

The art of medicine

Picture an epidemic: contemporary culture and HIV

Double check all quotes accurate all names of films people etc are accurate

Dazzling in a crimson prom dress, a young woman sits on an examination couch in a consulting room. In the muted blue shadows to her left, a physician prepares to take a blood sample. The young woman has been cared for by the doctor since she was aged 4 years when she and her mother were diagnosed as HIV positive. At that time, effective antiretroviral therapy (ART) was not yet available; the physician had thought that the girl was unlikely to live long enough to attend her junior prom. This image, *Eleven* (2015), a self-portrait taken by the American artist Kia LaBeija (b.1990), marks and celebrates her survival to adulthood. While acknowledging the life-saving importance of ART that was introduced on a mass scale in high-income countries in the late 1990s, the image also honours the practices of care undertaken by people living with HIV. As LaBeija has described: "I go to the doctor all the time, to check my CD4 count, see how my viral load is doing. Am I undetectable? How are my organs doing? It's a method of self-care, but not one many people get to see."

As a born-positive, queer young woman of colour, LaBeija's art contrasts with a dominant cultural imaginary of HIV that within high-income countries remains largely centred on the experiences of predominantly white and cis-gendered gay men in North America and the UK during the 1980s and 1990s. The last ten years have seen reinvigorated cultural interest in the first two decades of HIV across a diverse range of media, from contemporary artworks to prime-time television. This critical mass of cultural production has brought to public consciousness the history of an epidemic and the communities most affected by it, celebrated the achievements of HIV/AIDS activism, and drawn attention to the role of prejudice and stigma in creating and prolonging health crises. Yet a fetishisation of the early years of the HIV epidemic risks perpetuating an outdated narrative of HIV as a death sentence while overlooking advances in preventing HIV transmission such as pre-exposure prophylaxis, post-exposure prophylaxis, or the contributions of the U=U movement. Additionally, a cultural imaginary that canonises the experiences of white men in high-income countries fails to recognise HIV as an ongoing global health concern. The critical perspectives offered by humanities scholars, activists, artists, curators, and other creative practitioners are invaluable

in exposing the constraints of these dominant cultural representations of HIV and AIDS and in shaping a more complex and inclusive set of histories and present-day positionalities.

The challenges of adequately addressing the past and present realities of HIV were vividly illustrated by the reception of the exhibition *Art AIDS America*, which opened in the USA at the Tacoma Art Museum in 2015 after 10 years of careful research and planning. Of the 107 artists featured in the show, only five artists were Black-identified, including LaBeija, who was also the only Black woman and the only artist representing mother-to-child transmission. In protest, activists argued that this representation was profoundly out of step with the demographic realities of HIV in the USA, where Black Americans have been disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. When the exhibition went out on national tour it was robustly revised and expanded to address these concerns: the final version in Chicago comprised 150 artworks and a comprehensive public programme that was located not only within the gallery but also in spaces throughout the city that included free HIV testing.

Although the work of contemporary artists such as LaBeija eloquently gives form to under-represented experiences, museum shows like *Art AIDS America* do not typically reach the widest of audiences; it is arguably film, streaming, and television that have wider reach and can more impactfully shape the cultural imaginaries of an ongoing health crisis. With the box office success of films such as *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), *How to Survive a Plague* (David France, 2012), *Dallas Buyers Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013), *120 BPM* (Robin Campillo, 2017), and *1985* (Yen Tan, 2018), film studies scholars have critiqued the cinematic tendency to centre the stories of heroic individual white men while relegating the experiences of racially minoritised people, women, and transgender people to the margins. The critically acclaimed *Dallas Buyers' Club* tells the story of real-life Texan hustler Ron Woodroof (Matthew McConaughey) who partners with transwoman Rayon (Jared Leto) to set up a HIV medication buyers' club after receiving a positive diagnosis for HIV/AIDS. Set in 1985, the film explores the early experimental stages of ART development in clinical trials, but ethical questions related to the structure of drug trials and the commodification of human life are set aside in favour of a narrative that charts Woodroof's redemptive personal journey from self-interested homophobe to reluctant ally of the disenfranchised LGBT community who constitute the majority members of the club. The film's celebration of Woodroof as sympathetic anti-hero is achieved by the reduction of trans character Rayon to one-dimensional stereotype. Film scholar Akkadia Ford has highlighted how frequently Rayon is

depicted in clinical settings, contributing to the harmful trope of transgender people as inherently “ill”; Rayon ultimately suffers a solitary death in hospital, reinforcing societal stigmas about HIV/AIDS that still resonate today. Analyses such as Ford’s suggest that—even within a film widely regarded as progressive—narratives around how to live “successfully” with HIV are frequently shaped by heteronormative and transphobic assumptions, with potentially damaging consequences for transpeople actually living with HIV today.

In the UK, Channel 4 television drama *It’s a Sin* broadcast in early 2021 reignited British interest in cultural accounts of HIV/AIDS. Set in London in 1984 and based on director Russell T Davies’ recollections of that time, the series follows a group of young gay men and their friends. *It’s a Sin* had an effect on the number of people choosing to access HIV information, testing, and care, offering an example of the power of cultural representation to shape public perceptions about health. The Terence Higgins Trust helpline reported a 30% upsurge in calls the day after the first episode aired, which happened to be at the start of National HIV Testing Week. On the first day of that year’s campaign, the Trust took a record-breaking 8207 test orders; their previous highest have been 2709. A year after the show had broadcast, website traffic for the Trust had more than doubled. A number of cultural projects were encouraged by the positive reception of *It’s a Sin*, including the trialling of a new public poster health campaign, *Together We Can*, that made use of stills from the series. Locating *It’s a Sin* as part of a broader “post-AIDS” media ecology, media studies scholars Chase Ledin and Benjamin Weil ask what is at stake when dramatised HIV histories are reframed as pedagogic tools, and call for a closer dialogue between health communication materials and popular media practices. Writing in relation to Robin Campillo’s French AIDS activism drama, *120 BPM*, Benjamin Dalton and Alice Pember raise a similar question, asking what responsibility different contemporary artistic forms carry with them in relation to HIV/AIDS representation.

Cultural practices make crucial contributions to discourse about the past and future of the HIV response in the context of a more integrated approach to global health. Contemporary personal experiences of HIV offer important perspectives. For instance, the concept of “ending AIDS” is powerfully problematised and situated in relation to racial health inequalities in the USA by the contemporary poet Danez Smith, who recognises their own exposure to HIV as part of a broader programme of state-sanctioned violence against Black and queer people: “i got this problem: i was born / black & faggoty / they sent a boy / when the bullet missed”.

The poem *1 in 2* begins with the epigraph: “On February 23rd, 2016, the CDC released a study estimating 1 in 2 black men who have sex with men will be diagnosed with HIV in their lifetime.” With the odds stacked and newly diagnosed, the writer likens themselves to caught quarry, wondering: “is there a word for the feeling prey / feel when the teeth finally sink / after years of waiting?” In *it won’t be a bullet*, HIV is acknowledged as another entry “in the catalogue of ways to kill a black boy”, the writer entreating the reader to bear witness to the inexorability of their (future) death: “find me / buried between the pages [...] ironic, predictable. look at me.”

In this context, the maxim “it’s not a death sentence anymore” is radically troubled. In *recklessly*, a poem dedicated to Michael Johnson, a Black athlete jailed in 2015 for failing to disclose his HIV status to his sexual partners (he was later released in 2019), Smith draws attention to the disproportionate numbers of people living with HIV in state incarceration in the USA, and suggests that many do not have access to advances in HIV prevention: “the bloodprison leads to prison / jail doubles as quarantine / chest to chest, men are silent / you’re under arrest, under a spell / are you on treatment? PrEP? (wats dat?)”

The final stanza of the poem visually disassembles the line “it’s not a death sentence anymore”:

“it’s not a death sentence anymore
it’s not death anymore
it’s more
it’s a sentence
a sentence”

The work of contemporary artists and poets such as Kia LaBeija and Danez Smith offer a forceful reminder that, even within a rich country like the USA, HIV does not affect all communities equally and that the necessity of ensuring equitable access to prevention and treatment remains an ongoing public health challenge. Cultural representations helped to create a dominant set of AIDS imaginaries in the early decades of the epidemic and continue to have a powerful influence on public understandings of HIV today. As well as creating the opportunity for conversations about HIV and breaking down stigma, the ‘picturing’ of an epidemic actively shapes popular ideas about who might be at risk and what living well with

HIV might look like, with implications for the effective take-up of prevention measures, testing and treatment across different groups.

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Further Reading

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