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## Mapping Gothicism in HIV/AIDS Art, and the Importance of Art in Understanding Queer Cultural Trauma: Canadian Perspectives

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Cultural Trauma: Canadian Perspectives**

## **Mapping Gothicism in HIV/AIDS Art, and the Importance of Art in Understanding Queer Cultural Trauma: Canadian Perspectives**

### **Abstract**

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Canada continues to be a defining moment in queer trauma and cultural production. Since the 1990s, queer academics and theorists have become increasingly interested in how queer people navigate and negotiate trauma. With the establishment of Queer Studies and Gothic Studies, the two fields have been considered complementary both historically and contemporarily. Queer academics and theorists have discovered that queer cultural production continuously evokes gothic themes, tropes, and atmospheres to understand cultural trauma. Previous research primarily focuses on literature, and my research seeks to expand the field into visual mediums. My research is interested in understanding how queer cultural production's use of gothic tropes in HIV/AIDS has changed throughout the decades and has shaped queer experience in Canada. I collect Canadian HIV/AIDS visual art, filmography, photography, and mixed-media art to conduct a visual and sociopolitical discourse analysis to understand the phenomenological experience of queer people in Canada. My findings unearth significant change in the ways themes of death, ghosts, and haunting are used in HIV/AIDS art, providing a unique insight into the changing phenomenological experiences of queer people in Canada, which are still heavily haunted by temporal and cultural trauma. My research is significant because it unearths new queer knowledge production, showcasing how queer Canadians have created new forms of understanding cultural trauma that resist and challenge mainstream traumatic discourse.

### **Introduction**

Queer cultural production has a historical bond with exploring and understanding trauma. Death, decay, madness, and haunting are among the many dark tropes queer knowledge and expression find themselves engulfed by, searching to make sense of existence while living in a culture of violence. With the rise of queer theory as an epistemology and Gothic Studies in the 1990s, academics and theorists began to map the unique relationship between queer cultural production and the Gothic. Queer Studies and Gothic Studies are complementary fields of inquiry, and queer theory has enabled essential developments in the theorization of the Gothic (Rigby, 2009). However, it remains vital to expand beyond the limiting discussion of what queer theory has done for Gothic Studies. Gothic themes, tropes, and atmosphere illuminate machinations of queer knowledge production otherwise buried by providing space to explore the haunting (after)effects of trauma. Queering the lens of trauma unearths the temporal nature of trauma itself, where the past becomes part of an absent-present. Cultural trauma does not simply reside in the past but bleeds into the now and restructures the contemporary experience of queer existence.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic is a primary cultural event that shapes and reshapes the queer community within Canada and globally. As newly diagnosed cases rapidly increased, stigmatization burned like wildfire, and the queer community was the central target. The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Canada provides a blended historical and contemporary space to examine the haunting (after)effects of cultural trauma within queer knowledge and people. The existing research primarily focuses on queerness in gothic literature or the Gothic in queer literature. My research is interested in expanding upon this domain, examining how gothic tropes are used in popular HIV/AIDS visual art, filmography, photography, and mixed-media art created by queer Canadian artists. My central research seeks to (1) further understand how Canadian queer

cultural production regarding the trauma of HIV/AIDS changed from the beginning of the epidemic to present-day, and (2) how gothic tropes are configured and reconfigured throughout the different periods and shape the lives of queer Canadians. I will be conducting a visual and sociopolitical discourse analysis on the collected and curated HIV/AIDS art to map out and interpret the phenomenological experiences of queer Canadian artists as they navigate through cultural trauma and its haunting (after)effects. I theorize that queer cultural production and the use of Gothicism about HIV/AIDS has significantly changed from the 1980s to present-day while still challenging mainstream discourse regarding trauma, exposing the model of ‘pre-trauma wholeness and post-trauma fragmentation’ does not accurately encompass queer traumatic temporality.

### **Methods and Methodology**

My research centers around the analysis of HIV/AIDS art created by Canadian queer artists from the 1980s to the present. I began my research and collection of art pieces, photography, filmography, and mix-media art through the websites of prominent Canadian and American national galleries, museums and foundations, including the National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Art, Art Canada Institute, Visual AIDS Organization, CATIE, and The Art Institute of Chicago. I refined my collection by researching artists showcased on websites through online search engines. After concluding my collection of materials, I analyzed the visual art pieces to understand the phenomenological experiences of queer Canadian artists, the temporal trauma caused by HIV/AIDS, and how queer artists use Gothicism to navigate trauma. I organized the collected art pieces chronologically and conducted a visual and sociopolitical

discourse analysis to understand the social, political, and cultural context that informs the art pieces and artists behind them to understand queer existence amidst cultural trauma further.

### **Past into Present: The Beginning of an Epidemic and Queer Cultural Production's Response to Death and Decay**

#### **Figure 1 and 2**

*AIDS* (left) and *LOVE* (right)



*Note.* General Idea, 1987, acrylic on canvas (left), and Robert Indiana, 1967, oil on canvas (right)

*AIDS* is a striking painting created by General Idea, a Canadian artist collective composed of Felix Partz, Jorge Zontal, and AA Bronson. *AIDS* (Figure 1) is a mimic of Pop art painter Robert Indiana's *LOVE* and marks a shift in General Idea's creative pursuits. *AIDS* was cutting-edge during a time when discussing HIV/AIDS was taboo. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, disclosing your HIV/AIDS status severely threatened your job security, relationships with family, and rapport with the larger queer community (Smith, 2016). Although stigmatization continues to affect the socio-economic status and well-being of Canadians living with HIV/AIDS (Perri et al., 2021), mainstream and prominent queer discourse have configured HIV/AIDS as a

manageable diagnosis. Therefore, with the emergence of the epidemic in the early 1980s, mimicking an infamous work of art was a challenge to the deafening silence faced by queer people. The government ignored the queer community while cultural discourse turned violent, blaming queer men for spreading HIV/AIDS. Indiana's *LOVE* spread like wildfire, plastered on key chains, cocktail napkins, and postage stamps (Smith, 2016). Bronson stated the intention behind the painting was the hopes that it "would spread within the culture and create a visibility for the word 'AIDS', so it couldn't be swept under the carpet" (Smith, 2016, p. 43). The bold lettering of the word 'AIDS' painted in with a stark red hue not only copies *LOVE*'s composition but positions itself into the cultural connection between HIV/AIDS and blood. The red ribbon has become a universal symbol for those living with HIV/AIDS. However, queer blood had become associated with disease and decay. Canada put increasing limitations on blood donations from men who have sex with men (MSM) until implementing a life ban on donations from MSM in 1992 (BBC, 2022). Restrictions were eased in subsequent years and were completely lifted as of September 30, 2022 (BBC, 2022). However, the bans and restrictions are a testament that the configuration of queer blood as a carrier for disease has long haunted queer experience. *AIDS* examines queer cultural trauma amidst a landscape of violence that sought to force queer people into silence and submission. Partz and Zontal succumbed to AIDS, yet the art piece screams beyond the grave to not be forgotten and to remember the stories of those who continue to haunt queer spaces. *AIDS* has produced new meaning from its birth in 1987 until now, once a testament of becoming and now a testament not to forget.

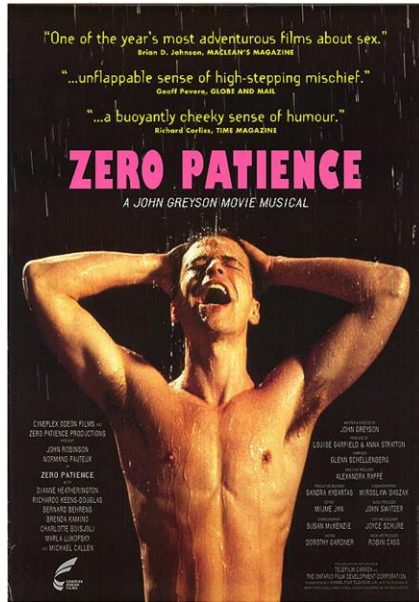
*AIDS* is the embodiment of an epistemology of haunting starting at its insurrection. *AIDS* may not initially be read as Gothic compared to other art pieces; However, the traumatic gothic shadow over queer cultural production is not always explicit (Westengard, 2019). General Idea

created *AIDS* from the ashes of a famous piece of work that became gimmicky, plastered on everything and inescapable. General Idea wanted to encapsulate the looming nature of HIV/AIDS in queer people's everyday lives. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is not a singular traumatic event that can be neatly pin-pointed. Instead, the epidemic is a cultural event engulfed by traumatic temporality. Queer cultural production disrupts mainstream narratives that configure trauma as linear singular events and unearth how trauma is a haunting "swirling, fractured, intersecting temporality of ongoing low-level trauma, not just a singular traumatic event popping through into the present but a disorienting and overwhelming storm of traumatic intrusion" (Westengard, 2019, p. 32). Similarly to how Indiana's *LOVE* intruded itself into everyday life through its reproduction into various items, General Idea used the surrounding narrative to examine how the HIV/AIDS crisis intruded itself into the everyday lives of queer people. HIV/AIDS was inescapable, much like Indiana's work; HIV/AIDS may not have always been noticeable or explicit in the mundanity, but it was constantly reproduced and informed every aspect of queer phenomenological experience.

### **Figure 3**

*Zero Patience*





Note. J. Greyson, 1993, film.

John Greyson's 1993 *Zero Patience* (Figure 3) further explores the relationship between HIV/AIDS, blood, and ghosts. *Zero Patience* is a Canadian musical film that challenges the false narrative that HIV in North America was introduced by a single individual: Gaëtan Dugas, a Québécois flight attendant. Dugas was known as 'patient zero' and became the target of blame in the 1980s. *Zero Patience* was birthed from the uproar of criticism against the Blood System of Canada. In 1993, Canada's federal government called for an inquiry into the safety of the Canadian blood system after thousands of Canadians had become infected with HIV and Hepatitis C-positive blood (McKay, 2017). After the first week of gruelling testimonies from blood product recipients and family members, *Zero Patience* was released (McKay, 2017). The film's protagonist is based on Dugas, aptly named Zero, as he comes back as a ghost seeking to have his story told. Zero is trapped in a state of limbo where he is invisible to the people around him, including his former lover and mother; the only person who can see Zero is Sir Richard Burton, who is working at Toronto's Natural History Museum and becomes interested in studying "patient zero." Burton's scientific studies are misdirected, representing the false and

insidious narratives that pinned the epidemic on a gay flight attendant. After developing a romantic relationship with Zero, Burton sees the errors of his ways and strives to tell Zero's story and make him visible again. The film ends with Zero asking to fade back into limbo, becoming a ghost once more. Zero's motivation to become visible and have his story heard, only to choose to become a ghost again, is initially perplexing. Zero's decision to fade back into obscurity after searching for wholeness is a commentary on Canadian culture during the beginning of the epidemic. Dugas could not become visible within the narrow schemes of representation of people living with HIV/AIDS in the 1990s (McKay, 2017). Thus, in the film, Zero chose to disappear rather than to be trapped within the limiting discourse at the time (McKay, 2017). *Zero Patience* explores how queer people navigate trauma while existing in sociopolitical structures that do not allow people to express and understand trauma openly. At the film's end, Zero returns to being a ghost, haunting spaces familiar to queer people diagnosed with AIDS: gay bathhouses, doctor's offices, and activist meetings in old churches or run-down buildings. 'Patient zero' follows the queer community as a reminder of those who have been lost, the stories that went untold, and the importance of finding new ways of meaning. *Zero Patience* challenges mainstream notions of pre-trauma wholeness and post-trauma fragmentation, asking, "Have queer people ever been considered whole in a culture of violence?"

To engage with anything queer is to engage with ghosts (Westengard, 2019). Queerness and queer desires have been historically configured as grotesque and monstrosities, and the historicity informed the demonization of Dugas, a queer man, as "patient zero." As *Zero Patience* explored, Dugas became the "bringer of disease," a narrative that continues to plague MSM. The 1993 testaments from people who received infected blood products and their families further shaped the "innocent" and "guilty" victims of HIV/AIDS. Contracting HIV through gay sex was

highly stigmatized because gay sex and queer desires were already regarded as monstrous. Zero becomes a ghost again because the violent sociopolitical structures never value his or other queer life. Similar to how monsters are taken up in popular media, heteropatriarchal powers are continuously on the lookout to neutralize threats - *how do we kill it?* (Miller, 2011). Greyson's retelling of Dugas' story through a campy and artistic musical that blends fact with fiction counters damaging cultural scripts. Like much of queer cultural production, Greyson does not sit and endure trauma silently and instead takes an opportunity to speak the stories of ghosts. Greyson does away with respectability politics, showcasing the gay bathhouse, hospital rooms, and urban backdrops in all their glory. Queerness has found kinship with monstrosity despite the stigmatization (Miller, 2011), and Greyson unapologetically displays the phenomenological experiences of queer people regardless of heteropatriarchal sensibilities viewing queer experiences as monstrous and grotesque.

**Past and Present: A Transitional Period of the HIV/AIDS Crisis, Ghosts, and the  
Emptiness Left Behind**

**Figure 4 and 5**

*Facsimile, Part II*



*Note.* S. Andrews, 1993, wax tablets.

The *Facsimile* (Figure 4) series by Canadian artist Stephen Andrews consists of images taken from obituaries of young men and women who died from AIDS and were rendered on wax tablets. Before the rendering process, Andrews faxed and photocopied the images hundreds of times to slowly erase the identities of the individuals. The word 'facsimile' is defined as written or printed material being an exact copy or reproduction of the original. By faxing and photocopying the obituary images to obscure the faces of the deceased, Andrews was artistically representing the death and erasure of queer people not only by AIDS but by a culture of violence. Andrew discusses how *Facsimile* was produced "during the time when many people were dying weekly and there was still widespread ignorance and fear about the disease" (Carlyle-Gordge, 2012). The installation became a place where family, friends, and lovers could mourn the dead (Carlyle-Gordge, 2012). *Facsimile* and other artistic pursuits also provided Andrews space to grieve the loss of his lover and friends. In 1992, Andrews was diagnosed with HIV, and within the year, he lost fifteen friends and his partner (Carlyle-Gordge, 2012). Before beginning antiretroviral therapy (ART), Andrews was very ill and was coming to terms with his imminent

death (Carlyle-Gordge, 2012). *Facsimile* acts as an expression of the dead and the 'living-dead.' The slow erasure and decay of the images represent both death and the heavy loss felt by the living. *Facsimile* showcases how queer people use art as a tool to understand the cultural and insidious trauma caused by the epidemic and a reminder that AIDS was not the only virus that was killing queer people. The low level of public awareness and lack of acknowledgment, especially outside of urban centers, worked to erase the experiences of those living and dying with HIV/AIDS (Warner, 2002). Thus, the 'living-dead' symbolizes not just queer people close to death but whom society deems worth living and worth dying.

### Figure 5

*My Government is Trying to Kill Me / Meditations on Compassion*



*Note.* T. Kerr, 2006, acrylic on canvas

Tiko Kerr's *My Government is Trying to Kill Me / Meditations on Compassion* (Figure 5) further examines queer necropolitics. The painting is that of a hospital room at night shrouded in sickly white, yellow, and green hues from the fluorescent light bulbs buzzing overhead and the

droning of the television hung on the wall. Kerr's painting feels like an invitation to death, the fish-eyes perspective giving the illusion that the viewer is looking into the room through their own eyes. *My Government is Trying to Kill Me / Meditations on Compassion* examines the haunting spaces of AIDS; no one is in the hospital bed, but the painting gives a sense that someone once resided in that ghostly, cold room. Kerr was diagnosed with HIV in 1985 and spent much of his time after his diagnosis living in St. Paul's Hospital in Vancouver (Carlyle-Gordge, 2012). In 2005, Kerr demanded access to experimental antiretroviral drugs that were his only chance of survival (Carlyle-Gordge, 2012); Health Canada initially rejected Kerr's demands; hence the first working title being *My Government is Trying to Kill Me*. Although Health Canada eventually gave Kerr access to the experimental drugs, his work is a stark reminder of how little the Canadian government regards queer existence.

*Facsimile* and *My Government is Trying to Kill Me / Meditations on Compassion* both radiate with an empty presence, where life and humanity are obscured or missing entirely, but their presence and energy persist. Both pieces are raw in their expression, shying away from symbolic flirtations and opting for a strong and defined approach to their message: the sheer emptiness of HIV/AIDS spaces. Canada has a unique national history concerning the HIV/AIDS epidemic; unlike its American counterparts, Canada did not have any nationally recognized gay and lesbian organizations (McKay, 2017). This absence further alienated queer Canadians nationally and fostered additional scapegoating toward the queer community (McKay, 2017). The radiating emptiness in both pieces is also a cultural commentary on the obscured, manipulated, or erased stories and experiences of queer people living and dying with HIV/AIDS. *Facsimile* and *My Government is Trying to Kill Me / Meditations on Compassion* carry the same message as the film *Zero Patience*, where queer experience was not given a place to exist during

a time of heightened stigmatization. Thus, through queer cultural production, queer people make their own space to understand trauma and its haunting (after)effects.

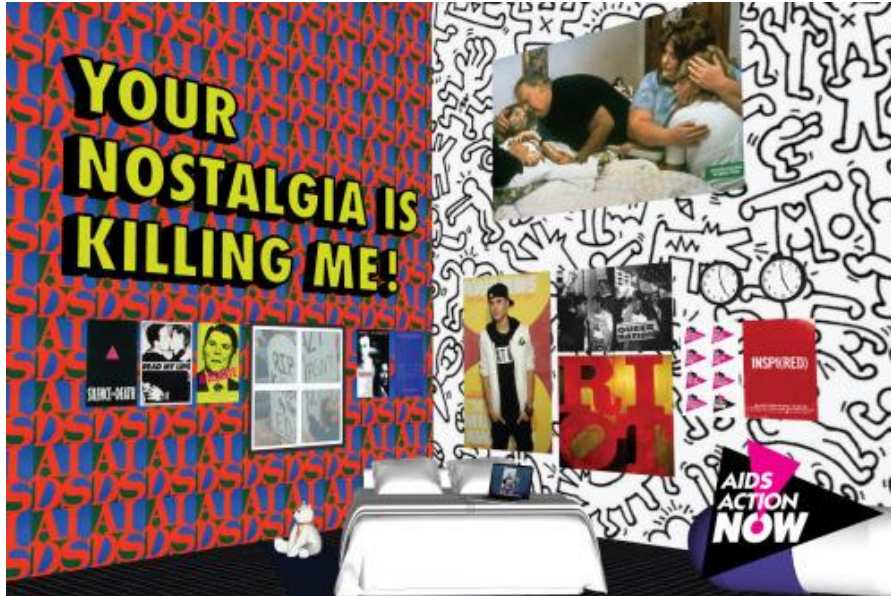
Andrews and Kerr's own experiences are similar, having been diagnosed with HIV and reached a point close to death before recovering after the introduction of ART. Andrews and Kerr's experiences and artistic work mark and shift from epidemic time to endemic time that continues to inform HIV/AIDS after the mid-2000s. Endemic times mark that "death is no longer something that suddenly swoops down on life — as in an epidemic. Death is now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it" (Gill-Perterson, 2013, p. 279). The concept of endemic time provides insight into HIV/AIDS art produced during this transitional era and beyond. Due to ART, HIV/AIDS became a manageable disease for many, but the cultural trauma and the insurmountable loss that queer community faced during the epidemic's beginning still informs queer phenomenological experience. Thus, past HIV/AIDS art now exists in an overlapping between the two, and contemporary queer existence navigates within that overlap between a generation of queer people that knew epidemic time with a generation of people who have only known endemic time - causing a disjoint (Gill-Perterson, 2013). Kerr's painting explores this transition, initially naming his painting *My Government is Trying to Kill Me* until receiving life-saving treatment and renaming the piece *Meditations on Compassion*. Kerr's renaming highlights how queer people's understanding of trauma constantly changes, providing new meaning and avoiding stagnation.

### **Present into Past: From Epidemic Time to Endemic Time, Queer Cultural Production's**

#### **Response to AIDS and its Haunting Spaces**

#### **Figure 6**

*Your Nostalgia is Killing Me*



*Note.* Ian Bradley-Perrin and Vincent Chevalier, 2013, digital sketchup

Young Canadian queer artists affected by HIV/AIDS are examining the surrounding discourse in new ways. Ian Bradley-Perrin and Vincent Chevalier collaborated on a digital sketchup titled *Your Nostalgia is Killing Me* that included prominent artwork and cultural items from 1980s AIDS activism, including General Idea's *AIDS*. The image recreates a bedroom surrounded by posters and the text "your nostalgia is killing me" in neon-yellow block letters. The use of digital mediums to create a collage of past cultural items marks a clash between two different periods and perspectives. Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier created the art piece to warn that the romanticism of the past can disrupt current priorities and real change (Liss, 2017). Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier's sketchup complicated the existing narratives regarding temporal trauma and the haunting spaces of AIDS, warning the community how the past can shroud the present. Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier's intentions were to address the resurgence of AIDS activism of the 1980s being used as an aesthetic, with people dressing up in the fashion of the time and trying to replicate the political era (Liss, 2017). Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier feel a



disjointed relationship with the past, where the haunting images of pale ghostly figures wasting away and covered in Kaposi's sarcoma lesions felt both eerily familiar and curiously foreign (Liss, 2017). The two young artists are concerned that a haunting past of HIV/AIDS is being romanticized and undermining the work and discussion of queer people living with HIV/AIDS in the 21st century. The digital sketchup was controversial, especially among older queer activists who lived through the HIV/AIDS crisis in Canada, considering the art piece tone-deaf and insensitive. For Bradley-Perrin and Chevalier, it became clear that there was a generational divide between people living with HIV/AIDS.

### **Figure 7**

*À Vancouver*



*Note.* Vincent Chevalier, 2016, video.

Chevalier's *À Vancouver* is a 2016 video filmed on an iPhone and later re-recorded on a CRT monitor to give a grainy effect. *À Vancouver* follows Chevalier as he retraces the footsteps of his father's trip from Montreal to Vancouver during the 1960s. The grainy, VHS-emulated

footage positions the video in a state of limbo between two different times, exploring the relationship between father and son and generational trauma. *À Vancouver* builds upon *Your Nostalgia is Killing Me*, questioning how to commemorate an event that both demands and refuses commemoration and falls prey to romanticization. Chevalier is HIV-positive, and his video explores the “uncanny as it affects the interplay between queer history and personal memory, and as it relates to the AIDS crisis—a sort of absence, or haunting, just beneath the surface” (Varghese, 2018). Queer theorists and queer cultural production have noticed something valuable and compelling in the Gothic and keep returning to the genre for insights (Rigby, 2009). Gothicism provides perspicuity into uncanny effects that are indissociably bound with a sense of repetition or “coming back” (Rigby, 2009). *À Vancouver* addressed the uncanny nature of queer trauma by visiting and revisiting Chevalier’s past in relation to his father. Chevalier’s work continues to challenge previous notions on how queer cultural production engages with trauma and the use of gothic tropes to understand said trauma. *À Vancouver* takes a cultural and psychoanalytical approach to trauma by exploring personal trauma against the backdrop of HIV/AIDS. Similar to Bradley-Perrin’s sentiments, Chevalier and many younger queer people feel disjointed with the past regarding the HIV/AIDS crisis. In his video, Chevalier explores these sentiments further, unearthing the complicated phenomenological experience of younger queer people navigating a past that is eerily familiar, haunting present, but foreign in nature simultaneously. Thus, queer artists like Chevalier are further complicating the linearity of trauma, examining personal, generational, and cultural trauma as a past and present experience.

## **Conclusion**

Queer theory and queer cultural production have a unique relationship with Gothicism. Through the use of gothic themes, tropes, and atmosphere, queer people repeatedly come back to the genre to explore trauma. My research expands upon the existing research domain by collecting and examining prominent HIV/AIDS-related visual art, photography, filmography, and mixed-media art created by queer Canadian artists. I had two primary research inquiries: (1) understand how Canadian queer cultural production regarding the trauma of HIV/AIDS changed throughout the years, and (2) how gothic tropes are configured and reconfigured throughout the different periods and shape the lives of queer Canadians. Through a visual and sociopolitical discourse analysis, I mapped out the phenomenological experiences of queer people living in Canada. I theorized that the way queer cultural production examines trauma and how it challenges mainstream narratives regarding trauma would change throughout the decades. I also theorized the use of gothic tropes used to explore queer cultural trauma in HIV/AIDS art would also change significantly. My research unearthed a divide between older and younger generations of queer Canadians and how they understand trauma regarding HIV/AIDS. My research also revealed the transformation in the use of gothic tropes to under queer cultural trauma: Art in the 1980s into the 1990s explored themes of death and decay; art in the 1990s into the 2000s explored ghosts, emptiness, and obscurity; and art in the 2000s into the 2010s explored themes of haunting, uncanniness, and temporality.

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