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Representing AIDS' Invisible Subjects: Iris De La Cruz and the Historical Intersectional-Recovery Imperative

Abstract: There is a particular impetus to consider the history of the US AIDS epidemic through an intersectional lens, given that the inequities structuring the early years of the crisis continue to be reproduced in the popular imagination of its history. Iris De La Cruz (1953-1991) is often mobilized in this context as an example of the diversity of AIDS activism as well as of the epidemic's disproportionate toll on marginalized groups. However, this framing, though well-intentioned, positions De La Cruz's AIDS diagnosis as the entry point to her life and historical significance. Further, by identifying marginalized women with their serostatus, it privileges oversimplified associations over self-identification and historical specificity, emptying the lives of women with AIDS of individuality. Overall, narratives of De La Cruz as an AIDS fighter, activist, and simply as a woman with AIDS disregard the rest of her vibrant life and reveal nothing about her that could not have been said in advance.

Keywords: Iris De La Cruz; HIV/AIDS; Representation; Women's History; US History

Die unsichtbaren Subjekte von AIDS repräsentieren: Iris De La Cruz und der historische Imperativ der intersektionalen Wiederherstellung

Zusammenfassung: Es ist besonders wichtig, die Geschichte der US-amerikanischen AIDS-Epidemie aus einem intersektionalen Blickwinkel zu betrachten, da die Ungleichheiten, die die frühen Jahre der Krise beherrschten, in der populären Imagination über ihre Geschichte weiterhin reproduziert werden. Iris De La Cruz (1953-1991) wird in diesem Zusammenhang oft als Beispiel für die Vielfältigkeit des AIDS-Aktivismus sowie für die unverhältnismäßigen Auswirkungen der Epidemie auf marginalisierte Gruppen angeführt. Diese Darstellung ist zwar gut gemeint, macht aber die AIDS-Diagnose von De La Cruz zum Ausgangspunkt für ihr Leben und ihre historische Bedeutung. Indem marginalisierte Frauen über ihren Serostatus identifiziert werden, werden vereinfachende Diskurse über ihre Selbstidentifikation und historische Besonderheit gestellt, wodurch das Leben von Frauen mit AIDS seiner Individualität beraubt wird. Insgesamt lassen Erzählungen über De La Cruz als AIDS-Kämpferin, Aktivistin und einfach als Frau mit AIDS den Rest ihres pulsierenden Lebens außer Acht und enthüllen nichts über sie, was nicht schon vorher hätte gesagt werden können.

Schlagwörter: Iris De La Cruz; HIV/AIDS; Repräsentation; Frauengeschichte; US-Amerikanische Geschichte.

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Introduction: Intersectional History and Narratives of the US AIDS Epidemic

From the AIDS epidemic's earliest days, activists combined frameworks of race, gender, sexuality and class in order to conceptualize the crisis and advocate for HIV positive people (Juhasz/Kerr 2018: 92; Treichler 1999: 32; Patton 1985; Cerullo et al. 1987). Such an intersectional approach is integral to both understanding and confronting an epidemic which continues to disproportionately impact multiply-marginalized communities and globally dispossessed countries (see e.g. Bredström 2006; Biehl 2004). The popular historiography of AIDS in the US, however, has been critiqued for its focus on white gay men – or even straight men – to the exclusion of other groups (Kerr 2016b: 86; Cheng 2016: 73; Schulman 2021: 12-16). The particular political and ethical urgency of doing intersectional history in the context of the AIDS epidemic arises in part from stigma and deadly neglect which, while affecting all HIV positive people, do not do so equally. Humanizing histories may not only reveal but also counteract such indifference, by insisting that the lives of all people with AIDS are significant and grievable, in an ongoing demand for "public recognition of traumatic experience" (Cvetkovich 2003: 160; Kerr 2016b: 86; Pastore 1993: 20). Interventions into cultural narratives enact political and material change, "collectively sustain[ing] the living and the dead" (Cheng 2016: 74; Crimp 2004: 20). Creating a public record of the AIDS epidemic, then, which addresses the differential experiences of HIV positive people, opens up opportunities for oppositional politics and even survival: the recovery of those left not only for dead, but also forgotten (Mehuron 1997: 168f.; Gill-Peterson 2013: 296). However, recuperative historical projects are complicated by the fact that there is a relative lack of archival material about the experiences of HIV positive women, people of color, IV drug users, and/or sex workers, for example (Cvetkovich 2003: 158). Many of those who died in the epidemic, precisely because of their earlier deaths conditioned by overlapping mistreatments, have untellable stories, or only become legible in the archive in their criminalization (Kerr 2016b: 83). In this context, as a single mother and former sex worker who struggled with addiction and was arrested multiple times, Iris De La Cruz constitutes an exceptional historical figure, whose archival presence may enable a history of the epidemic that attends to the lives and significance of its most marginalized actors.

Interviews with or about De La Cruz, as well as her writing, are held in numerous traditional archives, such as the Brooklyn AIDS Oral History Project, the PWA Coalition records, Gay Men's Health Crisis records, and AIDS Activist Videotape Collection at the New York Public Library. She is also archived through memorial projects, instigated both by those who knew her personally and those who did not, from an AIDS Memorial Quilt panel and a support center for HIV positive women founded in 1993 bearing her name, to recent short videos with small audiences (Bernstein 1993; Blake 2012; gregster1977 2017; Holness 2017; laxton 2011; Robbins 2019). Her writing is collected in several anthologies of essays about the AIDS epidemic, and significant material is even available digitally (Banzhaf et al. 1990: 131-134; Bull 2003: 189-192; Howe/Klein 1995: 40-45; Rudd/Taylor 1992: 108-116).

Extensive historical work has been done on the basis of these materials, from the 1990s to the present. De La Cruz has played a recurrent role in historical, cultural, and political projects since the late aughts in particular, a period Ted Kerr has termed "the AIDS Crisis Revisitation" (2016a). Some aspects of this Revisitation present AIDS activism as it never was, that is to say predominately white, male, and middle class; while others push back on these narratives, explicitly calling attention to the role of women and people of color. "The Revisitation is powerful," Kerr writes, "because it shares stories about the AIDS crisis that inform the world we live in now," stories which "would otherwise be lost" (ibid.). De La Cruz may in part be such a compelling figure because her extensive archivization allows historians to counteract gentrified narratives of AIDS activism; but, counterintuitively, the assumption undergirding her inclusion in many of these projects is that she, and others like her, have been forgotten.

In this paper, I analyze the historiography of De La Cruz, in which I include not only scholarly books and articles but also dissertations, news and magazine articles, interviews, YouTube videos, and other creative projects which purport to historical realism. I consider her own writing and interviews only in how they have been framed by others, for example in anthologies or archival collections, because my focus is on how others tell her story. It may be somewhat incongruous to refer to the set taken up here as a historiography of De La Cruz as, with few exceptions, she is mentioned only briefly, sometimes in just a paragraph or even a footnote, in projects with other primary concerns, most often the early AIDS epidemic or sex worker rights movement.[1] Further, collecting these disparate sources together presents the overarching narrative they construct as more cohesive than it would otherwise appear. Nevertheless, taken as a whole, these sources do create a certain narrative about De La Cruz which, though by no means without contradiction, remains for the most part strikingly similar in its scope and emphasis. In this paper I ask what kind of work this narrativization does, and consider the arguments implicit in its patterns of inclusion and exclusion. My critique is directed neither at the truth nor the political value of any individual text, but rather at the set of historical stories about De La Cruz accessible in the present which they together inevitably produce. The surprises and paradoxes of De La Cruz's historicization – that there is such a wide breadth of material about her, but often little depth; that she is so often taken up in histories that strive to be critical, revisionist, and explicitly political; that in their writing, these histories' implicit claim to urgency is undermined – make it a useful case study in considering the impetus to write a more intersectional history of the US AIDS epidemic, as well as the effects of 'recovering' a figure primarily through their evidentiary value to a predetermined historical argument, even if that argument takes as its premise their particularity and significance.

My analysis is informed by my first, chance encounter with De La Cruz, through a digitized episode of her 1980s monthly radio show "Street Walkin'

Blues". Like many others, I quickly became enamored with her irreverence, quick and dirty wit, and the ease with which she handled heckling callers in her low, Brooklyn-inflected voice (De La Cruz 1980). As an M.A. student, I set out to write a microhistory of her life and involvement in a staggering number of social and cultural movements of the time: the late Civil Rights Movement, hippie and anti-war camps, sex worker rights, the Lower East Side art scene, and AIDS advocacy. It quickly became clear that I would fail at this: De La Cruz's archivization and historicization as first and foremost a person with AIDS overshadows whatever else she might have been or done, which, at least when writing in a historical mode, can be hinted at but not centered. Though there are far more sources about De La Cruz, each a thoughtful if often brief tribute to her life, than I, paranoidly, expected to find, I remain frustrated by the martyr narrative they collectively produce that dodges and so devalues mundanity; in which there is no space for her to be 'just' a mother, drug user, EMT, a rebellious teen painting her principal as life-sized Hitler in the school hallway, an art student down on rent with a dramatic love life and an incredible voice for radio (cf. Sedgwick 2003: 123-151).

The historiography of De La Cruz reflects the moral imperative to memorialize the lives lost to AIDS as well as to attend to the overlapping necropolitical inequities that have been obscured in the dominant cultural imagination of AIDS in the contemporary imagination. Yet, in this contextualization of De La Cruz's life and work almost exclusively within the epidemic, any entrance point to her historical significance is routed through her death. Further, in presenting her as evidence that AIDS activists weren't all white men, this historiography writes her and other marginalized HIV positive women as fundamentally interchangeable. Though no source can do this on its own, taken together the historiography (in which, of course, this article now participates) traps De La Cruz in oversimplified narratives of the AIDS crisis, which conflate women's serostatus, race, and experiences of sex work, drug use, and incarceration. By using De La Cruz to write a history of the US AIDS epidemic which recuperates its more marginalized actors and victims, though undoubtedly an integral project in general, she becomes merely a means to a foregone end, at the expense of a particularized consideration of her vibrant and multifaceted life.

Iris De La Cruz as an AIDS Fighter

The overarching narrative that emerges from the historiography is of De La Cruz as an "AIDS fighter" – an activist, writer, and leader who, though she would eventually succumb to her illness, refused to do so quietly (Wolff 1991). This story begins around 1987 with her AIDS diagnosis and ends in 1991 with her death, albeit with occasional flashbacks to 1980 and her work with Prostitutes of New York (PONY). The setting for this story is the AIDS epidemic, which is presented as both De La Cruz's prime as an extraordinary activist, and her downfall leading to her tragic death. Though De La Cruz did contribute extensively to AIDS work as a writer, activist, support group facilitator, and educator, the devaluation of other aspects of her life ultimately routes her claim to historical significance through AIDS and makes her death the primary entrance point to her life.

Many of the accounts of De La Cruz's life in the historiography begin after her 1987 AIDS diagnosis and tell a story of a "pioneer" for women with AIDS (Noe 2019: 38; cf. Hedger 2018: 106; Arriola 2014). De La Cruz's writing in three anthologies from or about the AIDS epidemic naturally frame her first and foremost as a woman with AIDS. Similarly, all of the physical archival collections holding material about De La Cruz are from or about the AIDS epidemic, and the interviews and writing they hold are for the most part from 1987 or later, facilitating and reinforcing the historiographic tendency to consider De La Cruz's life only after her AIDS diagnosis. If the first thirty-five years of De La Cruz's life are mentioned at all, they are often contextualized as serving to prepare her for her ultimate role as an AIDS activist. For example, Loebl writes that De La Cruz married at "17, long before she had developed any of her talents," and later, "while she was hustling on Third Avenue, […] wrote columns on drugs and sex for men's magazines." This prepared her to "use her pen and energy battling AIDS" until her illness "suddenly transformed this vibrant woman into a tortured creature waiting at death's door" (Loebl 2007: 49-51). De La Cruz's obituaries are outliers in their detail, describing her as charismatic, irreverent, and hilarious, blunt and unashamed about her many struggles, a leader in sex worker activism, and a writer and public speaker whose popularity turned her into a local celebrity. Nevertheless, as obituaries they are occasioned by her death, and like other texts also center on the last four years of her life. The New York Times, for example, entitled their article "AIDS Fighter's Spirit is Recalled," and summarized her contributions with a corresponding quote from her brother: "AIDS produced her finest moments" (Wolff 1991; cf. Bell 1991; Anon 1991).

De La Cruz's position as a spokesperson for Prostitutes of New York (PONY) in 1980 is one of the only things about her life prior to 1987 commonly mentioned in the historiography. Rachel West notes De La Cruz's role in the organization in an article on the U.S. PROStitutes Collective[2], the only source I have found which does not mention her AIDS diagnosis at all (Delacoste/Alexander 1998: 280). In contrast, other histories of sex worker organizing that bring up De La Cruz expand their timeframe, foregrounding information about her AIDS work and death, despite the fact that the books are otherwise predominately concerned with the history of sex work in the US (Chateauvert 2013: 99f.; Ditmore 2011: 110, 139). Practical considerations may account for these authors' choice to source their information on De La Cruz from texts primarily concerned with AIDS, given that AIDS activism in New York has been documented and archived to a greater extent than the sex worker rights movement. And, in the other direction, some texts, such as her obituaries, ground the skills and perspective De La Cruz brought to her AIDS work in her prior experiences with PONY and as a sex worker. It makes sense to discuss these aspects of her life in relation to one another because, as Melinda Chateauvert points out, women with AIDS were assumed to be prostitutes, and prostitutes were assumed to be more likely to be HIV positive (Chateauvert 2013: 83). Further, the histories of queer and sex worker rights movements are impossible to separate, and together mounted a highly organized grassroots response to the epidemic (Andrews 2014: 41). However, while presenting De La Cruz as a hero of the fights for both sex workers and people with AIDS, and demonstrating that she brought insights from the former to the latter, the majority of these histories privilege her AIDS diagnosis and work as the central fact of her life, even those otherwise primarily concerned with histories of sex work.

A notable exception to the tendency to write De La Cruz as, in the first instance, an AIDS fighter is Jason Baumann's 2016 conference presentation on her engagement with Afro-Caribbean and particularly Puerto Rican theologies and traditions. Marty Fink also writes about De La Cruz's life in unusual depth in a 2010 dissertation, which, although it focusses on her AIDS work, does so through deep engagement with her own writing and interviews, demonstrating the particularities of her experiences, activism, and voice (30-36, 55-59, 122-128). However, these narratives, as a 2016 conference recorded on SoundCloud and an unpublished dissertation, as well as West's one-sentence reference, are overshadowed in both number and, in some cases, prominence by texts that present De La Cruz first and foremost as an AIDS activist and person with AIDS.

That the historiography of De La Cruz centers the time between her AIDS diagnosis and death, as well as occasionally her work with PONY, may reflect the intersection of her life with circumstances deemed historically significant, that is to say the AIDS epidemic and to a lesser extent the early sex worker rights movement, not least because of this determination's impact on available archival material in the present. It may also arise out of the particular ethical and political impulses generated by AIDS to mourn and commemorate its victims and activism, especially since many of the authors cited knew De La Cruz personally (Cvetkovich 2003: 156). Further, in writing about her they refuse that she becomes one of "the many people dying who are never spoken of," in the context of an epidemic in which the question of historical representation is one factor in determining who lives and who dies, within historical memory in particular (Hall 1996: 272). However, centering AIDS in De La Cruz's memorialization also makes her diagnosis the major entrance point to her life, implied precursor to her historical significance, and fact about her within contemporary discourses. Her death becomes the end point towards which her life inevitably moves, as well as the starting point from which one is able to say something about her, framing her story as a tragedy from its premise, regardless of what one learns about her along the way. The overarching narrative produced by the historiography, then, implies that De La Cruz's life prior to 1987, AIDS diagnosis, death, and historicization each inevitably and sequentially led to the next, a teleology which leaves unconsidered the possibility that she ultimately could have lived with or been historically significant without AIDS.

Iris De La Cruz as an ACT UP Activist

Indeed, several books and articles have an even narrower focus, discussing De La Cruz in the context of a single day in her life. On October 2nd, 1990, ACT UP New York organized buses and provided financial support for about thirty women with AIDS to go to Washington D.C. to participate in a demonstration in front of the department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This demonstration was part of an ongoing campaign to pressure the CDC to change its definition of AIDS, which excluded opportunistic infections commonly seen in HIV positive women, IV drug users, and poor people. Without an official AIDS diagnosis, which for members of these groups came later in the illness' progression, if at all, it was not possible to access Social Security benefits, among other life-saving or quality of life-enhancing assistance (Griffin 1990). De La Cruz, who had long been passionate about supporting HIV positive women in particular, and whose own diagnosis was delayed by half a decade due to ignorance of AIDS' presentation in groups other than gay men, spoke forcefully at the demonstration (Hubbard 2012: 1:02:23-1:02:53). This speech, and the fact that De La Cruz was the one making it at this large protest, are mobilized in the historiography less to say something about her, but rather as evidence for a narrative of increasing racial and serodiversity among women in ACT UP New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Though an important history, this use tends to identify De La Cruz first and foremost with her serostatus and reproduces oversimplified correlations of HIV status with race, gender, sexuality, and class.

It is striking how often this one-day protest is used as the singular specific example of De La Cruz's activism, despite the fact that she was otherwise more involved in other organizations and projects – or perhaps more accurately, how often she is brought up in histories of the campaign, in which she was just one of many participants (cf. Meredith 2013: 19; Schulman 2021: 230; Stoller 1998: 14). Jean Carlomusto's recollection of "when Iris De La Cruz took the megaphone and spoke about not being able to get health care. She said her physician didn't take food stamps" is particularly popular and quoted in at least two books, an article, and a dissertation (Carlomusto 2002: 19; cf. Brier 2009: 174-176; Poapst 2015: 63; Shotwell 2014: 519; Watkins-Hayes 2019: 92). In these contexts, De La Cruz is often listed alongside other HIV positive women associated with ACT UP, at least through this action. Sarah Schulman, for example, recalls speaking to an audience of HIV positive women about the campaign to change the definition and "the early leaders of the women with AIDS movement, Black and Latina women – just like those in the audience. Katrina Haslip, Iris De La Cruz, Phyllis Sharpe – ex-prisoners, ex-addicts, ex-prostitutes, now leading a political movement, literally yelling and screaming in the rain in front of government buildings demanding policy changes" (2013: 13). This is an oft-repeated litany of HIV positive women with ties to ACT UP. In addition to Katrina Haslip, a Black Muslim woman and founder of the AIDS Counseling and Education (ACE) peer education program in Bedford Hills prison; and Phyllis Sharpe, a Black woman from Brooklyn and founder of a self-empowerment group for HIV positive homeless and formerly homeless people; De La Cruz is often listed alongside Marina Alvarez and Lydia Awadala, two women with AIDS who were early members of ACT UP's Latino Caucus.[3]

This list, in its frequent reiteration, implies that the women who compose it form a particular sub-category of those involved in ACT UP NY at the time. The most straightforward thing they shared were their AIDS diagnoses, at a time when the majority of women in ACT UP were HIV negative. All participated in ACT UP's HHS demonstration, though at least Haslip, Sharpe, and De La Cruz were otherwise more involved in other organizations. Nevertheless, they were some of the first HIV positive women to take on leadership roles in ACT UP, even if only to speak at this one action. However, there are other characteristics more amorphously associated with this group which, though they don't all apply to all the women, still exhibit collective sticking power heightened by the frequent reiteration of the women as a self-evident cluster. Many had been incarcerated, used IV drugs, done sex work, and were straight women of color, leading to assumptions about De La Cruz based more on her HIV status than her own self-identification. Descriptions of De La Cruz as Latina or a woman of color, in particular, seem presumed from her AIDS diagnosis, as well as the company she kept, her political and cultural attachments, and her name (cf. Cvetkovich 2003: 179; Brier 2009: 174; Arriola 2014: 1; Watkins-Hayes 2019: 92; Noe 2019: 38; Carroll 2014: 231). These women, and the experiences and identities they (were presumed to have) shared, stand in implicit contrast to the other women in ACT UP, who constituted the earliest members and majority of the Women's Caucus. This latter group was predominately HIV negative, white, and lesbian, and many were Jewish, had some college education, and worked as writers and artists (Cvetkovich 2003: 177-178).[4]

Mobilizing De La Cruz in this way tells a certain story about ACT UP NY in particular, and, synecdochally, AIDS activism in the US the late 1980s and early 1990s more generally. Given that the majority of women in ACT UP were white, HIV negative lesbians, this story goes, they were not representative of the women with AIDS for whom they advocated, who were predominately Black and Latina. The women's caucus recognized this as a problem and took steps to solve it by encouraging HIV positive women of color to participate and take leadership roles in projects and actions. This slowly changed the demographics of the group, even if they never came close to fully reflecting the communities most impacted by AIDS.

This story of gender, race, and the self-conscious both increases in and failures of inclusivity in ACT UP is convincing, regardless of whether and which historical facts about De La Cruz are deployed to build a case for it. Nevertheless, there is a different possible depiction of De La Cruz, one which would contextualize her within the majority, rather than minority, of women in ACT UP. Foregrounding her upbringing in what her mother described as "a middle class Jewish home" in Brooklyn, long career as a writer, time spent at the School of Visual Arts, references in her writing to sexual fluidity, and self-identification as white would place her differently within the two categories of women in ACT UP implied in the historiography (Wolff 1991). This is not to say that this would be a more accurate description of her, that the previous set of characteristics associated with her are wrong, or that these categories were ever presented as anything more definite than a summary of overarching trends. It is only to point out that there are a variety of ways that De La Cruz could be described from a historical perspective, and still more broader narratives than for which this could be used to provide evidence. Avram Finkelstein, critiquing what he calls "AIDS 2.0 storytelling," maintains that this too often falls into neat narratives which elide complexity and disorderly truth in favor of tropes and easy stories (2019). Drawing attention to the multiple possible narratives and identifications of De La Cruz denaturalizes, though by no means disproves, those highlighted in the historiography. This helps to demonstrate how these narratives work, what they do, and in particular the salience of HIV status in demarcating a host of other social divides which, though clearly enormously significant in their material impacts, perhaps can't be laid out as neatly as we assume.

Iris De La Cruz as a Woman with AIDS

Despite, or because of, the assumption that people like De La Cruz have been forgotten in historicizations of the AIDS epidemic, she has proven to be an appealing character in recent historically-oriented works, both academic and popular. For example, in publicity for and reviews of Victoria Noe's 2019 book, "Fag Hags, Divas and Moms: The Legacy of Straight Women in the AIDS Community", De La Cruz is cited as one of its most compelling and significant characters (Murphy 2019; Anon 2019; Simmons 2019). Yet, in the book itself, she is mentioned in all of four paragraphs (38-41, 154). The disparity between De La Cruz's outsize role in the book's publicity and reception and the scant treatment of her within its pages demonstrates De La Cruz's appeal to contemporary authors and audiences, as well as the limited substance that often lies behind it. Noe explains the impetus for her book in intersectional-recovery terms, emphasizing that "it's important for people to see that, as astounding as the contributions are from gay men, there have been significant contributions from women of all races, of all ethnic groups and from around the world. And it's time for their stories to be told" (qtd. in Simmons 2019). However, by deciding in advance the significance of De La Cruz's life, as a woman (of color) with AIDS whose contributions have not been properly appreciated, this approach tends to empty it of specificity. Ultimately, presenting De La Cruz as important only insofar as she was an activist and a person with AIDS who was not a white gay man implies that she is interchangeable with any other HIV positive woman during the early AIDS epidemic and forecloses the possibility that historical research could reveal something new about her.

If De La Cruz's place in the historiography could often just as well be served by any other woman with AIDS from the time, this raises the question of why her example, along with those of Sharpe, Haslip, Adawala, and Alvarez, are so often highlighted. Part of the reason is lack of archival material, as indeed the circumstance compelling recuperative projects is that the lives of the majority of HIV positive women from the first years of the epidemic are historically unrecoverable, in part due to their early deaths. For example, all HIV positive women involved in ACT UP in the 1980s, aside from Marina Alvarez, died before they could be interviewed for the ACT UP Oral History Project (Schulman 2021: 10; Chris 2014: 30). This difference is a further aspect of the rhetorical divide between De La Cruz's "group" and the rest of the Women's Caucus, who have the ongoing ability to craft the historical narrative, a privilege of which they are self-aware (Cvetkovich 2003: 179). Nevertheless, there is some information about these activists in the archive, even if it is often from others' perspectives. This is not the case for thousands of other HIV positive women, disproportionately Black and Latina, who lived with and died of AIDS in New York, yet about whom it is often difficult to find out anything at all, making them "the invisible subjects of AIDS" (Arriola 2014: 3). This leads to a historiographical tendency to discount the lives of marginalized women with AIDS as always-already secondary because less representable, what Jih-Feh Cheng terms "the historical impasse of valuing the living over the dead" (2016: 75). In attempts to circumvent this impasse, De La Cruz becomes an important historical representation, not only of herself, but also of other women 'in her category', who had more difficulty accessing resources in their lifetimes, and, in part for this very reason, about whom it is more difficult to find out specific information after their deaths.

Because she was a woman with AIDS, De La Cruz was denied care for issues both related and unrelated to her HIV infection, treated worse still after disclosing her history of drug use, and aware that any scraps of humanization and respect that she received were dependent upon her being read as white rather than Latina (Fink 2010: 125-126). As a well-documented historical example, De La Cruz is a reminder that many others had similar and similarly unique experiences, even if they never had the opportunity to detail these in video interviews now held at the New York Public Library. Through this archivization, she has the power to represent those doubly lost, in the epidemic and to history. However, she may be more an exceptional than a representative case, as a multi-organization activist, celebrated writer, and, at least in certain circles, minor celebrity. Using someone so extraordinarily charismatic and vocal about her experiences as representative of "the invisible subjects of AIDS" (Arriola 2014: 3) in general sets an almost unattainably high bar for historical remembrance for HIV positive women. On the other hand, it is through this very visibility that De La Cruz can be spoken of in the present. In the face of this, perhaps the only possibility is to re-write De La Cruz's death, and so her life, as tragic, meaningful, worth mourning, and in so doing also the attempt to pay the same respect to the "invisible subjects of AIDS", even if De La Cruz was never, in the end, one of them. Yet histories written in this mode often remain superficial, revealing nothing about De La Cruz, her fellow HIV positive women, or the AIDS crisis itself that could not have been said in advance.

Conclusion: Iris De La Cruz as Legendary

As what Paula Treichler has dubbed an "epidemic of signification," AIDS consists of cultural, political, and social, in addition to biomedical, meanings and metaphors (1999: 1). These discursive spaces, then, are a key terrain of struggle, one utilized extensively by "cultural activists" in their fight against AIDS (Crimp 2004: 28-40; Sontag 1996). The authors cited here take up this legacy, wresting alternatives to dominant narratives of the epidemic out of a serophobic, racist, and sexist archive. To evoke De La Cruz, and through her others often left out of historical narratives, remains an integral intervention into particular discourses of AIDS' impacts and those who fought them, and therefore of who can be a political actor with the ability to create change in the present. However, to use serostatus in women as a shorthand for race, sexuality, and experiences of criminalization, and seropositive women as ciphers for one another, may at this point be a reiteration of slippages which demand decoupling. As AIDS activists recognized, the work of cultural contestation requires a constant challenging of accepted narratives, which congeal into new dominant formations each time they are destabilized.

Historical representations of the very real but contingent gendered, sexualized, raced, and classed inequalities of AIDS tends to ossify them, burying HIV positive women under a number of assumed characteristics, foremost of which is their historical invisibility (Kruger 1996: 61). The contradiction inherent in writing about De La Cruz because she is sure to have been forgotten is at the core of romantic historical projects, including my own, in which historians must rescue her from insufficient or inaccurate memorialization. These romances may challenge exclusionary popular narratives about AIDS and who it impacted, but not its metanarratives of risk groups composed of fixed subjects, always already on the verge of death and historical disappearance (cf. ibid. 60). In defining De La Cruz first and foremost through her relation to AIDS, they remain trapped within the epidemic's ongoing viral logics, which reconfigure the possibilities for her identity and our history. AIDS, then, becomes a black hole whose mass collapses the rest of De La Cruz's life – who else she might have been and what else we might have written about her – into its indeterminate opacity, a tangle of discourses in which we, then, remain just as trapped as she.

Yet to present De La Cruz as, for example, a "now legendary Latina HIV activist" can only be understood as history as performative utterance: she becomes a legendary Latina HIV activist now, in the moment of being written or read as such, though before this moment she may have been known differently, or not at all (Arriola 2014: 1). She becomes legendary here in several senses. First, as a heroic figure, who fought for other women with AIDS, and created resources and spaces for them at a time when these were scarce. Second, De La Cruz is legendary in that she "acts as a symbolic representation of collective experiences," serving, in both the cited essay and the historiography as a whole, to conjure up those with AIDS who have been "overshadowed by the still prevailing structures of class, race and gender" (Tangherlini 1990: 381; Arriola 2014: 3). Here, the 'legendary' subject of AIDS serves as a counterpoint to its 'invisible' subject, with each granting the other meaning and historical urgency. However, within this pairing, both become devoid of distinctive identity, twin mirrors which endlessly reflect only the empty space between them. Yet this contradiction, in which the recuperation and the erasure are one and the same, provides its own narrative unraveling, refuting the assumption that the story it tells could ever be complete or coherent. This is legend in a third sense, as a folktale with a historical core, which is beholden to the plausible but makes no claim to be a literal recounting of the past. As AIDS activists recognized, the oppositional reconfiguration of this kind of legendary history has the power to change the conditions of our contemporary world. Each time we retell the legend of De La Cruz, historians write something new into existence, stories laden with social and political meaning which proclaim with their very presence the fact that they could always have been told differently.

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Anmerkungen

1 These exceptions include De La Cruz's obituaries, a short biography on the Iris House website, a 2015 conference presentation by Jason Baumann, and several brief YouTube videos. Marty Fink's 2010 dissertation, "Forget Burial", also includes a sub-chapter on De La Cruz.

2 The U.S. PROStitutes Collective was a subchapter of the International Wages for Housework Campaign organized by and for Black sex workers who partnered with PONY to fight police violence preceding the 1980 Democratic national convention in New York.

3 See for example interviews from the ACT UP Oral History Project, including with Jean Carlomusto (2002), Maxine Wolfe (2004), Terry McGovern (2007), Linda Meredith (2013), Gregg Bordowitz (2002), and Robert Vazquez-Pacheco (2002), as well as the Project index; Anne Cvetkovitch's chapter "AIDS Activism and Public Feelings" in "An Archive of Feelings" (179); Sarah Schulman's references to De La Cruz in "Let the Record Show" (10, 225, 230); and Nancy Stoller's "Lessons from the Damned" (12).

4 These assumptions reflected the reality that AIDS compounded existing structural inequalities, meaning certain already marginalized groups were disproportionately impacted. By 1988, AIDS was the leading cause of death among incarcerated people in New York, and 80 % of HIV positive women in New York City were Black or Latina (Banzhaf et al. 1990: 139; Gross 1987). Contrary to popular stigma, sex workers in general were no more likely to be HIV positive than the general population. However, in 1985 it was estimated

that at least a quarter of outdoor sex workers (also disproportionately non-white in comparison to their indoor counterparts) in New York City had been exposed to HIV via IV drug use (Shilts 1985). These staggering health disparities help explain the association, both actual and perceived, between race, experiences of sex work, drug use, and incarceration, and serostatus in women.

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