



Love in a Dangerous Time

Canada's LGBT Purge

Media Backgrounder

From the 1950s to the 1990s, the Government of Canada systematically investigated, harassed and fired 2SLGBTQI+ members of the Canadian Armed Forces, RCMP and federal public service for purported national security reasons during what came to be known as “the LGBT Purge.” It was one of the longest-running, largest-scale violations of human rights in any workplace in Canadian history.

This official policy destroyed thousands of careers, did untold psychological damage and ruined lives. But survivors of the Purge fought back through political and legal campaigns that resulted in a \$145 million class action settlement in 2018.

Most funds were used to pay damages to LGBT Purge victims. However, funds were set aside for projects that would symbolically represent compensation for those victims who did not live long enough to receive individual compensation.

This exhibition — along with a related travelling exhibition and an exhibit in the Museum’s Canadian Journeys gallery — is one of the projects.

Why This Story Matters

Uncover a Hidden History

This exhibition shares a well-documented but largely unknown part of Canadian history through the poignant stories of survivors. It shares their stories with many more Canadians, encouraging reflection and dialogue about our history and future.

Empowerment Through Resistance

The Purge ignited a powerful movement for justice. The exhibition highlights the resistance of 2SLGBTQI+ Canadians who fought back against violations of their rights. By documenting both the damage caused by the Purge and the subsequent activism of survivors, this exhibition highlights how everyone has the power to resist violations of their rights and empower others to do the same.

Connect to Contemporary Issues

The exhibition is about much more than previous government policy and past injustice. It is about courage and perseverance, about losses and triumphs that continue today. While honouring survivors, this exhibition also generates new conversations, connecting the past to present issues.



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Exhibition Highlights

The Bar

Step into an immersive re-creation of a vibrant 1960s bar located within the Lord Elgin Hotel in Ottawa, known as a sanctuary for the queer community. This engaging space invites visitors to explore the camaraderie and challenges of the era.

The Dark Room

Venture into The Dark Room, an intense immersive experience resembling a typical interrogation chamber. A striking one-way mirror presents moving images on a monitor, coated with reflective film, designed to evoke a chilling sense of being watched. Accompanying audio clips of survivor oral histories bring haunting realities to life, offering insights into the harrowing experiences of those interrogated.

Ask a Question:

Meet LGBT

Purge Survivors

Visitors have the unique opportunity to engage directly with survivors of the LGBT Purge through a voice user interface (VUI) or a physical

controller. This interactive feature makes it possible for visitors to ask questions and receive insightful responses from those who have lived through the Purge.

The Fruit Machine: A Space Opera

Canadian performance art duo Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan created a film installation that reveals the cultural context underpinning the Purge. *The Fruit Machine: A Space Opera* references pop culture of the 1950s and 1960s, when television, advertising and many other cultural expressions presented heterosexuality and binary gender as keys to a normal, good life. The film takes its title from the "Fruit Machine" of the 1960s, which was not a machine at all but a series of tests the Canadian government had a psychologist develop to detect queer individuals "scientifically."

The Regulation of Desire

At the heart of the exhibition is *The Regulation of Desire*, a captivating and immersive film

installation by Noam Gonick, made in collaboration with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet.

This evocative piece portrays fractured bodies in motion, crafting a moving narrative of the Purge experience. The title draws from Gary Kinsman's influential book, *The Regulation of Desire: Queer Histories, Queer Struggles* (1987, revised in 2024).

Contemporary Issues Wall

The Contemporary Issues Wall, affectionately dubbed the "graffiti wall", features a large, interactive display that invites visitors to use their hands to uncover hidden words that showcase the achievements of the 2SLGBTQI+ community. As visitors interact, larger "constellations" of accomplishments emerge, but if they pause too soon, challenges identified by the community will obscure these victories, highlighting the need for continued action towards a world where everyone is protected by human rights.