



**BETWEEN  
CERTAIN DEATH  
AND A POSSIBLE  
FUTURE**

**Queer Writing on Growing Up  
with the AIDS Crisis**



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# Looking for Gaëtan

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Gaëtan Dugas died on my first birthday in 1984. He was the flamboyant, promiscuous Quebecois fag erroneously described as the man who spread HIV throughout North America in Randy Shilts's disingenuous and sensationalized 1987 book *And the Band Played On*. The Patient Zero theory promoted in his book has been debunked by researchers and activists alike, but as a young small-town queer coming of age in the markedly homophobic and pre-/proto-internet '90s, I knew nothing of this critical response to Shilts, just that I was a fag, a fag was the worst thing a boy could be, and I was going to die of AIDS—God's punishment, or something. As a young teen, I remember seeing the made-for-TV movie version of *And the Band Played On* and feeling an inescapable sense of impending doom.

I was raised in a family of six in a moderately conservative Irish Catholic enclave in southern Rhode Island, home to the Naval Undersea Warfare Center where my father worked, a small Catholic university, robber barons' Gilded Age summer homes, and an international elite vacationing on their gaudy yachts and twelve-meter sailing boats. I'm the youngest of four kids, the only boy, and—disappointment of all disappointments—the gay one.

My three older sisters had the unfortunate luck of having to attend Catholic school until it became financially untenable in the wake of the '80s Reagan recession and the early-'90s banking and loans scandal. My gay ass was spared the Catholic school experience by the mere chance of being born last, but weekly mass and Sunday school were compulsory while I lived under my parents' roof. Being born last in 1983, as opposed to first in 1974, like my oldest sister, also may have saved me from an early death. Protease inhibitors, the drugs that finally pushed HIV into hiding in the human body, came out when I was thirteen, but kids in high school still regularly made jokes about fags dying of AIDS.

As soon as I could manage it, I moved from my deeply alienating Irish Catholic hometown of 16,000 to a poor post-industrial French Catholic town of 35,000 in central Maine to attend college. The prevailing conservative moralizing attitudes about sex, drugs, abortion, and homosexuality between the two places were parallel, despite the more than 200 miles and class differences that separated them. I barely knew anything about queer culture and never met an out gay man until I left home. As a post-pubescent adolescent, I had consciously limited my exposure to anything queer to evade the perception that I was gay, especially once my friend circle disintegrated after the realization that the mutual masturbation and sexual play we innocently engaged in as Boy Scouts had deeper meaning to the adults around us. As soon as our playful behavior had a name, it also had a history, pathology, stigma, and associated disease. If we kept this up we were going to lead unfulfilling lives and die of AIDS like all the poor, emaciated, KS-pocked faggots we occasionally saw on the nightly broadcast news—and go to hell.

No one taught me anything about being queer until I was in my twenties. There were no gay-straight alliances, PFLAGS, or queer-inclusive sex education classes. There were no queer clubs, bars, or bathhouses. There were no activist, artist, or subcultural

scenes outside of urban centers where I could find my proverbial people. There was one sexuality-themed course in college, and I took it, but that was it.

Thankfully, Emma Goldman, punk rock, and movies saved my life. Emma for writing with such eloquent, exacting rage against the violence of social controls and disenfranchising-by-design economic systems in a way that remained accessible to disaffected teenagers like me nearly 100 years later. Punk rock for not only giving me a sense of what's possible through collective organizing and shared passions but also for calling out the limitations. Punk also showed me that I didn't have to be a boring rainbow flag-waving pink-dollar consumer like the boys of *Queer as Folk* and *Will & Grace*. Instead, I could be a queer anti-capitalist punk, though the urban centers of queer punk culture (San Francisco, Los Angeles, Toronto, etc.) were places where I had never been and all the punks I knew were conspicuously straight. And, finally, movies, for connecting me with the gay history I so desperately wanted to know but couldn't find.

When Netflix began its DVD-by-mail subscription service in the early 2000s, I devoured everything I could get my hands on. I was a film studies student of my own making, following a self-directed syllabus based on Netflix's then-expansive DVD catalog. The anonymity of the mail-order system meant no longer interfacing with and outing yourself to potentially hostile cashiers at movie rental stores, greater access to unrated and NC-17 queer films that Blockbuster Video refused to carry, and a selection of queer films far greater than any brick-and-mortar video rental store I had ever encountered.

Through Netflix, and the painfully small video library at the college I attended, I watched queer film classics alongside a slew of queer AIDS movies on glitchy degraded VHS or DVD digital transfers: *An Early Frost* (1985), *Parting Glances* (1986),

*Common Threads* (1989), *Longtime Companion* (1989), *Tongues Untied* (1989), *Silence = Death* (1990), *The Living End* (1992), *Blue* (1993), *Philadelphia* (1993), *Silverlake Life* (1993), *Totally F\*\*\*ed Up* (1993), *It's My Party* (1996), *Love! Valour! Compassion!* (1997), *After Stonewall* (1999), *Angels in America* (2003) ... Despite deficiencies in representation, constraints of genre, and other shortcomings, these movies were where my HIV/AIDS and queer historical education took place, as there was nowhere else for me to start. The AIDS crisis has always been a crisis of representation, not just a medical and/or political crisis.

After graduating from college, I cobbled together a life through a mix of low-paying part-time social service and agricultural jobs while also starting a mostly queer collective house with friends. Together, in various combinations of ever-changing collective members, we volunteered our time and skills to help reenergize a fledgling queer and trans youth drop-in program, organized drag shows to raise much-needed cash for local youth HIV and STI prevention efforts, fought to reestablish a needle exchange, antagonized local Christian zealots at every opportunity, fought gay bashers and racists in the streets, defended low-income housing, traveled to regional and international activist gatherings and protests, and organized an AIDS Walk—a tedious nonprofit industry complex event for big-city folks but groundbreaking in our socially conservative working-class hometown where the Catholic hospital that was paid by the state to provide case management for people living with HIV refused to participate because we planned to distribute condoms.

The experience of being a part of this collective was equal parts exhilarating and exhausting. We were doing what we could with the limited experience we had, and the conspicuous absence of older queer mentors, save a few rad dykes—thanks, Penny and Erica. This absence of older queer mentors, particularly queer men, would set

me on a different path, forcing me to abandon the collective I had co-founded and relocate to the urban centers I found so alienating and soul crushing.

There's an entire generation of queer men missing from the present-day frame, and many of those who are still with us are deeply traumatized from decades of watching their friends and lovers decimated by a deadly virus made more virulent by homophobia and medical negligence. When I heard that Roland Blais, the owner of a defunct gay bar in Lewiston, Maine, inconspicuously named the Sportsman's Athletic Club, was retiring to Florida, I hastily interviewed him so there'd be some sort of official record. Mid-interview he made me turn off the video camera and wept while describing what it was like to lose bartender after bartender to AIDS and what loss on that scale meant for gay men like him living in small cities and rural towns. I didn't realize what kind of trauma I was prodding. I didn't know any better. The history of HIV/AIDS that I had learned up to that point had been an urban-centric one, where small-town queers were unaccounted for—or, worse, unimaginable. The presumptive lie was that the only way for queers to survive and thrive was to move to the city, a lie that continues to circulate today.

By 2009, I grew restless for greater intellectual stimulation and queer mentorship with older gay men that I couldn't connect with in central Maine. The economy had just tanked, so, like a lot of un/underemployed millennials, I headed back to school that September. Uniquely, my studies were paid for in part by settlement money from the city of Miami, where I was beaten unconscious by riot police and illegally jailed as part of the anti-Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) protests in 2003. Through my studies, I would be paired with an advisor from outside the school, my main reason for applying to the program in the first place. I fought with

administrators so that I could work with James Wentzy, a video artist and long-term survivor of HIV living in New York City.

As part of my studies in queer history, cultural memory, and HIV/AIDS, I met with James monthly in his basement apartment in the bowels of lower Manhattan. His apartment was filled with thousands of videotapes and pieces of AIDS activist ephemera that, at the time, you would never find in a museum. On my monthly visits he would fill me with stories, tea, and biscuits while we reviewed hour upon hour of video footage, both raw and polished. It was through my time with James that I learned inspiring queer histories I had never been taught, particularly the work of AIDS activist video projects like Damned Interfering Video Activists Television (DIVA TV), *AIDS Community Television (ACT)*, and the Gay Men's Health Crisis's *Living with AIDS* series. I watched, in awe, the raw power of his unnarrated collage documentary *Fight Back, Fight AIDS: 15 Years of ACT UP* and the performance poetry of David Wojnarowicz that James had captured before David's death in 1992. It was through my time with James, the exposure to his work and the work of his friends, that I'd come to understand the AIDS crisis as a genocide committed by a government against its own people. In particular, his experimental short, a 1994 collaboration with Kiki Mason entitled *By Any Means Necessary*, shook me to the core.

I've always understood the AIDS crisis, both in the past and present, to be deeply political. It wasn't until this moment with James, however, that I began thinking through what it means to understand this history as a history of genocide. Why don't we remember the AIDS crisis in the same terms as it was described at the time by the people who experienced the mass death and destruction firsthand? What's lost as metaphors shift? How is cultural memory passed from one generation to the next? Of course I'd never know loss on that scale. I'd never know what it was like to

drag a friend's coffin through the streets, enraged and exasperated. I'd never know what it felt like to throw fistfuls of ashes of dead friends and lovers onto the lawn of the White House in protest. There are limits to what I could know of history, no matter how hard I wished otherwise.

For me, history has always been about understanding how we got to the very moment of the present we inhabit—to understand how we've survived, who our enemies and allies have been, which activist strategies have worked and why, what is made (im)possible through shared collective experiences and moods, how the queer political imagination expands and contracts to render certain futures viable and others impossible. To think through these ideas I made a short film, *things are different now ...*, in the fall of 2011. I was at a particularly low point in my life—depressed, broke, recently uprooted, heartbroken, full of self-doubt, deeply alienated from living in a city for the first time in my life, and burned out from a decade of activism that never seemed to produce lasting structural change. At that moment, it felt like nobody gave a shit about queers, poverty, or HIV/AIDS, while the upwardly aspiring gays and lesbians were clamoring for marriage, open military service, and hate crime protections. I could barely get through my day most weeks, but making this film gave me structure and focus.

My short film struck an apparent nerve and was picked up by queer film festivals in North America and Europe, most excitingly, MIX NYC, where it premiered on opening night in 2012—the same film festival where James Wentzy's *By Any Means Necessary* screened for the first time when I was just a kid. What I didn't perceive was that I was part of a new wave of HIV/AIDS historicism in film, art, and literature. Suddenly, lots of people seemed interested in the history of HIV/AIDS. Documentaries and historical dramas came out every year for nearly a decade, some winning mainstream accolades and awards. Retrospectives of AIDS activist

art were suddenly in vogue. New biographies and memoirs dotted the shelves at mainstream bookstores. It all felt a bit strange to be swept up in this moment, especially as a largely unknown artfag from a small town in central Maine who made irritatingly experimental short films that hardly anyone had seen.

This wave of HIV/AIDS revisitation projects was the subject of much criticism, some of it pointedly directed at me—my work was dismissed as merely nostalgic, and I was put on blast alongside famous and/or well-resourced artists, curators, and writers. I remain sympathetic to many of the critiques of the whitewashing; the self-aggrandizing, questionable hero narratives; the historical revisionism, misogyny, and lack of engagement with historiography itself. There were so many things to discuss, but it felt bizarre to me that any interest in the past was being dismissed as merely nostalgic.

History is how I understood myself. I had no sentimental wish for the good old days of mass death and hopelessness, and I continue to have a hard time believing that one can't engage with history while also being involved in activist projects in the present—the very thing myself and others were doing. Importantly, though, this conflict over concentrated attention to the past was a symptom of a larger issue: How do we balance the urgent need to remember rapidly disappearing HIV/AIDS activist histories with the bifurcated urgency of HIV/AIDS in the present?

Surely, the imagined fortieth anniversary of AIDS in 2021 will create new waves of HIV/AIDS historicism, for better or worse. Of course, how we tell stories about the past tells us just as much about the present. The renewed interest in critical and artistic work exploring HIV/AIDS speaks volumes to the desire in the present for a better understanding of recent history that younger queers and activists aren't getting through formal and informal education. Thankfully, we now have a plethora of tools, both visual and textual,

to continue thinking through how histories come to bear on the present. These tools are not simply part of a clichéd directive not to forget the past lest we repeat it but also an injunction to recognize and deal with the traumas of the queer past that will always haunt the unfolding present. History is not a luxury.

Lying in bed talking aimlessly after sex the other day, my francophone poz lover revealed that he had never seen an HIV/AIDS-themed film, and that he had never even heard of Dugas or the Patient Zero myth that preoccupied my youth. At thirty-seven I carry the baggage of lived and historical trauma into our relationship, whereas at twenty-two he carries the burden of unrelenting stigma and criminalization wherever he goes. We've grown close quickly, flipping the cliché of the wiser older poz gay man educating an ignorant younger neg man. Without guidance or experience to fall back on, I find myself trying to be the person in his life I wished I had when I was a young queer in search of a history: kind, loving, generous, fierce, and knowledgeable—a friend and mentor.