the personal via coming out (similar to Joslin's *Blackstar: Autobiography of a Close Friend* [1976]), the politics of *Summer in My Veins* also signal a far more complex negotiation with the HIV/AIDS pandemic than its hitherto categorization as a 'coming-out' documentary. This chapter seeks to extend the focus on the film by locating it as a transnational text traversing the familial and sexual politics endemic to queer 'intercultural' filmmaking. By framing the documentary in a tradition of personal videos during the pandemic, the chapter commences by locating the drastic shift in the notions of family and kinship during the AIDS crisis. Through navigating the myriad ways in which these video texts, such as *Danny* (1987), *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1994), and *Sea in the Blood* (2000), place the familial at the center, the chapter situates *Summer in My Veins* amidst this discourse while highlighting the ways in which the film distinguishes itself in rethinking these notions of family and kinship as a queer-of-color text. Further, by paying close attention to the conservative sexual mores around HIV/AIDS during the closing of the millennium, the chapter depicts the film's refusal to challenge neoliberal notions of individual responsibility that often sought to vilify seropositive sexual partners in a bid to assimilate queer politics with homonormative ideals of sexuality. Finally, the chapter concludes by discussing the film's ambivalent ending in an attempt to rethink AIDS politics beyond the question of serostatus as a means of queer solidarity.

Back To The Family: Rethinking Kinship During The AIDS Crisis

> "He'd never had enough money, and now he worried he'd end up a charity case or, even worse, dependent on his family. He was terrified of having to call on the mercy of his family." (White 288)

In Edmund White's short story "Running on Empty" (quoted above), the protagonist, Luke, dying of AIDS, heads to Texas to visit his Southern homophobic family. Fearing their self-righteousness yet compelled by his precarious health and dwindling finances to seek refuge with them, Luke is forced to deal with his extended family, symbolically functioning as the dreaded past that he had hoped to leave behind. With its narrative anchored around the fraught relationship with one's bloodline, White's story epitomized a recurring trope in AIDS media and literature, i.e., of a queer person's reluctant homecoming following their diagnosis. In her study of gay male fiction in the West, Pearl notes how the proliferation of the coming-out narrative in the sixties and seventies often featured biological families as a source of "terrible disappointment" (148). The trajectory of these stories usually culminated with the gay protagonist leaving behind his homophobic family to mark his own way into the world (Pearl 148). In contrast to the repudiation of the familial sphere in the texts from the gay liberation era, several AIDS narratives upended this trope to mark a reluctant retreat back to the family. With constant declining health, limited access to care and affection, or a desire to finally settle affairs with one's kin before death, the seropositive protagonist in these narratives often ended up back in the childhood home seeking familial care and affection long forsaken for one's queer identity. Running parallel to this return to the biological family, there also emerged alternative modes of kinships that substituted the homophobic bloodline with

queer family networks providing care and affection (Pearl 143). Vacillating between these modes of kinship, the specter of the family nonetheless haunted its way back into the queer discourse both in its material presence as an affective structure and its symbolic relevance as a social unit sanctioning exclusion and queerphobia.

The year 1985 not only commenced the portrayal of the AIDS crisis on the big screen with the release of the two narrative features but also marked the aforementioned dichotomous exploration of the familial sphere in their respective narratives. In Arthur Bressan Jr.'s *Buddies* (1985), the first feature film (although not widely distributed) on the AIDS crisis, the family was marked by its narrative absence. The film's protagonist, Robert (Geoff Edholm), dying of AIDS in a hospital, tells his 'buddy' caretaker David (David Schachter) about his parents having disowned him when he came out to them in 1971. Functioning as a politically queer film pre-empting the incendiary AIDS activism of the coming years, *Buddies* ends with Robert's death (all alone in the hospital) which galvanizes David to protest outside the White House (symbolic of the apathetic Reagan administration)—the protest in this finale against the neoliberal ethos (including that of 'family' values) of the Reagan government extends its polemic critique towards the heterosexual family as an oppressive institution responsible for the AIDS crisis.

Released two months after the premiere of *Buddies*, the NBC telefilm *An Early Frost* (1985) marked a more conservative reckoning with homophobic parents, functioning under the logic of reconciliation and acceptance. With its opening shot of a suburban house, *An Early Frost* establishes the familial home at its narrative center, where the closeted gay son has to return to deal with his unsuspecting parents. In the film, Michael (Aidan Quinn), a lawyer in Chicago, tests positive for HIV, and after an altercation with his partner, Peter (D.W. Moffett) decides to go back home to his parents, Katherine (Gena Rowlands) and Nick (Ben Gazzara). Realizing that he cannot hide his diagnosis from his folks for long, Michael is

compelled to undertake a double coming-out—both of his sexuality and serostatus. While Katherine, initially shocked, offers her support and love, Nick, offended by both the sexuality and the contagious body of his son, remains callous to his plight. In a particularly telling scene, Katherine urges Nick to step in and take care of his dying son. Having already relinquished the bond that he fostered with his gay son, Nick replies that Michael can get the care he needs from "his own kind" (*An Early Frost* 00:43:43-00:43:45). "We're his own kind!" retorts an irate Katherine (00:43:46-00:43:48)—encapsulating its prime argument as situating the biological family as the ultimate model of kinship that a seropositive individual should count on. While essentially a TV movie, the enormous success of *An Early Frost* anticipated the trope of this queer homecoming in AIDS narratives to such an extent that Paul Monette termed this phenomenon of double coming out of the closet as "the *Early Frost* division"—wherein closeted gay men dying of AIDS had to turn to their families forcing their reluctant yet inevitable coming out (41).[12]

While the recurring presence of the family (as I shall discuss below) in the personal AIDS videos during the eighties and nineties could be considered a part of this structure of feeling that prompted queerness back into the familial sphere, such a sweeping claim to assimilate video narratives with other media forms would gloss over an already complex history of queer video filmmaking and its overt focus on the domestic from the very start. In his study of personal films by pioneering queer and feminist filmmakers, Renov notes the recurring presence of the family members in these tapes (180). Highlighting the ways in which several personal videos focus less on the articulation of one's sexuality and politics, Renov argues about a "new queer subjectivity" embodied in these tapes that posits the family as central to one's queer experience:

[12] In his review of television film *In The Gloaming* (1997), another narrative about a HIV-positive gay son's homecoming to a caring mother and apathetic father, James Endrst wondered, "Is this a film about family, an AIDS story, or a compromise between the two?" ("Gloaming A Moving")—Endrst remarks signalling towards the overarching yet incongruous presence of the biological family in AIDS narratives.

> Sexuality and its sources or etiology are only occasionally the overt subject matter of such work. Instead these films and tapes affirm the degree to which the (queer) identities of the makers are bound up with those of certain special (but straight) family members…These works are perhaps the next generation of the new queer subjectivity. Janus-faced, looking behind as well as ahead, personal yet embedded in the commonality of family life, these are works that bridge many gaps of human difference—those of generation, gender, and sexuality. (181)

The emergence of personal videos during the AIDS crisis certainly forms a part of a lineage of this new queer subjectivity even as it seeks to broaden the idea of family hitherto pictured in mainstream media (as in *An Early Frost*). In her delineation of the varying modes of kinship in AIDS autoethnographies, Pidduck argues about an "ambivalent" mode of rethinking queer kinship (442). Recognizing that conventional ideas of kinship (marked by heteronormative reproductivity) ran on the logic of exclusion for the queer subject, prompting them to seek alternative modes of support—Pidduck suggests that 'ambivalence' best captures the "explosive and dissonant array of emotions related to the discursive and material positioning of LGBT people on the cusp of kinship" (442).[13] By employing unique formal and narrative strategies, AIDS videos during the pandemic encapsulated thinking ambivalently about kinship by complicating the positionality of the original family within this discourse.

Danny (1987), Stashu Kybartas's elegiac tape about his eponymous friend, employs an experimental structure combining still photography, voiceovers, operatic and popular music to explore this fraught terrain of ambivalent affinities. Just like *Silverlake Life,* the short documentary opens with the knowledge of the death of its titular protagonist, Danny,

[13] Similarly, borrowing from the feminist critique of autobiographical practices, Hallas notes a relational subjectivity in AIDS testimonies wherein the self is always entwined with other relations, such as family, friends, lovers, and caregivers (117).

whom Kybartas had met while working at the Pittsburgh AIDS Centre. Kybartas enmeshes the tape with a voiceover retrospectively detailing this intimate queer friendship, along with frequent interjections from recorded tape interviews with Danny. Having been away from home for more than five years with no intention of ever moving back, Danny recalls the irony of retreating to his parent's house in Steubenville, Ohio, following his doctor's prescription for chemotherapy as a last resort. Realizing that he now needs to go back home to be taken care of, Danny calls his mother to reveal both his diagnosis and homosexuality. While the mother is welcoming, Danny refrains from coming out to his straitlaced father, fearing that the latter would not be able to accept his homosexuality and seropositive status. When Kybartas presses Danny about this choice to keep his homophobic father in the dark, a confounded Danny replies that while he immensely dislikes his father, he also doesn't want to hurt his feelings. Despite this emotional turmoil, Danny spends his final days at his parent's place, shunning all contact with the outside world. In contrast to this morose and emotionally enervating experience with the biological family, Kybartas details his vivid memories with Danny and their brief time together going to bars and sharing stories about Danny's gay past (visualized through his erotic photographs)—these sections of the tape are supplemented with an upbeat melody of Donna Summer's "Love's Unkind," compared to the silence or mournful operatic score during the family section. Recognizing this stressful relationship with his family, Kybartas wonders aloud about Danny's strange decision to move back with his unaccepting folks even when Kybartas and other queer friends offer to take care of him—an ambiguity that the film leaves unresolved. The tape ends with Kybartas learning of Danny's death just before he had planned to visit him—the lamenting operatic song during the credits mourning a queer kinship ended too soon.

While this similar negotiation with the familial remains a concern of too many texts to be considered here in ample detail,[14] the notion of such ambivalent kinship is further complicated in videos by ethnically marginalized and queer-of-color artists. In her study of first-person Jewish videos, Lebow, extending upon Renov's idea of domestic ethnography, argues about the centrality of the family in these texts (*First Person* 36). Rather than frame the familial as distinct from the individual, Lebow suggests that the self in these films is only conceived through relation to the family and is unthinkable without them (*First Person* 38). Similarly, Gopinath, in her analysis of the practices of South Asian queer diasporas, notes the ways in which the queer-of-color narratives do not align with the traditional coming-out narrative of leaving the heteronormative home behind for a more liberatory and accepting milieu (14). Instead, the self in these narratives is imagined via the family, constructing what Mayer aptly terms (in relation to the films of Michelle Citron) a polyvalent identity that embodies multiple subjectivities comprising a diffused racial, queer, and gendered identity (Mayer 201). This is not to suggest that the queer-of-color imaginaries posit the familial as a liberatory space bereft of the ambivalence delineated previously, but such imaginings do resist the discourse of a Eurocentric universalized gay identity intent on constructing a monolithic formation of queerness (Gopinath 12). Hence, even as the familial marks its way into the personal AIDS videos by artists of ethnically marginalized identities, the ambivalence regarding kinship in these texts moves beyond the previously described dichotomy of the chosen family over the biological one.

[14] The tussle between the biological family and the new chosen one remains a concern in many AIDS texts. The short PBS video profile of activist, David Summers recounts his uncomfortable experience with his mother who happened to be too frightened to take care of her HIV-positive son—forcing Summers to come back to his chosen family. In a similar vein, Jay Corcoran's *Life and Death on the A-List* (1996) (discussed in the previous chapter) encompasses the tense relationship between actor Tom McBride with his mother when the latter offers her reservations about McBride swimming in her pool fearing it might spread the virus to other people. Realizing that the experience would be too overwhelming for her, McBride returns to New York in the company of his queer family even as the biological family reappears during the climatic sequence featuring his bodily paralysis and eventual death.

In *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1994), Gregg Bordowitz's meta-autobiographical tape about the existential ennui and frustrations of being HIV-positive during demoralized times, the filmmaker recalls similar anxiety about his 'double coming out' following the diagnosis. Although the said coming-out has already occurred three years prior to the narrative in the film, Bordowitz invites his mother and stepfather to recall the exact incident about the event. Framing this recording as a sort of familial epic, Bordowitz inserts yellowed captions introducing him and his family as "Stepfather," "Mother," and "Son" along with the exact setting and date of this meeting—both mocking the primacy of the family unit while stressing one's relationality to it in explicit terms.

Figure 8-10 (*Fast Trip Long Drop,* 00:16:46, 00:16:47, 00:16:49): Bordowitz, in mock epic fashion, introduces his parents and himself via his relation to them rather than through the common documentary practice of captioning via names—tacitly

	emphasizing the relevance of relationality in constructing the author's subjectivity.

Both the parties express different memories of that day—while Bordowitz recalls his mother weeping at the announcement of his coming out, the parents recollect no such show of emotion. In the present, the mother expresses her anguish not because of her son being 'gay' but rather because of the difficult life he might have to lead due to his marginalized identity and precarious health. While this section concludes with the mother's affirmation and support, Bordowitz's engagement with his lineage extends beyond his parents. In a later introspective section, Bordowitz recalls his grandfather, who lost his sibling to typhus during the cholera and typhus epidemic—the employment of this genealogy of death and dying serves to emphasize Bordowitz's own illness as a part of this familial history (Lebow *First Person* 140). Realizing that his anguish as an individual diagnosed with a life-threatening disease is not wholly unique and that misery has remained an intrinsic part of his family (accentuated by their marginal identity), Bordowitz remarks, "I guess I am just part of history" (00:38:03-00:38:06). Using his Jewishness as a way to draw links between the Holocaust and the contemporary epidemic fostered by government and public apathy, Bordowitz imagines his current political identity within a Jewish tradition of suffering and resilience (*Lebow First Person* 140). Apart from this lineage, Bordowitz also marks his affinities with his activist family in ACT UP (of which he was an integral member) by featuring group therapy sessions with other participants who express their anxieties and fears about dying with AIDS. Further joining Bordowitz in tackling his concerns about his short-lived mortality is his lesbian friend and dance artist Yvonne Rainer, dealing with her own breast cancer diagnosis—the poignant conversation between these friends probing the prospective loss of one another through distinct yet equally fatal illnesses. Through these

myriad and complex networks, Bordowitz imagines kinship as not merely vacillating between the biological and the chosen family but as constituted and shaped by these affinities.

Richard Fung's much-heralded and discussed *Sea in the Blood* (2000) further probes these ambivalent kinships, drawing on personal and historical linkages between different illnesses. Fung, whose work as an academic and artist negotiates the positionality of queer Asian sexuality enmeshed with familial, colonial, and racial histories, frames *Sea in the Blood* amidst these contexts. Using recollections from family members, home movie footage, and letters, Fung begins the tape recalling a picturesque trip across continents that he once embarked on with his new-found partner, Tim, during the early eighties. Just as the couple is in India, Fung receives troubling news from his family (who disapprove of Fung's trip with Tim) about his sister, Nan, who is sick. Drawing the viewers away from his romantic trip, Fung shifts the narrative toward Nan, who suffers from Thalassemia—a deadly hereditary disorder also marked by its colonized medical history. Slowly, the viewers learn of Fung's intimate relationship with his sister since their childhood, with Nan being his most intimate confidante and the first person he eventually comes out to. However, despite his strong ties, Fung delays going back to his childhood home to meet Nan for one last time, arriving hours later after her demise. Switching between the trip with Tim and recollections of the beloved sister, the film embodies a dual kinship marked with ambivalence—the intimate trip with the gay lover and the promise to a dying sister (Pidduck 453). Years after Nan's death, Tim tests HIV-positive during the early years of the crisis—forcing Fung to again reckon with the precarity of navigating his relationship amidst disease and death. By entwining a genetically inherited illness with a virus whose transmission is usually ascribed to sexual intimacy, Fung, while himself seronegative, attempts to understand his personal losses (one potential and one already transpired) by placing these illnesses in relation to one another—posing again an ambivalent queer kinship that refuses to dichotomize the bonds of the biological family with

the gay partner. Even as it situates the disapproving diasporic family against the gay partner, *Sea in the Blood* refrains from positing the former as a repressive institute to be forsaken and abandoned. In her reading of the film, Cho cautions against employing this dichotomy to understand the racialized diasporic family as parochial and homophobic, arguing that such a model risks evaluating other sexual cultures and communities against a hegemonic Eurocentric model of sexuality (432). Moreover, by incorporating Tim's activism to lead the fight for drug access in Canada—demonstrated by the footage of him and other activists hijacking the 1989 international AIDS conference in Montreal—Fung situates his solidarity with a significant political movement, although without placing his familial history against it.

It is amidst this framework of negotiating illness, sexuality, and identity in relation to the family that this chapter seeks to analyze *Summer in My Veins* (1999) by stressing its status as a queer-of-color first-person documentary and an intercultural text. Further, by underscoring its sexual politics in an age of assimilatory queer ideals, I seek to complicate its position as a mere coming-out film and argue about the ways in which it professes rhetoric countering these conservative sexual mores during the nineties.

Intercultural Negotiations With Family, Identity, and Sexuality in *Summer in My Veins*

"Coming out of the closet is like visiting a foreign country. Not only because you are exposed to cultures and practices that you had only dimly imagined previously but also because the language is so often completely alien to you," wrote Saran in an article published in 2000 (32). Ironically enough, the analogy that Saran drew between coming out and visiting a foreign country epitomized his own empirical account as an Indian student who went to study film at Harvard University, where access to Western queer discourses shaped his own gay identity. Dismayed at the dearth of queer accounts and people in India (especially against

the rise of the Hindu right-wing during the late nineties), Saran (as envisioned by his writings) frequently turned to the West as a lamp under which he could make sense of his own sexuality and identity.[15] From heralding the relevance of the Stonewall riots for queer emancipation worldwide to profiling American cultural icons like Greg Louganis and Rock Hudson, Saran's writings testified to the awareness of his 'gay' identity as facilitated by his transnational movement to the States. This transnational movement is not only integral to understanding Saran's oeuvre as an activist and filmmaker, but also as situating *Summer in My Veins* as a first-person documentary navigating this intercultural terrain.

In her study of the emergence of first-person films in India, Gadihoke notes that historically, the dominant mode of documentary address in the subcontinent often sought a collective voice wherein the filmmaker's subjectivity remained invisible to emphasize the social utility of the form (144). However, during the nineties, economic liberalization enabled a rapid shift in Indian media thanks to access to the internet, the digital revolution, and satellite broadcast, which, coupled with the rise of identity politics in the public sphere, fostered the growth of a 'personal subjectivity' in documentary films (144). Apart from facilitating this massive shift in the media landscape, the economic globalization of the nineties was also responsible for enabling networks via cross-border migration (both of objects and people), which as Ghosh remarks, aided in the emergence of a queer community beyond the national borders (657). It is amidst this confluence of the emergence of this first-person subjectivity and transnational migration that the queer politics of *Summer in My Veins* situates itself.

[15] Although after graduating and returning to India, Saran's vocabulary to describe queerness would also move beyond the Western markers of coming out and visibility. Moreover, Saran himself remained cognizant of the construction of these 'borrowed terminologies' in his work and recognizing the Foucauldian distinction between sexuality and sexual acts. "Gay identities we might have 'imported' from the West, but how does the fundamentalist explain the pervasive nature of homosexual acts in (at least urban) Indian society?" he wrote in an essay highlighting the ubiquity of homosexual acts in urban spheres (Saran 48).

With its transnational positionality, Saran's film can be classified under various rubrics (cross-border/diasporic/hybrid text), but using Laura Marks's framework of the 'intercultural' film is most suited to account for its formal and social politics, not least because of Marks' privileging of the video form. Describing the rise of films made by immigrant or diasporic artists during the closing of the millennium, Marks notes that intercultural cinema as a category is defined by the way it negotiates the filmmaker's position as "living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge or living as a minority in the still majority white, Euro-American West" (1). These 'intercultural' texts, informed by the artist's spatial positionality as immigrants or exiles from their country in the West, refuse to be relegated to a single cultural discourse and oscillate in two directions (Marks 6). While the term 'intercultural cinema' remains panoramic to encompass multiple media forms, Marks, in her study, focuses primarily on the use of video as a mode employed by these artists, both as an economically feasible choice and also for aesthetic purposes (5). As an intercultural video text, *Summer in My Veins* embodies the dialectic relationship in traversing between the social and sexual norms of two distinct cultures (as Saran's position as a queer Indian student in the United States demonstrates)—positing an ambivalent hybrid identity that resists easy categorization.

The opening shot of the film features a room lit with disco lights with techno-dance music audible in the background, as consecutive shots of people (both queer couples and solo individuals) gleefully jamming their bodies to the beat appear in the frame. Joining this crowd, Saran eventually turns up in front of the camera, and his voiceover announces that he is enjoying the last gay dance of his college life before his graduation. Even though this opening might seem like an innocuous establishing shot, the foregrounding of a lively (and safe) queer space accentuates the film's positionality as an intercultural text. If, as several

accounts state[16], gay parties in India in the nineties and as recent as the last decade were often surreptitious and underground affairs which frequently ended with violent police raids—Saran's framing of himself as a gay subject dancing and filming himself at a queer space in the United States accords him a privilege unavailable to him in his home country. This framing is not to situate the West as a sexually utopic space bereft of inequities and oppression apparent in other nation states, but rather to locate the ways in which the migration and movement of queer bodies from a homophobic social milieu to an ostensibly more progressive one allows both the spatial and verbal articulation denied in the homeland.[17] Amidst the buoyant spirit of the party in this opening sequence, Saran's voiceover expresses anxiety about not being out to his Indian mother, who is visiting the country for his graduation and a family trip with her sisters across several states—positioning the conflict between the self and the familial at the center of his narrative.

Most of Saran's documentary functions, in his own words, like "a vacation movie where the stakes get higher" (Ghosh 671) as he employs the home movie aesthetic to chronicle his distinct family members during their trip from Massachusetts to Ohio and eventually to San Fransisco. As the narrative progresses, Saran details in a voiceover an unsafe sexual encounter with a seropositive man, which prompted him to get tested for the virus. Fearing that the test (whose results await in the future) might be positive, Saran hopes to ease his mother by coming out as gay rather than doubly confound her with both his sexuality and test results—expressing the paradigmatic conundrum of the 'double-closet'

[16] The raiding of queer spaces by the police and law enforcement forces to coerce, blackmail and imprison individuals remains a troublingly frequent presence in Indian queer history, exemplified by several retrospective memoirs, and recollections of queer life in the nineties. (Rangnekar 2019, Kolvankar and Ladha 2019, Bandyopadhyay 2023).

[17] In her short review of the film, Swaminathan articulates a similar sentiment by noting the ways migration might be a more lucrative and liberatory experience for some queer subjects, "In some cases, stepping out is freeing and safe, particularly from the viewpoint of sexuality. As a matter of choice, for many queer youngsters moving from India – a country where homosexuality is criminalised, to the United States – a country where same sex marriages are legal, can be a liberating move. Anonymity and distance from home culture allows for the freedom to express, freedom to mingle, and freedom to cohabit without the fear of retribution" ("Review").

under the shadow of the pandemic. Although the film's treatment of AIDS and sexuality is a more complex one than navigating the trauma of the double closet, as I will argue henceforth, Saran's positioning of the vacation trip also offers a contradictory discourse with regard to the familial sphere. In contrast to the dominant trope of the family in both queer and AIDS media as either accepting or obdurate, *Summer in My Veins* presents an ambivalent position of a queer-of-color subject that paradoxically presents the familial sphere as both a heteronormative and queer space. Hence, rather than situate it as plainly antagonistic to the queer self, the family becomes a site to reflect upon this identity—confirming Renov's thesis about such domestic ethnographies taking "recourse to the familial order" to construct the self (218).

During a sequence inside a car, Saran films his aunts singing a Hindi folk song whose lyrics (as translated on screen) describe the story of a mother wanting her son to bring home a beautiful bride to take hold of the domestic duties. In quintessential Indian tradition where the parents are venerated and held sacrosanct, the song further presses the son and his prospective bride to take care of the mother, who, having bequeathed her household duties to the daughter-in-law, is now seated on a golden throne. By focusing on the song which his aunts aim towards him, Saran emphasizes not just the filial duties he is expected to fulfill but also heteronormative ones by marrying a girl and settling with her. Later, in an extended long take sequence inside a living room, Saran films his mother and loquacious aunts casually chatting in a conversation that steadily steers toward Saran's friend, Charlie, who the family had met during the convocation ceremony. Owing to his genderqueer performance, the aunts suspect that Charlie must be a 'homosexual,' which leads to further debate about the conflation of gendered identity with sexuality.[18] Saran's older aunt, who is under the

[18] Again, it is important to remark that the discussion of queerness amidst the family members is only initiated due to Charlie, an out Western queer subject. Further in the conversation, the aunt mentions about the legality of homosexuality in the States and seeing a Pride Parade dedicated to 'these' people—the ubiquity of queer acts and queer subjects in the West allows the discourse of homosexuality to enter into mundane conversations.

impression that homosexuality is a phase, seeks to prove her point by suggesting that a person grows out of this 'lifestyle' when they find a partner of the opposite sex. Pointing at Saran, the aunt says, "For example, my nephew Nishit here. He is not married…Do you think I'll say he is a gay *[sic]*? NO! Because he has not found a girl to *[sic]* his level" (*Summer* 00:14:29-00:14:39)—the dramatic irony further accentuated for the audience who are aware that the nephew she is referring to is, *in fact*, gay. Following this suggestion, Saran immediately cuts the conversation scene to the family watching a song sequence from the notoriously homophobic Bollywood film *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (1998)—the romantic heteronormative coupling in the picture further stressing the ideals of love and intimacy that Saran is hoped to aspire to.[19]

In her delineation of orientation as becoming rather than being, Ahmed suggests how the heterosexual culture often steers subjects towards a 'straight' line which requires them to orient to heteronormative ways: "Heterosexuality is not then simply an orientation toward others, it is also something that we are oriented around…" (560). Noting the ways institutions like family direct the queer child towards certain objects (in the form of values, aspirations amongst others), Ahmed suggests that such an orientation onto the straight line is only made possible by renouncing queer objects (557-558). Similarly, by foregrounding these familial instances either via innocuous songs or the media forms consumed within the domestic sphere, Saran frames the way families orient the child towards 'straightness' and reproductive futurity—expectations his queer self cannot live up to. However, despite featuring the familial space as intrinsically heteronormative, Saran resists defining it as merely repressive

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[19] Saran's usage of the clip from *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (1998) also points towards a larger tradition of queer cinephilic practices that employ and appropriate clips from the mainstream and often heteronormative culture (in this case, Bollywood) to understand and construct the self. See Hallas 185-192. Saran's own writings detail a fascination with filmic forms from all over the world and his quips on Bollywood stereotypes further confirm the placement of the aforementioned clip to argue about the industry's role in entrenching heteronormativity. Moreover, the title of *Pyaar Kiya To Darna Kya* (itself borrowed from the iconic song from the classic film *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960)), which translates to "Why fear when in love?" has itself been widely used as a slogan by LGBTQIA+ activists in India to argue for the legitimacy of queer love against societal homophobia.

of sexual discourses, as is often the case with the depiction of queer-of-color families. Instead, by focusing on the wanton and prurient interactions between his aunts and mother—including jokes about body lotions functioning as lubes or sausage/bananas as phallic symbols, his aunt's performance by shaking her buttocks in front of the camera—Saran presents the family itself as a somewhat queer space wherein sex and sexuality can be articulated and discussed.[20] Gopinath rightly suggests that in the texts of queer diaspora, " The heteronormative home…unwittingly generates homoeroticism" (15)—a thesis corroborated by the film's punctuative use of these instances. Hence, even as the familial places the pressure to conform to heteronormative ideals, Saran locates sites from wherein the signifying practices of the 'straight' family can themselves be queered, in a gesture that Gopinath recognizes as "remaking the space of home from within" (14).

[20] Using these instances, I previously argued about the queering of the familial space in the film in a profile on Saran (Pant "Nishit Saran"). However, the profile did not adequately address the ambivalence of the familial sphere within queer-of-color practices, that I describe here.

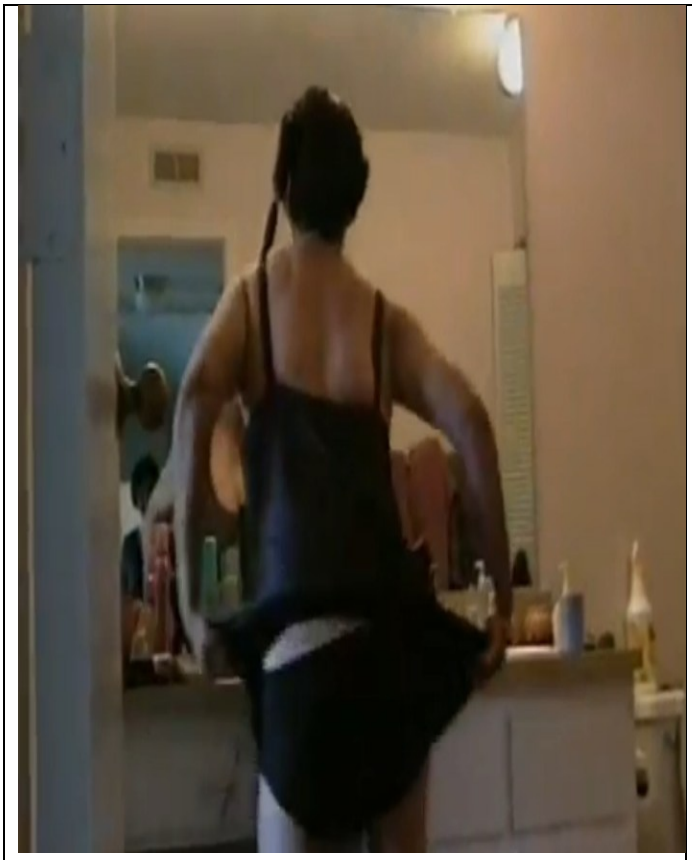

Figure 11-13 (*Summer in My Veins* 00:09:37, 00:10:37, 00:15:30): Rather than merely posit the home as a repressive heteronormative space, Saran inserts the playful and sexual repartee between his mother and aunt—whether it be his raunchy aunt suggestively eating a banana or shaking her buttocks for the camera. Insertion of these instances 'queers' the familial space, as Gopinath rightly suggests with regards to queer diasporic practices.

Further, as the narrative progresses, Saran details that his decision to come out to his mother is also informed by his choice to desist from the pattern of keeping secrets that runs in the family. Noting how his mother hid the news of her breast tumor until he visited her in India (visualized through footage from Saran's previous unreleased documentary *Fifty* [1998]), Saran draws a link between her skeletons in the closet to his own—hoping to put an end to this unhealthy business of keeping secrets from one another for the sake of comfort and ease. Hence, while the looming threat of testing positive necessitates Saran's decision to come out to his family, it is also informed by refusing to relegate 'queerness' to a clandestine affair similar to other family secrets. Finally, before she leaves, Saran comes out to his

mother on camera,[21] who, while deeming the announcement strange, still offers her support and asserts that despite his queerness, he will always remain her son.

By culminating the film by disclosing his sexuality and eschewing any mention of the possibility of testing positive following an unsafe sexual encounter, *Summer in My Veins* might gesture towards a more conservative assimilation of the queer subject within the 'accepting family.' However, Saran's confession of his sensual encounter with a seropositive man, later in the narrative, professes a complex sexual politics that refutes this adherence to homonormative ideals.[22] Even as the focus on HIV/AIDS remains peripheral to most of the narrative in *Summer in My Veins* and mostly forgotten with its ending sequence, Saran's retrospective evocation of his unsafe sexual encounter during a later point in the film adds to a critical discourse relevant to the AIDS politics of the nineties. During the latter half of the film, Saran, overwhelmed by the anxiety of coming out, sneaks out from his family's house in the night to head over to a local gay club. While hoping that it would alleviate his tensions, the excursion to the bar ends up reminding him of the unprotected sexual encounter he had months ago—the encounter that led to him getting tested for HIV in the first place. In a voiceover, Saran recounts meeting a guy named Troy in a gay club and eventually taking him home that night. Before they can get intimate, Troy reveals that he is HIV-positive, but Saran proceeds in the hope that as long as they use protection, he has nothing to worry about.

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[21] As I remarked in the previous chapter, the filming of the 'coming out' act on video again attests to the intrinsic capacity of the medium for confessions. During the middle of the trip, Saran makes up his mind to come out to his mother by handing the camera over to his cousin. However, without the video camera as a tool to mediate his experience, Saran informs in a voiceover that he feels wholly inadequate to directly talk to his mother: "…when I was trying to talk to her without a camera about something so important, I felt suddenly bare. I felt like I couldn't tell her anything without a layer between us." (*Summer* 00:25:30-00:25:44)

[22] Moreover, Saran's writings also suggests a more complex overview of the family structure than the reconciliatory politics of *Summer in My Veins* suggests. In his review of the works of playwright, Mahesh Dattani, Saran agreeing with Dattani's critique of the family unit, wrote, "…it is in the family that we face the deepest resistances to our freedom, it is in the family that our morals are most policed, it is in the family that our oppression is directly enforced in the false name of tradition" (21-22).

However, during the sexual encounter, Saran takes off the condom and continues without it. "I don't know why I did that. I wasn't even drunk. I mean, this was not a statistical question—this man had the virus! But somehow, I thought it was okay to have unprotected sex with him!" Saran's voiceover concludes by detailing this intimate encounter (*Summer* 00:21:12-00:21:26). Although Saran's detailed 'confession' of the unsafe sexual encounter might again run the risk of policing the sexual self that AIDS activists caution against, this explicit inclusion of the sexual encounter serves directly to counter the myths regarding AIDS and sexuality that began to proliferate during the nineties.

If, as suggested in the previous chapter, the early nineties marked a period of demoralizing times for PWAs, then the introduction of the cocktail drug therapies in the late nineties gave rise to new structures of feeling as the life-altering drugs transformed HIV from a death sentence to a manageable illness. Moreover, with this comparative normalization of HIV/AIDS and early fears about the virus somewhat quelled, the gay politics of the decade, rather than return to the sexual mores of a pre-AIDS era, began leaning towards homonormative ideals. Recognizing this political shift, Crimp, in his essay "Sex and Sensibility, or Sense and Sexuality," noted the media frenzy generated over the trial of Andrew Cunanan (a gay serial killer who had killed the fashion designer Gianni Versace) over the false rumor that Cunanan had tested positive for HIV (*Melancholia* 282). By charting the history of media's demonization of seropositive men, Crimp suggested that such rumors formed a part of a well-known stereotype of the killer homosexual that combined the myth of "gay men's sexual compulsion coupled with murderous irresponsibility" (*Melancholia* 283). Moreover, by noting how several gay authors and journalists of the time emulated and propagated these conservative sexual ideals, Crimp described the rise of the "restigmitization of AIDS" (*Melancholia* 287), which not only scapegoated seropositive gay men as wilfully transmitting the virus, but also sought to propagate an assimilatory version of

queerness pivoted around vilifying sexual promiscuity in favor of the demand for gay marriage (*Melancholia* 289-290). Similarly, in his monograph on the subculture of barebacking (i.e., the practice of having unprotected sex), Dean states the massive hysteria generated over the notion of unprotected sex amongst gay men was described as tantamount to either murder or mass suicide (2-3). This overt pathologization of the practice of barebacking, Dean argued, glossed over the complexities of men partaking in these activities by merely terming them as sexually irresponsible.

By including details of his sexual encounter with Troy, Saran subverts this myth of the irresponsible, deceiving, and murderous seropositive men that flourished during the time. In his recounting of the event, it is Troy who punctuates their lovemaking by announcing his serostatus and Saran who proceeds without a condom, affirming Shernoff's suggestion to resist posing the sole blame on positive individuals and viewing sex as an intimate negotiation between two people (284). More importantly, in his retrospective reflection of the incident, Saran himself remains skeptical of his choice to relinquish the condom for unprotected sex, "I don't know why I did that. I wasn't even drunk!" By stressing the ambiguity of one's sexual choices and refusing to resolve them by logical reasoning, the film suggests the inadequacy of the notions of personal responsibility by showcasing, as Crimp rightly claims of such transgressions, that "sex is not amenable to rational will" (*Melancholia* 299). If conservatives during the closing of the decade blamed gay men for being responsible for testing positive in the age of excess information about safe sex (Crimp *Melancholia* 287), Saran's engagement in barebacking hints towards the limitations of knowledge and discourses in regulating sexual acts, which as Dean argues are permeated by the nonrational (32).[23] Hence, by refusing to blame the self or the other or seeking rational explanations for

[23] Theorists of barebacking cultures stress on viewing it as constructed of multifaceted practices and norms and argue about refraining to characterize these acts from a mere psychiatric lens. Shernoff, suggests that people partaking in barebacking practices might be motivated by several factors: "…loneliness, being HIV-positive, having unmet intimacy needs, feeling alienated from the gay community, being in love, and a craving for deeper

barebacking, Saran not only offers a counter-testimony to the conservative codes of the time but further complicates the ostensibly reconciliatory appeal in the film's denouement.

If coming out of the closet and getting accepted by his family towards the end of the film signal a heteronormative absorption of the queer subject, then Saran's confessional account about fucking without a condom troubles this association of the good gay son. Dean suggests that contrary to the rhetoric by conservatives to present the image of the responsible homosexual for the public acceptance of queerness, barebacking positions itself against such norms and thereby professes an 'antihomonormative' stance (9). By refusing to adhere to the positive images demanded by assimilatory politics, a barebacker further distorts such sanitized associations: "…not only am I not the good heterosexual that I was supposed to be but I'm also not the good homosexual who always practices safe sex that I'm assumed to be" (Dean 10-11).

Although seemingly a short detour from the narrative's inevitable culmination in coming out, Saran's confessional monologue, replete with references to his 'irresponsible' behavior, disturbs the project of assimilating within the family as the good homosexual. Even as the film ends with its protagonist coming out and testing negative for the virus, Saran inserts a tongue-in-cheek epilogue before the credits, writing, "Now I just need to figure out how I am going to show this movie to my mother" (00:38:25-00:38:28). Since showing the film to the mother would involve exposing her to his sexual liaison (as she would be privy to the confession via the narrative) and thereby distorting her image of the good gay son, Saran teases the radical possibility of integrating his confession to challenge homonormative ideals and expectations in the familial sphere. In a film brimming with ambivalences, this inclusion

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intimacy and trust" (72). Dean, on the other hand, views barebacking as not merely relegated to the queer community—and instead argues that it be viewed as "an experience of unfettered intimacy, of overcoming the boundaries between persons, that is far from exclusive to this subculture or, indeed, to queer sexuality" (2). Further, in contrast to the overt pathologization of the practice, Dean suggests that in instances, engaging in barebacking can even suggest "new opportunities for kinship, because sharing viruses has come to be understood as a mechanism of alliance, a way of forming consanguinity with strangers or friends" (9).

only further queers and complicates notions of identity, kinship, and sexuality in AIDS discourses than the film's hitherto classification as a mere coming-out documentary. Further, bringing these instances into focus also allows a rethinking of professing solidarity with radical queer politics in the age of AIDS.

Conclusion: Solidarities Beyond Serostatus

As outlined in my previous chapter, the politics around AIDS activism as a collective enterprise justifies the charge of solipsistic focus against Saran's first-person documentary, and I do not intend to argue against such a reading. While the late nineties, with the introduction of cocktail therapy, would significantly alter the classification of HIV as a death sentence in North America, the mounting deaths in South Africa, India, and other nations in the Global South would continue to escalate in both heterosexual and queer populations. Saran's sense of relief towards his own negative status in the film's ending sequence then might be seen as a limiting choice on his part to move beyond the myopic concerns of the self, especially as the pandemic and its ravages continue to haunt the most marginalized. However, to merely disregard the film on the basis of such negation would efface the other ways in which it professes a queer affinity that is not necessarily divorced from the AIDS discourses of the time. As an intercultural text, *Summer in My Veins* navigates the fraught terrain of coming out under the shadow of AIDS that resists the monolithic overview of the family as a mere homophobic space. In contrast to other AIDS disclosure narratives where the white gay subject vacillates between either being rejected or accepted by the nuclear heteronormative family, the ambivalent address of Saran's film challenges such dichotomy. Further, by narrating his brief dalliance with a seropositive partner amidst the hysteria

generated around barebacking and conservative ideals, Saran subverts the trope of "AIDS confessions" to resist the homonormative call for sexual responsibility.

Saran died in 2002 at the young age of twenty-six in Delhi—this premature demise of a young gay filmmaker cannot help but raise an association with HIV/AIDS even as the cause of his death was a brutal car accident, killing him and four of his friends. Following his return to India, Saran embarked on a prolific journalistic career, actively writing against Section 377, an archaic colonial law that criminalized homosexuality in the country until 2018. "Section 377 officially sanctions the public disgust and hatred of homosexuals in the country. It makes me, in the eyes of the law, a criminal subject to imprisonment for life...It effects *[sic]* a whole gamut of civil and criminal laws that deny gay persons the rights that heterosexuals take for granted every day. And you say that my sexuality is a private matter," he wrote in a polemic piece arguing for the politicization of sexual matters in a bid to change draconian laws (16-17). In his vision of queer emancipation, Saran professed a radical vision that was trans-inclusive, cognizant of caste and class politics in the country, contemptuous of the rise of fascism, and, more importantly, argued for a refusal to relegate sexuality to a private matter. With *Summer in My Veins*, Saran not only sought to film his coming out as a means to ensure this politics of visibility but, with its unabashed evocation of sexuality, also argued for the necessity of queer intimacy to challenge both hetero and homonormative ideals. Watching and analyzing *Summer in My Veins* by recognizing the racial, temporal, and sexual histories it is constituted of allows one to locate the film within radical queer politics germinated out of the AIDS crisis. Similar to Fung's film, *Summer in My Veins* seeks to profess an alternate mode of solidarity with AIDS politics in personal filmmaking that moves beyond the serostatus of its authors to navigate the ways the queer self is embroiled within familial, sexual and social politics fostered by the pandemic. Bringing these instances into focus troubles the ending of the film's insinuation of AIDS as an absent cause forgotten for

reconciliatory politics—and suggests a panoramic overview militating against easy resolutions.

Chapter 3. Contemporary Crisis(es): *Meteor* (2023) and The Current Geopolitics of AIDS

Already no stranger to controversies for its contentious narrative and harsh examination of American high school life, the concluding season of Netflix's teen drama *13 Reasons Why* (2017-2020) again came into renewed scrutiny following the airing of its series finale. This time, the cause of this widespread furor was the death of a beloved character in the show, Justin Foley (essayed by queer actor Brandon Flynn). In the said episode, Justin collapses on the floor during his prom night and is immediately rushed to the hospital. The cause of his withered and aggravated state is revealed to be HIV, having advanced to full-blown AIDS due to his troubled past as both a sex worker and an intravenous drug user. Shortly after this grim pronouncement, an emaciated Justin, with his body marked by KS lesions, dies in the hospital surrounded by his friends and chosen family—the archetypal deathbed shot in the hospital reverting to the heydays of AIDS media of the nineties, best epitomized by films like *Philadelphia* (1993). Unsurprisingly, the anachronism of this image and the narrative did not go unnoticed, propelling think pieces from various factions of queer outlets. In a particularly caustic piece for *Plus Magazine*, Taylor Henderson called out the show's writers for the dull-witted implausibility of a character dying of 'AIDS' in 2020 and for milking the complex realities of HIV for narrative sensationalism (Henderson "*13 Reasons Why*"). A recurring point of contention amidst this online outrage against the show was a common consensus about the absurdity of a character dying of AIDS in the new millennium, especially in an age of cocktail therapy and PrEP.

This backlash obviously stemmed from a larger tradition in queer cultural practices to critique the ways in which narratives often ascribed an expendable status to seropositive individuals. In his early study of the genre of the "AIDS Movie," Hart had ascribed this

prevalent trope of the death of HIV-positive individuals in Hollywood films as a part of a lineage of erasing 'otherness' in melodramas, wherein the seropositive individual "must ultimately die to restore the patriarchal social order through the eradication of their 'deviant' otherness" (30). While the critiques of *13 Reasons Why* drew attention to this erasure as an insidious and irresponsible feat of representation in the contemporary, the recurring complaints about the implausibility of death from HIV/AIDS opened a whole new can of worms. Despite UNAIDS's recent proclamation about more than one million people getting infected every year with HIV and more than half a million dying because of AIDS-related complications ("Global HIV & AIDS statistics"), conservative gay pundits in the States had announced 'the end' of AIDS as early as the late nineties with the advent of cocktail therapy in the West. Responding to one such elegy of the AIDS plague by Andrew Sullivan in 1996, Crimp had retorted by calling out such pronouncements about the end of AIDS as wholly incognizant of global disparities. "…he takes his own experience of the development of protease inhibitors not as the experience of a privileged subject—white, male, living in the United States, covered by health insurance—but as a universal subject," wrote Crimp of Sullivan's ignorant proclamations (*Melancholia* 10). Two decades after Crimp's acerbic rebuttal, the AIDS crisis seems to have further dwindled, both in the States and globally, although, as the aforementioned statistics suggest, it remains a global calamity—still infecting and still killing.

By highlighting these statistics and un-announcing the end of AIDS, I do not mean to insinuate that *13 Reasons Why* as a text implies its character's death as a narrative necropolitical critique of these disparities of the pandemic. To do so would be to condone its adherence to archaic tropes and lack of awareness about the current demographics and discourses on AIDS. However, by borrowing the discourse around its character's death due to AIDS, I seek to probe the representational strategies on AIDS, especially from a transnational

framework. If, as critiques of the show widely underscored, death due to AIDS remains an incongruous implausibility in the contemporary, what does it mean to witness narratives and accounts where the equation of AIDS=death still holds? Using these markers to underscore the fraught geopolitics of AIDS, this brief chapter seeks to focus on Atefeh Khademolreza's recent experimental short, *Meteor* (2023). Employing the film as both a paradigm of the contemporary global crisis as well as a means to culminate the arguments underlined in this thesis, the chapter analyses the grim formal and narrative elements in the film as a means to rethink the distribution of the AIDS crisis as it is informed by cultural and social milieus beyond the frameworks of Western AIDS politics. Finally, by noting its intersectional evocation of solidarities and justice, the chapter concludes by rethinking notions of AIDS activist struggles first envisioned by ACT UP and other AIDS coalitions—in an attempt to bring the arguments of this thesis full circle.

Ordinary Crisis and Personal Losses in *Meteor* (2023)

Funded and screened as a part of the *Viral Interventions*, a York University research-creation project headed by filmmaker/activist John Greyson and researcher Sarah Flicker, *Meteor* (2023) is a short experimental feature by Iranian-Canadian artist Atefeh Khademolreza exploring the loss of her best friend against a tumultuous period in Iran. Using rotoscoping animation to cover real-time activist footage for narrative cohesion and surreal imageries to underscore the filmmaker's subjectivity, *Meteor* forms a part of a lineage of the rise in autoethnographic storytelling in Iranian documentaries. Locating the rise of subjectivity in the works of Iranian artists (both in the country and the diaspora), Lotfalian clubs these works under 'autoethnography,' wherein the filmmaker's personal accounts reflect a subjective overview of the post-revolution society (127). Tracing the origin of this

mode to renowned auteur Abbas Kiarostami, Lotfalian stresses the way these documentaries highlight the relationality of the self within the larger society (128). Employing a similar autoethnographic modality, Khademolreza (who was mentored by Kiarostami) frames the story of her personal loss against the ongoing "Women, Life, Freedom" protests, which were spurred by the state-murder of Mahsa Amini over compulsory hijab mandates.

Similar to most of the videos and texts discussed in this thesis (*Silverlake Life*, *Danny*, *Sea in the Blood,* amongst others), *Meteor*, while situated in the present, is retrospective in its narrative. Khademolreza, as the film's narrator, reaches back into the memories to remember a fond friendship with her gay friend, Amin. Using an epistolary address, the narrator's voiceover commences the film with "Dear Amin…"—laying the ground for the subsequent narration. Corresponding this voiceover is the image of the narrator seated inside a rumbling subway on her way to attend the "Women, Life, Freedom" marches in Canada—the motif of a journey (both literal and psychological) forming an intimate part of the film's spatiality. Remarking on the current totalitarian regime in Iran, the narrator contemplates the despotic violence wrought by the state against protestors—this rumination is accompanied by real-life footage (drawn over via rotoscoping) of intrepid protestors from the marches. From the social media reels of women burning their hijabs and cutting their hair in solidarity to the television footage of activists burning down police cars and being battered by the tyrannical military—the film animates the struggle of militant anti-state protests using a montage of clips from varying formats and sources. The use of rotoscoping over the actual footage further lends an uncanny and shaky feeling to the montage, underscoring the dire urgency of these struggles. This employment of animation via rotoscoping and other visual techniques also runs in opposition to the politics of visibility central to AIDS media. In a personal interview conducted with the filmmaker, she emphasized the need to conceal the identities of its subjects via animation to shield them from the threat of the despotic state (Khademolreza).

Compared to the liveness of the previous videos discussed, rotoscoping becomes both an aesthetic and political strategy to accentuate a social milieu where the strategies of visibility as emancipation don't hold and, in turn, might prove fatal for the subjects involved on screen.

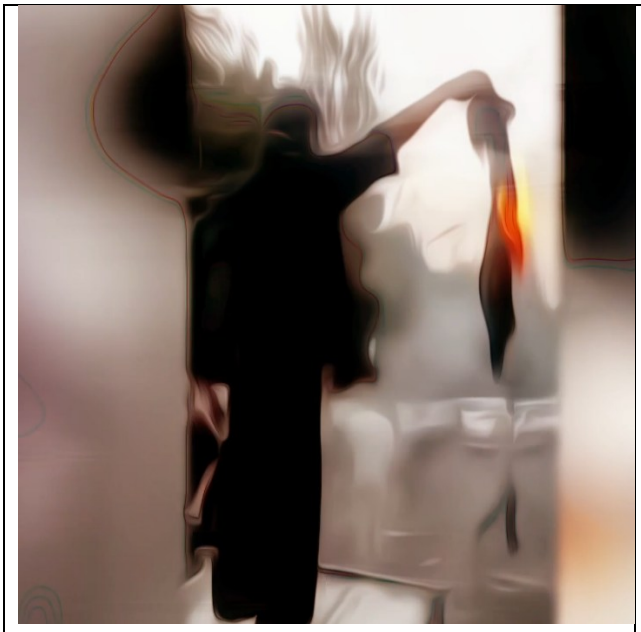

Figure 14-16 (*Meteor*, 00:01:43, 00:02:26, 00:02:32): Stills from the film. Khademolreza inserts actual footage from the various protests in the country—including women burning their hijabs, instances of police brutality, and online clips of women cutting their hair as a means of solidarity and protest. The use of rotoscoping renders the footage extremely chaotic and shaky, underscoring a sense of urgency.

The narrative continues with the protagonist thinking about her home country and the autocratic government at play, which takes her back to her intimate friendship with Amin, whom she left to migrate to the West. The narrator wonders about Amin's decision to stay in a country where homosexuality is punishable by death—as the film visualizes this grim suggestion with an animated image of the gallows. Immediately following this frame is a close-up shot of two boots hanging in midair, apparently hinting at Amin's grim fate at the hand of the homophobic state. However, the Kuleshovian implication of this juxtaposition turns out to be misleading—revealing that the two boots floating were from an earlier memory of the narrator and Amin sitting near the edge of a building's roof. Nonetheless, the dire insinuation suggested before the revelation further underscores the precarious positionality of queer individuals in brutal social milieus.

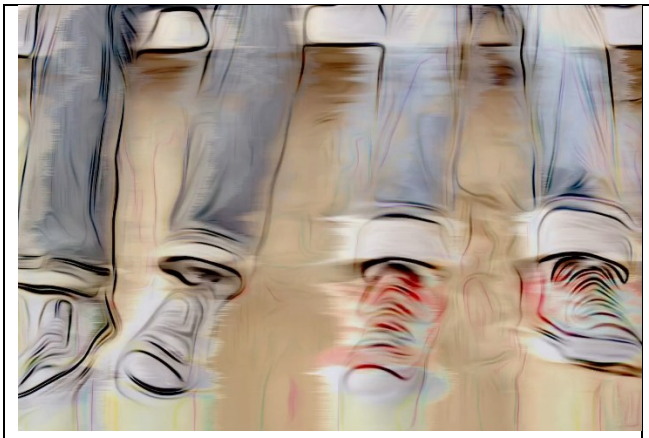

Figure 17-19 (00:03:05, 00:03:13. 00:03:30): By juxtaposing the image of the gallows with of a shoe hanging, the film hints at the possibility of such state-sanctioned murders, even as the image of the shoe turns out to be from an earlier memory of the two friends sitting near the edge of a roof.

The narrator reveals how Amin had confided to her about falling in love with a man and engaging in a sexual relationship. Continuing her address to Amin, the narrator reveals that she also had a secret (symbolized through sewed lips) about her own romantic feelings for her gay friend, which were never reciprocated. Despite her unrequited love, the narrator still wishes for Amin's well-being and advises him to get tested for HIV. Fearing that getting tested and the high possibility of turning out positive would imply being outed and thereby being violently ostracised by friends and family (owing to the primitive association of AIDS with homosexuality), Amin shrugs off the narrator's concerns repeatedly. Later, the narrator has a surreal nightmare where she imagines Amin as a large sun-like orb providing warmth and comfort to her. However, later, an enormous meteor strikes the sphere, wreaking havoc, depicted in a series of infernal and apocalyptic images. Eventually, the bright red sun is engulfed by destruction and reduced to a frigid and lifeless rock—the image of this grey orb slowly morphing into virus-like bodies taking over the frame. After remembering this prophetic vision, the narrator reveals that Amin died thereafter. Moreover, his family concealed the cause of his death as COVID-19, a disease bereft of the charge of sexual shame associated with HIV/AIDS. A grief-stricken narrator is left to wonder why her friend negated

her persistent advice to get tested and seek help—a conundrum the film poses as its central query.

If the discourse around *13 Reasons Why* emphasized the impossibility of death due to AIDS in an age of surplus knowledge and amenities, *Meteor* offers a counter-queer necropolitics of such utopic formulations. The editors of *AIDS and the Distribution of Crisis* argue that the notion of "AIDS obsolescence" (as was often remarked during the discourse on the television show) ends up negating the modern geopolitics of the crisis as it continues to plague the lives of the most marginalized in the Global South, especially queer and trans people of color (Cheng et al. xviii). Since these subjects already live on the margins—perpetually affected by inequities borne out of global capitalism and colonization—their diagnosis and consequent suffering become 'ordinary,' and their subsequent deaths go unrecognized (Cheng et al. 4). Divorced from their previous histories of activism and mobilization, AIDS in the contemporary remains not just a crisis but a "global distribution of networked crises" (Cheng et al. 17)—intertwined with legacies of racism, colonization, and economic disparities. This ordinary banality of AIDS, where the effects of the crisis cannot simply be mitigated by access to drugs or healthcare, also unsettles the previous linkages of AIDS and identity as had been previously delineated in activist communities.

In an attempt to oppose the malicious claim of AIDS being intrinsic to homosexuality, AIDS activists of the time had often stressed the credo of "HIV/AIDS is not who you are but what you do"—challenging the assertions of fundamentalists linking AIDS to being queer (Cheng et al. 18). By asserting that AIDS is "what you do," this formulation emphasized that anyone could get HIV from engaging in risk-taking practices. However, in the contemporary, queer-of-color scholar Kang-Nguyễn offers a pessimistic inversion of this credo, arguing that "HIV is not just about what you do but who you are" (Kang-Nguyễn in Cheng et al. 213). With this provocative assertion, Kang-Nguyễn refutes the earlier platitude about HIV only

affecting those who engage in unsafe practices ("what you do"). Instead, in the contemporary era, it is one's social positionality ("who you are!") that dictates the likelihood of being exposed to the virus and, more importantly, accessing care and resources necessary for managing good health after exposure. Hence, in an age where the ordinariness of the virus fuses into the life of the disenfranchised, HIV/AIDS becomes inextricably tied to one's marginalized position.

It is amidst this framework that Khademolreza probes into the death of her friend. Amin's refusal to get tested for HIV despite being at risk stems not from a sense of reckless irresponsibility but rather from his precarious position as a queer man in a developing country ruled over by an authoritarian regime. With the overarching fear of getting tested implying the risk of being outed and thereby risking oneself to familial and societal violence, Amin's already limited options militate against seeking help and the subsequent treatment needed to evade the progression of the virus to AIDS. Moreover, in a society murderously hostile to queer discourses and desire, the very awareness of negotiating safe-sex practices remains unavailable to subjects already living on the margins. Hence, affirming Kang-Nguyễn's assertion, Amin dies not because of AIDS but because he is *queer*—his social identity renders him increasingly vulnerable to the virus and its aftermath. Khademolreza's earlier juxtaposition of the gallows to Amin's hanging shoes again comes into play here—even if Amin escapes the carceral and executory violence of a despotic regime, he is not immune to the homophobia and hostility sanctioned by it.

While *Meteor* frames an increasingly personal narrative of individual loss, the 'personal' here does not correspond to the neat public/private binary that I have outlined in the previous chapters. Moreover, by drawing attention to the epidemiological geopolitics of HIV/AIDS, *Meteor* disturbs the assumptions outlined in Western AIDS discourses. In places where marginalized populations already remain susceptible to multiple forms of violence,

AIDS continues to kill even as it remains invisible (disguised as COVID-19 in Amin's case) and, more insidiously, *ordinary*—a crisis happening and killing in silence.

Conclusion

Since most of this thesis has pivoted around ACT UP in an attempt to argue about the status of these personal documentaries as both in conversation and subversion of the group's radical (and also limiting) politics, it is only fitting that it concludes thinking about the coalition and the questions of AIDS activism in the contemporary. With its indefatigable spirit and influential tactics, ACT UP laid grounds for a pioneering struggle to pressure an apathetic bureaucracy and scientific community to gain access to medications and treatments—underscoring the urgency of this battle with disruptive protests and activist practices. In an age where such access to drugs has already been achieved (although who can access such treatments still remains a pressing concern), what implications does it hold for global AIDS action? In its final few minutes, *Meteor* intimates a contemporary vision of this activism.

After mourning the loss of her friend, the narrator in *Meteor* reminisces about her fond memories of Amin, especially his graceful dance moves in pointed stilettos and the joy his vivacious personality brought to her life. Realizing that these cherished memories will always keep Amin alive for her, the narrator ceases her aching ruminations to come back to the present as the train comes to a halt. As she steps out of the subway to march towards the ongoing "Women, Life, Freedom" protests, the narrator remembers her friend for the final time, promising to fight in his memory: "Dear Amin, I will continue to fight…for you…for myself…And for those who, like us…have been deprived of their right to be themselves" (00:07:32-00:08:05).

While Hilderbrand, as I summarized in the first chapter, argued about the ways in which viewing queer archives of the past (like ACT UP videos) could regenerate a

revolutionary spirit against contemporary challenges (313), *Meteor* refrains from such nostalgia. By integrating social media footage, reels, and montages of ongoing solidarity protests in Iran and worldwide into its narrative, Khademolreza underscores the *present* as itself an ample source of catapulting oneself into revolution. Since AIDS as a global crisis remains informed by intersecting lines of oppression, then a fight against AIDS remains not merely gaining access to drugs or establishing testing centers but rather an onerous process of rebelling against such tyrannical structures. In a racialized and capitalist social milieu predicated on daily violence against queer, trans, and people of color, a fight against AIDS would remain incomplete without total emancipation from such inequities. However, this is not to suggest that the pioneering legacy of ACT UP and its various factions remains obsolete even as the demographics and discourses around the pandemic have undergone a drastic shift since the revolutionary group first took to the streets. With the final shot of *Meteor* involving the zealot feminist protestors raging against the oppressive regime, Khademolreza suggests that despite the necessary political distinction from the earlier protests, the central credo from ACT UP's most famous slogan still rings true, i.e., to "TURN ANGER, FEAR, AND GRIEF INTO ACTION."

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