INTERVIEW WITH MARIKA CIFOR

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Marika Cifor is Assistant Professor in the Information School and adjunct faculty in Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. She is a feminist scholar of archival studies and digital studies. Her research investigates how individuals and communities marginalized by gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, and HIV-status are represented and how they document and represent themselves in archives and digital cultures. She is the author of Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS (University of Minnesota Press, 2022). In Viral Cultures, she examines the archives that keep the history and work of AIDS activism alive. Her archival ethnography details how contemporary activists, artists, and curators utilize these records to build upon the cultural legacy of 1980s and 1990s American AIDS activism to challenge the conditions of injustice that undergird current AIDS crises. She analyzes the power structures through which these archives are mediated, positioning vital nostalgia as both a critical faculty and a generative practice, reanimating the past in the digital age. She also has published widely in critical information studies, gender and sexuality studies, and American studies on topics including affect and archives, feminist data studies, and community-based information practices. Cifor co-edited a 2018 special issue of Archival Science on Affect and the Archive, a 2019 issue of the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies on Neoliberalism, and a 2020 special issue of First Monday on HIV/AIDS and Digital Media. At the iSchool, Cifor is co-founder of AfterLab and affiliated with the DataLab and the Technology and Social Change (TASCHA) group. She is also a member of the interdisciplinary Border Quants: Feminist Approaches to Data, Bodies and Technologies Across Borders research team she is working to develop feminist data studies.[1]

Carolina Alves: Marika, you describe yourself as a "feminist scholar of archival studies and digital studies." For some time, it has been the majority view (from a traditional archival perspective) that the archival professional should be "neutral" and "impartial." When you declare yourself a feminist intellectual, this mark becomes determinant to the understanding of your political position and your understanding of the field of archives. Would you comment on how your position has influenced your theoretical and methodological approaches?

Marika Cifor: Thank you so much. I love this question. I think that, for me, there is a great reason why I put feminist in front of how I describe my work as a researcher in archival studies, as well as in digital studies. Because for me, I do not see archival work, or archival scholarship, or the intersections of those two things as neutral or objective. We obviously come from a long history of investment (sometimes for good reasons) in notions of neutrality and objectivity, but my perspective (informed by feminism, postmodernism, post-colonialism, and other forms

of critical theory) is that such a position is actually not possible or actually even desirable. We all bring to the work we do—whether it is scholarship or the practice of our own perspective—our own biases, our own relationships to power, and for me, describing my work as feminist calls into question those notions of power and how they operate in the archives that allows me to identify, describe power, and like places in relation to it. Also, the other reason I describe my work as feminist is that I think feminism can not only help us to identify power and oppression, but also to imagine our way out of the kind of current, the status quo, the way in which power has been organized, the way in which people have been marginalized and oppressed. And so, including what has happened through archives. For me, positioning my work as feminist and my practice as feminist is a way to name those kinds of investments in interrogating power, and I see my work as part of a larger shift in the field (especially over the last couple of decades) towards Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan and T-kay Sangwand—described in the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies as a critical archival studies practice, a kind of scholarship and practices that invests in thinking about how power has operated through archives, but also how we can reimagine archival work and our core practice to work towards greater equity and justice, especially for people who have been historically marginalized.

Martina Spohr: Your research is embedded in a field of reflections that has been classified by some scholars as "Critical Archival Studies." This field (widely discussed in the journal "Critical Archival Studies," published by the Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies in 2017) discusses the lack of documents about specific groups and profiles and analyzes the impact, on archival praxis and theory, of new social demands in relation to archives. In what ways has the field of archives been impacted by the rapprochement with feminist and postcolonial theories?

Marika Cifor: I think in almost every way. I see it in my teaching. I teach students who are training to be librarians, archivists in a Master of Library Information Science Program here at the University of Washington. I think most of my students no longer show up assuming that the kind of work we do is actually neutral or objective or that that is possible or desirable. I think that is a signal that kind of larger shift in the profession. That even people who are kind of at the beginning of their engagement are seeing this work and the kinds of reasons that they are invested in wanting to do it as different (perhaps) than it was. I do think that the framing that Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand provide for us and the issue you mentioned really name a move that was already happening in the field. I think we can see its roots perhaps even earlier on community archive spaces, as kind of Howard Zinn's very famous call, from the side of history, to do history and work from the bottom up in the work that was already happening. We really see,

in archival theory, a turn in the 1990s and early 2000s towards classic work, that I sometimes still teach, that really calls into question how archives have been implicated in power and injustice and really utilizes, as you mentioned, feminist and postcolonial theory, to draw attention to the ways in which archives have never been neutral or objective and how it's not actually desirable to think about our work that way. Our work can actually amplify or extend oppression when we don't interrogate the ways in which power has operated through it. I really see the kind of roots of what they very usefully call critical archival studies in terms of our scholarship, right? They really date to a period over the last two or three decades. I like how Caswell, Punzalan, and Sangwand define it. This is actually very much in line with the answer I gave to the last question about how feminism allows us to identify what is unjust about the current state of research practice, also offering us a roadmap to imagine ourselves out of that situation, to identify goals and practices that can and should change. I think part of what these kinds of long-established systems can make so difficult to do is the work of actually imagining and enacting a different kind of practice, of imagining that things could even be different at all? It provides us with the grounds to actually make those critiques and I think that the influence of feminist and post-colonial work on the field has been so incredibly significant. Because there was this existing scholarship to build on and to be in conversation with, it allowed people in workable studies spaces to take up that work and to think about how it actually applies in the specific contexts of doing archival work, whether that is like more practice or theory or the intersection between those. I think naming it as critical archival studies allows those of us who see our work as about thinking about the ways in which power operates and the way in which we wish things were, working towards making things different. It allows us to tie our work together, whichever theoretical kind of frames we draw on because our work is fundamentally invested in these same kinds of projects that we might be approaching it from different angles. For me, feminist theory has been a particularly important part of that work. I am deeply grateful to people who use post-colonial and decolonial approaches in similar ways to build together this critical approach to archives.

Carolina Alves: Throughout the world, the social demands of diverse groups for memory and justice are currently growing. This scenario stimulates a debate about the access to historical records and its relationship with the field of rights. You are conducting research on HIV and AIDS activism through archival records. In this context, how do you analyze the relationship between archives and the increase of rights of minority groups, especially the LGBTQIA+ community?

Marika Cifor: That is perfect. I think the acronym for LGBTQIA+ people is variously done. The plus is important in expanding it, but it becomes very unwieldy to actually say aloud. It is a great question. And for me to be TQ, IA or queer archives have been a kind of fundamental

way in which I have explored these kinds of bigger questions. And, again, I would love to hear what this looks like in Brazilian context. But in a US context, HIV and AIDS are fundamentally linked to queerness in ways that are historically accurate. HIV/AIDS was first discovered amongst gay and bisexual men or men who have sex with men and a lot of the kind of most fundamental activism really came within what were lesbian and gay communities, rather than what we would call LGBTQIA communities now, so those linkages are important. I talk about it in my book, our culture… how archives and LGBT archives are not the same but they are often grouped together. There are good and logical reasons for that. And the struggles of people living with HIV and AIDS have overlapped with the struggles, opportunities of LGBTQIA people, though, of course, there are moments where those struggles, relations to power are distant. There is really a way I am particularly interested in questions of not only how we do document the kinds of experiences of LGBTQIA people and people living with HIV and AIDS. But the question that always interests me the most about archives is not what we have documented and what we could document but how those records are actually activated, how they're used to do different kinds of work. That's fundamentally why I actually ended up writing about the archives that live at the center of that project, the New York Public Library's archives and manuscripts collection visual aids (which is a community-based arts organization) and the NYU, US sales library and special collections. Each of those are distinct (they are four organizations) but they are interlinked in interesting and powerful ways by the kinds of collections they have and through their collaborations. I have said before I that think that there are equally interesting archives documenting HIV/AIDS at the same period as the United States in other places. But what was fundamentally exciting and unique about what I saw happening in New York City in the 2010s was that these records were really being actively engaged with both by the communities and activists who had produced them, but also by archivists and artists, and activists, and curators who were thinking about how do we actually use these records to engage in these questions. Social injustice for people living with HIV and AIDS, which globally and in the US are fundamentally tied to questions of racism and inequities in access to health care and resources, poverty, neocolonialism and many other kinds of isms. But not just how do we use these records to have those conversations and make AIDS have the same contemporary resonance of attention. But also, how do we use these records to link to other kinds of struggles against injustice and oppression? Whether that is Black Lives Matter, whether that is work around prison abolition, whether that is work to make more liveable lives for trans and gender non-conforming people, right? How do we link these struggles? And how do we activate records to engage history and draw attention to how archives can be mobilized in the present to do social justice work? There are lots of different

and exciting ways. I can bring those records to bring attention to contemporary issues, to put contemporary issues in conversation with the past and justice. I always liked the example that come to trade [???] …, which is the archives here in Seattle that focuses on Japanese American experiences with internment and incarceration during World War Two. They link those records and those struggles explicitly to the ways in which people (and particularly people from across Latin America) are experiencing violence and discrimination and harm at the borders of the United States, as people attempt to migrate to the United States. And so, I think that is a nice example of how, like, these struggles are unique. But they are also interlinked and I hope records to [???] activist important knowledge, from the ways in which people have deployed different kinds of tactics and inspiration for the kinds of work they want to do now. And so, I see archives as fundamental to kind of the memory of these kinds of movements but also as active forces that can be deployed and used and work towards all sorts of social justice efforts now.

Martina Spohr: According to your point of view, are archival institutions responsive to these new demands placed on archives? Are there any relevant experiences that you would like to share?

Marika Cifor: I think that is a complicated question. Probably left and right. I think there is a shift in our field. In some ways, I see it reflected in my students' interests and the ways they are interested, even if they are planning to work in academic institutions, or government archives, or even corporate archives. Many of them are interested in how do we engage the communities around these records? How do we use these records to make a positive impact in the world? We are still used to the US, very much set up in archives to serve and to meet the needs of very particular users. And those are usually academics like myself. Or maybe in some other settings, genealogy and other kinds of public researchers. But we are still very much set up in this model of working with people with a certain kind of research expertise and experience. We, as a field, are trying to learn and grow in terms of how we do community engagement and how, particularly, we might engage younger people with archives, right? I think people often don't encounter archives until their undergraduate experiences or maybe even graduate school or maybe not at all. And so how do we actually make archives legible, accessible, and engaged for different kinds of communities? What that looks like really varies depending on the kind of institution and the kinds of colections. I like to use Visual AIDS as an example here because they are a community-based organization. I think they've become invested in the concept of archives. But archives are not necessarily what draws together their community. Their community, artists living with AIDS or who have passed away. And we are living with HIV or AIDS. But their community is really invested in the questions of what kind of visual art can do. And, as part of that, Visual AIDS suits their work as preserving a legacy,

as enabling the kind of continuance and survival of the work as well as their artistic thoughts. And they really actively use social media and other kinds of curatorial practices to engage the community, whether or not that community is explicitly interested in archives or doing archival research, they use those records as tools, as means to have conversations about contemporary artworks and social movements as well. And so, I think that sometimes this kind of community engagement can come more naturally in places where the organization is already embedded in its communities of practice. But I see what for me are exciting and encouraging trends for thinking about how to do this within bigger institutions as well, even in places that might not see themselves as community archives. My students will be working with the Labor Archives here at the University of Washington next quarter. Though they are part of special collections of a big university, they really see their mission also as working very closely with different labor communities, locally and nationally. And so, I'm excited for students to also get to see both the challenges of doing this kind of work in big institutions and the ways in which those big institutions resources can be channeled and used to support the kinds of work that the community is being documented or interested in and committed to as well.

Carolina Alves: Which role do you perceive archives playing in the contemporary world?

Mariaka Cifor: This is a big question. I think, for me, in some of the ways we've already been talking about, I hope that our codes are not only means to record our histories and document lives and social movements and different kinds of work. They are also really being reconceptualized as forces in the present that might enable us to build different kinds of more socially just futures. I released the work as archivists and as likable scholars, as thinking about how to not only document the past, but how to mobilize the past for conversations about a present and what are the ways in which we want to imagine and build our future. And so that is a big expansive answer, but it's a big question. So, I think my hope is that we really see archives perform as forces for doing social justice work, on contributing to that work in ways big and small. There is an article by Wendy Duff… and others write on the social justice impacts of archives and I think that very usefully define social justice as something that we are working towards. It is not something that any of us can envision actually being fully attained in our lifetimes, or maybe even in the features we can actually envision but that does not make that work any less worthwhile or important. So, I think we have a long way to go. We can each do our tiny or slightly larger part in that effort.

Martina Spohr: You have a recent article about archiving AIDS on Instagram. In a world surrounded by fake news and denial of science, in what way can we think about the digital archiving of the documental content on the web? What are the challenges to

sustain and enable studies based on digital documentation that is increasingly endangered, both in its credibility and in its preservation?

Marika Cifor: There. Again, big and important questions. Again, actually, that greatly parallels the way to describe social justice work. I think it is probably more accurate to describe digital preservation as an ongoing process. I think we know a lot more about the preservation and maintenance of access to these resources and how we preserve digital resources and things on the web. We are very much still in the process of figuring out… it will always be an ongoing process as technology continues to evolve. The digital also raises new questions about the boundaries and where and if we should draw them between archives and records. What is an archive in a digital space? What is a record? And what does it look like for a record to circulate in a digital platform? I think these are interesting questions. Stacy Wood… and I wrote an article a number of years ago about critical feminism in the archives. We talk in that pace, about how we see work in the humanities on the archival term as contributing to build a more extensive vision of what archives are and can be, and I tend towards an expansive, broad definition of what is and is not an archive. I am often writing about community-based memory spaces, where I think it is up to the community to draw those boundaries, if at all. And so, I think there's exceeding potential in documenting content on the web and documenting activist content on the web, but it also raises ethical challenges in the present about the ways the organizations documenting them now are working. How do we preserve these records of social movements without potentially causing harm? For the activists and others who are involved in them, how do we do this in ways that are ethical? I have been writing with one of my doctoral students about some kind of early digital technologies… about bulletin board services (or BBs) that in the 1980s and early 1990s. A way that people with at least a good deal of technological literacy… where we are beginning to use as ways to communicate with each other and to share information with [one] another. But many of these now only exist in some state of digital preservation or because people printed [them] out. You could see some of the preservation challenges happening there. But there is also ways in which these were run by individuals and by communities and they were community-owned or individually-owned platforms. And now, I think there is all of this content but almost all of it lives on privately owned corporate platforms, which creates new challenges to actually accessing and preserving it and new kinds of legal and ethical questions about what it means to do work on corporate platforms. And so, I think we are just in a moment where we are beginning to grasp the kind of tremendous challenge of documenting with the web past and present and to think about how we're going to move forward in doing this. This is about challenges both practical

and more conceptual around credibility, around preservation, around authenticity. We are also in a field that has been asking questions about accountability, about authenticity, about trust, about preservation. And so, I hope that we can use all of that kind of rich body of thinking and practice to kind of face these new questions. This is going to be a process. There is going to be things that are going to be better documented than ever before and then there is going to be things that are completely kind of inaccessible to us and new challenges for people who want to do work on earlier moments, right? On internet history or on the ways in which communities activated and engaged with records and other moments over the last few decades. We are just at the tip of the iceberg of thinking about how complex those questions are. Instagram, right? As you talked about the article, I wrote on convergence, right? It is just one of those pipelines. I was privileged enough to work in an institution, right? Where, through colleagues in the Data Lab, I had access to actually get some of the Instagram data to be able to do analysis. Scraping image data and scraping metadata around the images is really challenging and requires a different set of technological skills and a different set of assets. And that is going to create, I think, points to some of the challenges we are going to continue to have as… particularly people who want to do this work without the kind of institutional resources I have and without other colleagues I have, who have the technical skill to do some of this work, I think we are gonna just continue to face important challenges, but at the same time, I think we have to deal with them because these kinds of platforms (Instagram, Twitter…), until at least we recently and others, are aware of a lot of this kind of organizing and social movement work. And artistic engagement is happening. And so, it's our job to try to figure out how to navigate [this], those challenges, I think are nowhere near solved.

Carolina Alves: Thank you. It is our last question, but it is certainly the beginning of a long talk we want to have with you to share our projects, and maybe we can have this talk in Brazil. We can dream, maybe, about that. Okay. In your article, called *On Digital Models: Responding to Viral Metaphors in Pandemic Times*, you trace a parallel between COVID-19 and HIV viruses' social impact and how they are interpreted trough models. Can you talk about these relations that you have got on this research? And how we can improve the understandings and conclusions about these kinds of moments in our contemporary society?

Marika Cifor: Yeah, the article you are talking about is a collaborative work with Cait McKinney, who is a communication scholar based in Vancouver. I have these pieces as kind of our latest collaboration that we have worked together, we share a lot of interest on kind of information activism, as Cait has written about it, and particularly about how activists use whatever digital tools are at their disposal to do their work. And so, this piece, for us,

feels almost like a time capsule now because we wrote it in the early stages of COVID for a special issue on digital metaphors, edited by TL Cowan and Jasmine Rault, [and others]. And the larger issue is about the work that these kinds of metaphors and digital spaces do, keeping an eye based on our prior work individually. And separately, we are interested in this notion of viral and virus and why we use the language of biological viruses to talk about contagion and spread and risk and danger and others as well, particularly in the world of computing, in digital culture. And so, we were interested in how… because, in that early COVID moment and still today, visuals, visualization, and modeling were important in scientific responses, but also in how the public was seeing and understanding COVID as it moved across, shifted our worlds and our lives. The ways in which real-time visualization happens and the ways in which we engage with data and COVID-19 are interesting and ongoing questions. But also, for me, there is interesting questions about how… I was finishing my book as well in our first year of COVID and I was interested in the ways in which there were parallels between the ways in which HIV/AIDS was documented in its early days and the ways in which we were documenting COVID. We saw and some of this is writing about technological shifts and about shifts in how archives work to document the present. I think more actively than they used to. But also, there was this kind of immediate term in documentation towards COVID projects. Also, some of that was tied to this vision that it would be temporary, that we were living in this kind of anomalous moment, a great shift, and we should document that moment. And there was a lot of energy and resources turned towards documenting COVID in ways that I think individuals who were deeply involved in AIDS movements were interested in documentation from the beginning, but there was this kind of institutional interest, I think, in the same way in the early days. And so, for me, COVID and AIDS have been compared. At least in the United States they are often compared. Some of that is about a perception that in the United States… that AIDS is a pandemic we have dealt with and are familiar with, while COVID-19 was new and we did not and maybe it is difficult to know how to deal with it. And so there were both these kinds of fruitful and generative comparisons being made and these comparisons kind of flattened the particularities and distinctions and, of course, the most important commonality is that, as my colleague Jallicia Jolly has written on pandemics, it always operate along social fault lines, they amplify and expose existing inequities along lines of race, gender, class, and so forth. So, we knew, I think from the beginning, with COVID (much like with HIV/AIDS), past and present, that people who are already marginalized would have that kind of harshest impact and the kind of greatest challenges in the space. And so, for Cait and I, we were interested in thinking in this piece about how modeling in particular works… how it kind

of represents our knowledge and what kinds of norms are embedded in the ways in which we model information. And we were particularly interested in the kind of sexual politics that undergird those models. And Cait had done some work thinking about notions of modeling previously. And we are both interested in the ways in which AIDS in particular, at least in a North American context, very much shapes pandemic responses. And so, that piece became a way for us to talk about the kind of early AIDS modeling and the way in which it thought about sexuality and embedded notions, like heterosexuality, and monogamy. And again, how those models were being used to talk about risk and danger, and who were good or bad actors in the early days of COVID. And so, for us, we are always interested in the kinds of politics that undergird and shape. Those kinds of efforts that representation, that documentation. And so, modeling, was one way to talk about that. And one way to talk also about just how viral metaphors have operated in digital spaces, are continuing to operate, and are particularly kind of profound in these moments where we are talking about the meeting point of metaphorical and actual, biological viruses. And so, I think it is part of a really exciting, special issue as well, but thinks critically about all kinds of metaphors that we commonly use in the digital space and why and how we do them. And why actually metaphors are an important kind of tool for that kind of reified… certainly norms, but that also might disrupt them in interesting ways. I am so very honored to have our work as part of that kind of luxury collection as well. I think about something that is unfolding… always a little dangerous. Because I mean, though, right? You return anything to Britain, with enough time and space, you have new thoughts and different thoughts. We are already living maybe in a different moment of COVID than we were at the beginning of 2020 and what that is, so it feels like we're writing about something that's kind of evolving and the way in which we were experiencing and thinking about things in 2020 versus now, you know. Three years… It was just in some of the same questions but the experiences [are different].

Martina Sphor: Thank you so much, Marika. It was amazing.

Marika Cifor: Thank you so much for asking these interesting questions. I also wish it could be more of a conversation. I would love to hear what you are working on and thinking about and what some of these kinds of questions have looked like in Brazilian context as well.

NOTAS

1 Disponível em: https://ischool.uw.edu/people/faculty/profile/mcifor.

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