

A History of a Crisis: AIDS-Activism and Religious Nostalgia in the United States.

Crisis entered the English language as a medical term and would later evolve into a word for unprecedented hardships. *Nostalgia* also emerged as a medical term and later evolved into a broader expression of longing for the past and its supposed simplicity. Both terms' medical origins and new meanings came to be significant in the discourses around the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States of the 1980s.

Nostalgia, as I define it in my project, is a rhetorical device used to evocate a state of past Utopia. The New Christian Right, which had considerable political power in the 1980s, applied nostalgic rhetoric to emphasize the broken relationship between a Christian tradition and the United States. At its core lay a restoration fantasy that sought to re-establish this relationship to secure the survival of the nation and to return it to a state of supposed former glory.¹ Their nostalgic rhetoric contains the idea of promise, doom, and mission.

Lesbian and Gay individuals did not have a point in the country's past they could look back to as a supposed state of Utopia. To them, Utopia was a practice rather than a place.² It had yet to be achieved by changing heterosexist notions of sex, gender, and desire. The advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis led to an unprecedented collective effort by Gay and Lesbian communities to make their existence known by loudly proclaiming their past and present violent oppression within the social, political, and economic system of the United States.

I argue that within the outlines of the Christian Right's nostalgic restoration fantasies, *homosexuality* was conceptualized as an ongoing moral threat to the sacred nostalgic vision of the United States. The Christian Right's notions of the morality and ethics of *homosexuality* are not seen as confined to orthodox religion but rather as a broader representation of hegemonic³ norms of the time. The HIV/AIDS crisis and its initial perception as a "gay plague" emboldened the Christian Right's discourses around *homosexuality* and further perpetuated the idea of HIV/AIDS as a moral issue rather than a health issue.⁴

This work seeks to look beyond the concept of nostalgia as an emotional phenomenon of an individual longing for the past. Rather, it is understood as rhetoric that shaped and informed political and cultural discourses around the past, present, and future of the United States in a specific historical context. In my project, I analyze and compare the discursive

¹ Nutt, Rick, How the Religious Right Views History – and Why. *Soundings, An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Vol. 72/2,3, 1989, p. 528.

² Long, Thomas L., AIDS and American Apocalypticism, *The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic*. New York: State U of New York P, 2005, p. 174f.

³ Such as whiteness, ability and health, economic power, and straightness.

⁴ Navarre, Max, Fighting the Victim Label. *October*, Vol. 43, Winter 1987, p. 144.

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fields of *family*, *body*, and *place* in the discourse of the Christian Right and activism of Gay and Lesbian communities. I chose the period of the 1980s because I see it as exemplifying the essence of nostalgic rhetoric like no other time in recent United States history until the Trump presidency. The prevalent HIV/AIDS crisis and the consequent revived Gay and Lesbian activism as a progressive and future-oriented force stood in stark contrast to the nostalgic religious rhetoric of the Christian Right. What I see missing in the current historiography is a cultural history of politics in connection to nostalgic discourses around crises and activism. Furthermore, the literature on gay and lesbian activism and life during the HIV/AIDS epidemic is surprisingly lacking, considering the impact the HIV/AIDS activist movement had on the development of the current *Queer* socio-political movements. The current reemergence of extremist religious political power in the United States, especially in opposition to *queer* identities, makes this project relevant to today's issues.