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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Sydney & Kim

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by Hazel Katz

Committee in charge:

Professor Michael Trigilio, Chair

Professor Amy Adler

Professor Nicole Miller

Professor Roy Perez

2023

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University of California San Diego

2023

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Thesis Approval Page.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	vii
Abstract of the Thesis.....	ix
PART 1: SAFE.....	1
PART 2: SYDNEY & KIM.....	25
References.....	49

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: still, <i>Sydney & Kim</i>	x
Figure 2: still of Carol’s San Fernando Valley neighborhood in <i>Safe</i>	2
Figure 3: still of Carol seated in her new home while her maid Fulvia pours her milk and painters paint the cabinets, <i>Safe</i>	2
Figure 4: Carol’s illness is triggered by automobile exhaust in a parking garage in <i>Safe</i>	6
Figure 5: Carol’s illness is triggered by fumes at a dry cleaners, <i>Safe</i>	6
Figure 6: Carol watches an infomercial for the Wrenwood Center from her hospital bed, <i>Safe</i>	9
Figure 7: Carol watches an infomercial for the Wrenwood Center from her hospital bed, <i>Safe</i>	9
Figure 8: a variety on the Power Shuffle workshop in which New Bridges participants are told to stand up if “you were ever ridiculed by someone you didn’t know because you are black, latino, asian, native american, or jewish,” <i>New Bridges Documentary, 1989</i>	12
Figure 9: a New Bridges workshop facilitator explains internalized oppression as, “the lies that we get told, it’s all over, it’s everywhere, it’s like a smog, it’s something that we breathe,” <i>New Bridges Documentary, 1989</i>	12
Figure 10: ‘sharing groups,’ <i>New Bridges Documentary, 1989</i>	15
Figure 11: Peter Dunning asks Wrenwood Center residents, “why did you become sick,” <i>Safe</i> ..	15
Figure 12: Louise Hay hands an HIV positive ‘Hayride’ participant a mirror and tells him, “this is the savior you’re looking for,” <i>Another Hayride documentary</i>	19
Figure 13: a parade float advertising the ‘Hayrides,’ with a sign in the shape of a heart that reads, “HEAL AIDS WITH LOVE”	19
Figure 14: an advertisement for the C.O.C.K line from Chromat.....	22

Figure 15: Still from Linklater’s <i>Tape</i>	27
Figure 16 (below): Still from <i>Sydney & Kim</i>	27
Figure 17: 2008 midterm entitled, ‘Mary Miss and the Male Gaze’.....	29
Figure 18: 2009 midterm entitled, ‘Faith’.....	30
Figure 19: text message exchange between Hazel and Daniel.....	31
Figure 20: Reuters news article from 2012 with an image caption reading, “the Phillie Phanatic dressed as ‘Lady Pha Pha’ climbs out of her egg onto the field”.....	31
Figure 21: Brochure from the now defunct Queen Mary drag bar in the San Fernando Valley....	33
Figure 22: Brochure from the now defunct Queen Mary drag bar in the San Fernando Valley....	33
Figure 23: Poster for Sulka’s 1984 film <i>Sulka’s Daughter</i>	34
Figure 24: Hazel’s baseball card from her Phallic phase in 1993.....	37
Figure 25: Siobhan Meow on the Harold Stern show in 2006.....	39
Figure 26: Still from <i>Sydney & Kim</i>	42
Figure 27: Audre Lorde with her mother, Linda Gertrude Belmar Lorde, 1946.....	47
Figure 28: the San Diego Padres mascot, <i>the Swingin’ Friar</i> , dressed in a camouflage habit....	47

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Sydney & Kim

by

Hazel Katz

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

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Professor Michael Trigilio, Chair

As trans healthcare access becomes increasingly precarious, leftist discourses around trans care trend towards oversimplification. In reaction to right-wing ideologies that paint gender affirming care for minors as child abuse and for adults as criminal-pathological, liberal commentators describe trans healthcare through a positive dialectic of sickness, treatment, and recovery. This linear narrative erases trans people who are also disabled and/or who have had to medicalize themselves, literally make themselves sick, in order to receive care. Due to austerity social welfare systems, many trans women will remain debilitated long after their neovaginal nerves reconnect. How do we visibilize these women's stories cinematically in ways that do not

further demonize us as navel gazing snowflakes or posit representation as a solution to crises of neoliberal political economy?

To navigate this question, I turn to cinematic narratives of disability and (un)recovery to think through futures of care. In addition to theorizing with own short film *Sydney & Kim* [2023], this paper looks closely at Todd Haynes' 1995 film *Safe*, which describes a binary of capitalist care and New Age care. Haynes' implicit critique demonstrates the urgency of a third path of care, one that resists atomization. *Sydney & Kim* is motivated in part by queer cinematic works that index queerness obliquely, exploring what queerness is by showing what it is not. Narrative projects like Haynes' *Safe* and Gregg Araki's TV sitcom pilot *This is How the World Ends* [2000], employ an apophatic cinema of queerness, exaggerating cisness and straightness to the point of explosion. In a moment when Trans Cinema is still congealing into a genre, I hope *Sydney & Kim* can offer a cinematic language of refusal, in which the historical failures in achieving trans liberation through recognition inform filmic structure itself.



Figure 1: still, *Sydney & Kim*.

PART 1: SAFE

Safe is a 1995 feature length narrative film written and directed by Todd Haynes and starring Julianne Moore as Carol. The film was produced by Christine Vachon and photographed in 35mm by Alex Nepomniaschy. *Safe* tells the story of a 40-something upper middle class white woman, Carol White, as she, her family, and friends come to terms with a sudden onset chronic illness, labeled by some professionals as environmental illness or chemical sensitivity. Carol is a homemaker in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles. In the first half of the film she struggles through her life of leisure, her body becoming increasingly reactive to everyday contaminants like car exhaust, hair perm solution, lactose, makeup, and cologne. She battles coughing and sneezing fits, gastrointestinal issues, and an overwhelming fatigue that permeates her every moment. Carol's husband Greg (Xander Berkeley), her friend group, and her doctors are suspicious of her illness. They seem to agree that she is experiencing a psychosomatic episode, which for them is caused by Carol's idleness and therefore doesn't warrant serious care or attention.

Because the film's narrative focuses on mundane moments in Carol's life, it emphasizes her alienation from herself, her community, and the sociopolitical context that engulfs her. The film's cinematography and production design elevate Carol's small moments to an immanent trembling. Her world feels simultaneously sacred and hostile. Similarly, the sound design borrows organs, flutes, and low frequency rumblings from horror film soundtracks. The camera operates at a consistent distance from Carol and her milieu; there are rarely closeups of faces or objects. Instead, the cinematography transforms interiors into landscapes. Characters become accessories to the homes they design and inhabit. The camera feels reverential, almost frightened



Figure 2: still of Carol's San Fernando Valley neighborhood in *Safe*.



Figure 3: still of Carol seated in her new home while her maid Fulvia pours her milk and painters paint the cabinets, *Safe*.

to get too close. As a spectator I feel simultaneously buffered by the camera from the horror of Carol's world and implicated as a white woman who struggles with pathological control myself.

Safe can be read as a neo-western as well as a horror film. At dinnertime one night, Carol's husband helps his 12-year old son Rory with his homework. Rory is writing an essay about Black and Brown "criminal" gang members from downtown Los Angeles invading the peaceful San Fernando Valley. In another scene, Carol and her husband's neighborhood is revealed to be a half-built luxury development. The real estate signs dotting the Hollywood Hills signify a contemporary manifest destiny, one that continues a tradition of white settler colonialism, but trades 19th century Christian justification for a 20th century New Age religiosity.

Carol's friends are steeped in individualist self-help mythologies like Manifestation. In the locker room after an exercise class Carol attends with her friends, one of them says, "I eventually found the whole step thing was like just another form of addiction. That's exactly what this book is saying. It's about how to own your own life. What he's saying is, we don't really own our lives. We're taught what to do and think, but emotionally we're not in charge."¹ New Age thought like this has a pretense of overcoming internalized oppression and bodily pain, but it proposes a theory of change that ignores structural forces, thus empowering women like Carol to see their lives as disconnected from those of their maids.

I'm interested in thinking through half-religious, half-therapeutic traditions like Manifestation as intellectual descendants of manifest destiny. Both propose a duty to improve a

¹ *Safe*. Directed by Todd Haynes, Sony Pictures Classics, 1995.

“savage” space through bootstrapping models of recovery. While manifest destiny produces spiritual purification through the occupation, privatization, and land theft, Manifestation achieves purity through a marginalization of negative thoughts. Both seek to rescue terrains of illness through processes of domestication.

In the second half of *Safe*, Carol goes to Wrenwood Center, a retreat center for environmentally ill people in Albuquerque. Wrenwood is run by Peter Dunning (Peter Friedman), a man living with AIDS and chemical sensitivity who believes he keeps his illnesses suppressed through the magic of positive thinking. Peter wants the residents and visitors at Wrenwood Center to disconnect from the evils of the outside world and focus on good thoughts in their own minds.

Environmental Illness

Carol finds out about the Wrenwood Center when she’s in the hospital recovering from a particularly acute episode marked by bloody convulsions. As her doctor and Greg question Carol from the foot of her bed, they are unconvinced by Carol’s self-diagnosis. Carol’s doctor asks her to identify a specific food or medicine that she consumed, a discrete event that exposed her body to toxicity, “an emotional strain” that triggered her immune system. Greg says, “think honey! What gave you the bloody lip? What would cause you to actually bleed?” to which Carol answers, “I don’t know. The chemicals,” a line which is punctuated by an apprehensive but increasing synth and two high piano notes. Carol’s “the chemicals,” is verbalized through her chapped lips, landing like a tween’s protest in the silent hospital room. Carol is frustrated because she knows her sickness isn’t a moment of bodily collapse. There’s no before and after,

no singular culprit. Instead, her malady is a slow erosion, a long exposure to a diffuse network of toxins. Carol's poisons are the exhaust of capital extraction and therefore invisible and omnipresent. "the chemicals" and not "the Chemical."

In *the Right to Maim* Jasbir Puar reframes disability through an expanded field of disability, debility, and capacity. She writes that while disability describes a disabling event, a before/after of nondisabled/disabled, debility and processes of debilitation understand populations that have been excluded from dominant narratives of disability.² Debilitation characterizes both the inevitability and ongoingness of certain bodies wearing down, often low-wage workers of color and workers in the global south. Capital requires inexpensive bodies to churn through, simultaneously criminalizing and therefore further debilitating people inhabiting these bodies who refuse to do this labor or who organize resistance.

Carol's body moves between debilitated and disabled. She is classed and raced as a person who can access disabled identity. Unlike her maid Fulvia (Martha Velez), Carol can choose to stop her life and go to Wrenwood Center for a holistic treatment. Carol's economic superfluity - the condition of her never having to earn an income - is also based on the exploitation of women like Fulvia. While Carol is ostensibly tasked with performing reproductive and emotional labor for Greg (in the film her stepson Rory is from Greg's previous marriage), Carol is not engaged in labor that requires bodily degradation like her maid Fulvia. At the same time, Carol's illness is illegible to her doctors, her family, and her friends. Its chronicity and corporeal diffusion resists diagnostic criteria which in turn prohibits her from health insurance covered treatment. The alternative treatment she ends up seeking both at New Age

² Puar, Jasbir K. *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*. Duke University Press, 2017, xv.



Figure 4: Carol's illness is triggered by automobile exhaust in a parking garage in *Safe*.



Figure 5: Carol's illness is triggered by fumes at a dry cleaners, *Safe*.

groups in Los Angeles and then at Wrenwood Center reinforce the sketchiness of her condition. Her journey in the film counters exceptional narratives of disabled becoming both towards health and death. Carol's illness is a purgatorial stasis induced by the fumes of unregulated corporate greed and exacerbated by austerity public health budgets.

As Carol rests one night in the hospital, she encounters a promotional video for Wrenwood Center on the television. At first she skips past it, but after a brief visit to a home shopping network, she returns, and is transfixed. She learns that, "nestled in the foothills of Albuquerque, the Wrenwood Center describes itself as a nonprofit communal settlement dedicated to the healing individual." In the promo, Peter Dunning, Wrenwood's founder explains, "I like to think of us as a kind of safe haven for troubled times." "We're the most extensive cooperative treatment residency of our kind," says Wrenwood director Claire Fitzpatrick (Kate McGregor-Stewart), "but what I think makes us really unique is our emphasis on the individual." I am interested in exploring this tension between the group and the individual, which plays out at Wrenwood Center and becomes an avatar for alternative care discourse in our current moment.

Unlearningness

In recent years, social media influencers and activists have used the language of self-care and Manifestation to advocate liberation from sickness caused by capitalism. Contemporary activists increasingly use phrases like "the politics of luxury"³ as counter-narratives to dominant ideologies of scarcity that neglect sick and disabled people. While these slogans are comforting,

³ Sutton, Benjamin. "The Politics of Luxury: Tourmaline on Her Powerful New Photographs at Art Basel." *The Art Newspaper*, 16 June 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/06/16/the-politics-of-luxury-tourmaline-on-her-powerful-new-photographs-art-basel>.

they often lead to victim-blaming and integrate seamlessly within medical models of responsibility and care. Christian Parenti has traced a history of psychosocial revolution from the writings of Herbert Marcuse through cults like Re-evaluation Counseling to anti-oppression workplace trainings of the 21st century.⁴

Beginning in the 1960s and 70s, the New Left elaborated therapeutic techniques toward a Marxist emancipatory consciousness. In his 1969 piece, *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse writes that socialism requires mass psychological transformation. His reading of Marx is a lamentation of the global north working class consciousness which, for Marcuse, has festered and become reactionary through mass consumption and the lust for status.⁵ This remedial imperative, “the new sensibility” would produce “men and women who have the good conscience of being human, tender, sensuous, who are no longer ashamed of themselves”.⁶ Parenti provides an intellectual history of Marcuse’s third wife, Ricky Sherover, who studied under Marcuse at Brandeis University and eventually followed him to UC San Diego in 1965 along with Angela Davis and a few other graduate student mentees. Sherover, who was thirty years younger than Marcuse, partnered with him in 1974, just five years before he died. Sherover then left the US to study with Jürgen Habermas at the Goethe Institute in Frankfurt and published her dissertation, *Emancipation and Consciousness* in 1984.⁷

Sherover’s writing builds upon Marcuse’s psychological focus in his analysis of Marx. For Sherover, “Marx considers the abolition of mystified consciousness only in terms of removing its external causes. He fails to consider the possibility that the abolition of mystified

⁴ Parenti, Christian. “The First Privilege Walk.” *Nonsite*, 2021, <https://nonsite.org/the-first-privilege-walk/>.

⁵ Marcuse, Herbert. *An Essay on Liberation*. Beacon Press, 1969, 20.

⁶ Marcuse, 21.

⁷ Parenti, 2021.



Figures 6 & 7: Carol watches an infomercial for the Wrenwood Center from her hospital bed, *Safe*.

consciousness may require an intentional practice which focuses directly on its continuing existence in the subjectivity of individuals.”⁸ Similar to her New Left colleagues, Sherover prioritizes the transfiguration of internalized oppression, recommending an “intentional practice” that resembles a meditation.

While working on her doctorate, Sherover created *New Bridges*, a political education nonprofit in San Francisco that supported young people to “unlearn oppression.” Sherover was also active in the Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) therapeutic community, a group that branched off of Scientology in 1952 under its leader Harvey Jackins.⁹ RC, like Dianetics in Scientology, conceptualizes personal transformation and relief from suffering through the recollection and reformulation of past traumas, or “engrams” in scientology. RC practices an analogue confessional method, with co-counselors prodding each other to dig up their repressed memories, and encourages an explicit somatic discharge of psychic pain through crying, shouting, and shaking.¹⁰ Jackins, who previously was an IBEW union organizer and Communist Party member in the 1930s and 40s, before being fired and brought before the House un-American Activities Committee in 1954, developed RC as a pseudo-political strategy for social movements. As part of their therapeutic work, RC members were required to enter and enlighten various leftist organizations around “unlearning oppression” to push movement-workers towards demystified consciousness.

Sherover infused her theories of emancipatory consciousness and psychosocial reemergence into *New Bridges*. With her co-director Hugh Vazquez in 1976, Sherover pioneered

⁸ Sherover-Marcuse, Erica. *Emancipation and Consciousness: Dogmatic and Dialectical Perspectives in the Early Marx*. Blackwell, 1986.

⁹ Parenti, 2021.

¹⁰ Satter, Beryl. “The Left.” *Rethinking Therapeutic Culture*, edited by Timothy Aubry and Trysh Travis, University of Chicago Press, 2015.

the Power Shuffle, a group exercise in which participants are asked a series of personal questions which they answer by taking a step forward or backward. These movements become a public performance of participants' experiences of privilege and oppression. Exercises like these are often embarrassing, but that is the point. For proponents of RC and Dianetics, methods of communal forced disclosure enable a release or unlearning of oppressive assumptions.¹¹ In a 1984 interview, Sherover explains how she developed her teachings:

I noticed that myself and many other of my friends were consistently making the same mistakes even though our consciousness was 'politically correct' so called, and we read all the right books. Nevertheless, we tended to do the same silly, stupid things and kept on putting the same foot in the mouth. I realized that the difficulties that we were running into were not the sort of thing that could be corrected by either reading more books or by more political discussions...they had to do with undoing, on the emotional level, some of the consequences of prior conditioning and some of the misinformation ...that has been glued together as a result of that conditioning.¹²

Sherover was successful in her role at *New Bridges*. She was invited to give Unlearning workshops internationally, and many of her workshop activity designs persist today as antiracism trainings, DEI requirements, and self-help infographics. The diversity training industry has become so mainstream that it is now practiced in right-wing institutions such as financial services corporations and the US military.

Parenti, who participated in *New Bridges* workshops as a teenager, argues that exercises like the Power Shuffle promote the idea that individual psychological reckoning can ameliorate and even transform systemic issues like racism and income inequality: "when rendered as oppression, the material problem of class power is replaced by the attitudinal problem of 'classism.'" Additionally, these workshops frame internalized privilege and oppression through

¹¹ Parenti, 2021.

¹² Seminara, L., and Liz Larew. "Interview: Ricky Sherover-Marcuse." *Women's Voices*, no. 36, 1984, p. 6-.



Figure 8: a variety on the Power Shuffle workshop in which New Bridges participants are told to stand up if “you were ever ridiculed by someone you didn’t know because you are Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, or Jewish,” *New Bridges Documentary, 1989.*



Figure 9: a New Bridges workshop facilitator explains internalized oppression as, “the lies that we get told, it’s all over, it’s everywhere, it’s like a smog, it’s something that we breathe,” *New Bridges Documentary, 1989.*

discourses of illness and recovery.¹³ Sherover and her upper-middle class white comrades sought to eradicate the “same silly, stupid things,” that they had inherited from their environment and drank like tainted water.

In 1977, Audre Lorde gave a speech to the MLA in which she asked, “What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?”¹⁴ While these words can be read as a poetic description of internalized oppression or a reflection on the emotionally coercive atmosphere of racial capitalism, Stacy Alaimo reminds us that Lorde was living with breast cancer at the time: “notwithstanding the potent metaphorical resonance of ‘swallowing’ tyranny, the swallowing--and the death that results--is also quite literal, since it alludes to the ingestion of carcinogenic foodstuffs.”¹⁵ Sherover, who also lived with and died from cancer, characterizes *isms* as misinformational environmental illnesses that debilitate us over time, but that with “intentional practice,” we can heal and become unsick, abled, neutral, good people.

Getting Better

Returning briefly to Puar, who writes about Dan Savage’s queer acceptance movement *It Gets Better*, we can connect Sherover’s teachings around oppression to discourses of abundance that have always flourished in US capitalism. In Puar’s introduction, entitled “the Cost of Getting Better,” she contrasts Savage’s exhortation, “You have to live,” with ACT UP activists, “You are

¹³ Parenti, 2021.

¹⁴ Lorde, Audre. *The Cancer Journals*. Aunt Lute Books, 1997.

¹⁵ Alaimo, Stacy. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Indiana University Press, 2010, 86.

killing us!” For Puar, “Savage does not direct his message to the endemic social and political forces that continue to manifest homophobic hatred. Instead, his ‘you’ is the individual, to whom and only to whom he credits the survival of gay bullying. In this regard, ‘It Gets Better’ presumes the end, the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, rather than any homage to its ongoing deleterious effects or current situation.”¹⁶ Sherover wants leftists to get better too, and she is convinced that they can. They *have* to get better if they are going to improve their consciousness and stop making microaggressive mistakes. And they have to get better if we are going to have a socialist revolution. And while they should get better communally, through group process work and peer counseling, they are ultimately individually responsible for expelling the toxic messages that they have inhaled from a racist culture.

Todd Haynes directed *Safe* in 1995, at the peak of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the US, when over 50,000 people died of the disease.¹⁷ His film functions as both a metaphor for the stigma of the pandemic and the many alternative approaches to healing that sprang up in the wake of Reagan and Bush administration inaction. When Carol arrives at Wrenwood Center, Peter, the founder, is introduced to Carol as “a chemically sensitive person with AIDS.” In his lectures to Wrenwood patients, Peter describes how he has overcome his illnesses through a combination of positive thinking and unlearning self-victimization. Wrenwood is a treatment center premised on the complete healing of the individual. When Greg drops Carol off, he affirms this belief: “Look, you just relax and take care of yourself, get well quick and we’ll come see you in a couple of weeks. Soon as I reach deadline on this.”

¹⁶ Puar, 9.

¹⁷ Torian, Lucia. “HIV Surveillance—United States, 1981-2008.” *JAMA: the Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 306, no. 2, 2011, pp. 146–49.



Figure 10: 'sharing groups,' *New Bridges Documentary*, 1989.



Figure 11: Peter Dunning asks Wrenwood Center residents, "why did you become sick?" *Safe*.

In a *Bomb Magazine* interview shortly after the film premiered, Haynes discusses Louise Hay's book on AIDS, *The AIDS Book: Creating a Positive Approach*, his inspiration for the Wrenwood Center. Hay was a bestselling self-help author who, in the mid-1980s started a support group that became popular with gay men, known as "the Hay Rides" for people living with AIDS in West Hollywood. Hay appeared on Oprah, Dr. Phil, and other popular talk shows to advertise her work. Haynes says: "her book literally states that if we loved ourselves more we wouldn't get sick with this illness. And that once you get it, if you learn how to love yourself in a proper way, you can overcome it. That's scary."¹⁸ Hay herself had been diagnosed with cervical cancer and she credited her positive thinking approach with ridding her body of the disease.

Hay's most popular book *You Can Heal Your Life* outlines her philosophy on healing. Her approach bears some resemblance to Dianetics: we must remember painful memories and let them go. It is the holding onto uncomfortable feelings that continues to cause us pain in the present moment: "pain of any sort, to me, is an indication of guilt. Guilt always seeks punishment, and punishment creates pain. Chronic pain comes from chronic guilt, often so deeply buried that we are not even aware of it anymore."¹⁹ Hay writes that her cervical cancer was caused by unreleased feelings she had as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. She believes that sexually transmitted disease is similarly caused by sexual guilt and negative feelings that we've internalized about our bodies. For Hay, AIDS afflicted gay men in large numbers because they were more likely to have received and internalized negative messages about their bodies from their families, and over time these negative messages metastasized into HIV/AIDS.²⁰

¹⁸ Maclean, Alison. "Todd Haynes." *Bomb*, vol. 1, no. 52, 1995, p. 48-.

¹⁹ Hay, Louise. *You Can Heal Your Life*. Hay House, 1995.

²⁰ Hay, 134.

At the same time that Louise Hay was organizing the Hayrides, Ricky Sherover was engaged in destigmatizing AIDS internationally. One of Sherover's former mentees and longtime HIV/AIDS activist remembers developing an "Unlearning AIDS-phobia" workshop with Sherover.²¹ Wrenwood Center too is a powerful driver of destigmatization and affirmation. When Carol arrives at the Center, she is exhausted from the trip. Claire, the director, gives her a big hug and validates her pain: "there's nothing more debilitating than travel." Carol has never been in a space like this before, where staff asks how they can accommodate her. But Peter is also making a lot of money off of Wrenwood's patients.

Eventually Greg and Rory come to visit Carol at Wrenwood. Greg and Carol are walking back to her cabin one evening and Greg asks Carol about her prognosis. Carol answers, "I just think it's true what they say. That it's up to the individual...and that it takes time." Carol pauses and something catches Greg's eye. It's a mansion on top of the hill overlooking Wrenwood's campus. "Whose house is that?" asks Greg. "That's Peter's," replies Carol, "It's gorgeous, isn't it?" Greg's suspicion grows but he manages to keep it to himself. This scene demonstrates the mutuality between Peter's business model and his philosophy of healing. Carol has been indoctrinated into the belief that her sickness is up to her to heal and simultaneously that Peter's profit-motive is normal. The veil of Peter's pyramid scheme only lifts for Greg, a relative outsider to Wrenwood.

²¹ "Message from JDD about Ricky." *Herbert Marcuse Official Homepage*, 20 Apr. 2002, www.marcuse.org/herbert/people/ricky/JDDAbtRicky024.htm. Accessed 6 Mar. 2023.

Discourses of Abundance

Louise Hay's writing about prosperity and abundance further contextualizes Peter's entrepreneurial philosophy of sickness and recovery: "Allow fancy homes and banks and fine stores and showrooms of all sorts--and yachts--to give you pleasure. Recognize that all this is part of YOUR abundance and you are increasing your consciousness to partake of these things if you desire. If you see well-dressed people, think, 'Isn't it wonderful that they have so much abundance? There is plenty for all of us.'"²² Like the specter of Peter's mansion, which squats like a panopticon above the still-sick patients of Wrenwood, Louise Hay's bestselling novel, which the reader holds in their hands, proves that through hard work and positive thinking, anyone's sickness can be cured, any poor person can become rich, any sad person can become happy. Moreover, those who struggle or refuse to let go of their resentment towards those with more privilege are merely reentrenching harmful behavioral patterns that will stagnate them in emotional and material misery. Hay's analysis is persuasive because it refuses to accept the scarcity that undergirds capitalist imaginaries. She maintains that not only do we all deserve to have all of our basic needs met, but we deserve pleasure and prosperity. For Hay, the individual's economic success is separate from the economic precarity of an Other. There is enough for all of us.

While there is indeed enough for all of us, Louise Hay and Peter obscure the structures that bind us economically to one another. It is insufficient to say that we can wish away class strata by remembering that inequality isn't a foundational truth of humanness. Hay writes, "There is a natural rhythm and flow of life. Things come, and things go. I believe that when

²² Hay, 121.



Figure 12: Louise Hay hands an HIV positive ‘Hayride’ participant a mirror and tells him, “this is the savior you’re looking for,” *Another Hayride* documentary, 2021.



Figure 13: a parade float advertising the ‘Hayrides,’ with a sign in the shape of a heart that reads, “HEAL AIDS WITH LOVE.”

something goes, it is only to make room for something new and better.”²³ These statements harmonize with neoliberal capitalism and the unregulated privatized economy, where the market is endowed with a liberatory subjectivity that is not allowed to workers. Moreover, Hay and Peter (and Sherover’s nonprofit) pathologize and commodify people in order to extract their healing as a fungible asset.

In 1984 Louise Hay founded Hay House, a personal growth publishing company that has a current revenue of \$102 million per year. Hay House publishes works by Abraham Hicks, collective entities that are interpreted and written down by Esther Hicks, who has a \$13 million net worth. Hicks, who receives and records messages about Manifestation, belongs to Louise Hay’s tradition. Manifestation describes several new age self-help techniques that transform thoughts into reality. Hicks believes that people attract the things that happen to them through their thoughts. Therefore, with positive thinking and manifesting what we desire, we can live happy, fulfilling lives. Hicks’ teachings lead to victim-blaming and blend seamlessly with the individualism taught by racial capitalism.

In recent years, many social media influencers have embraced various strands of Manifestation to build their followings. Similar to televangelists, social media influencers use the language of therapy and self-growth to nurture cultlike audiences. Successful queer and trans artists and activists have recently turned to the language of manifesting as well. Activists increasingly use phrases like, “the politics of luxury” and the “politics of abundance,” to mean that marginalized people deserve to have everything they need and more.

²³ Hay, 121.

Tourmaline is an activist, writer, and artist who, in recent years, has embraced the teachings of Abraham Hicks. In a 2020 article in *Vogue*, Tourmaline details her practice of “freedom dreaming,” as a process of Manifestation. She writes, “freedom dreams are born when we face harsh conditions not with despair, but with the deep knowledge that these conditions will change--that a world filled with softness and beauty and care is not only possible, but inevitable.” She continues, “when I stay in bed all day, luxuriating in rest, moving in and out of cat naps, I’m freedom dreaming. I am living in the knowledge that I don’t have to be productive in the ways capitalism demands of us in order to deserve relaxation and recuperation.”²⁴

Tourmaline’s phrasing is lyrical and captivating. Her gentle charisma is reminiscent of Peter’s philosophy: “if I really believe that life is that devastating, that destructive, I’m afraid that my immune system will believe it too. And I can’t afford to take that risk.” At what point does a dream or conviction fall prey to the realities of our world? Tourmaline’s focus on rest and replenishment is convincing, but are her practices accessible to the majority of working people? Similarly, Peter’s words dismiss people who can’t unsee the pain of living, or who have bodies that can’t assimilate into narratives of getting better.

This is not to say that we shouldn’t continue to dream of a world without oppression. On the contrary, without collective speculative futures, we stand no chance against state violence and climate catastrophe. But we should remain wary of thought leaders that profit financially from their endorsements of personal growth practices which are devoid of collective strategies. Tourmaline, for example, has recently partnered with global brands like Unilever and Reebok in campaigns around trans visibility. While she seems to have created a life for herself where she

²⁴ Tourmaline. “Filmmaker and Activist Tourmaline on How to Freedom Dream.” *Vogue*, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream>.

has time and space to freedom dream, she's doing the pinkwashed bidding of multinational corporations that debilitate workers in the global south.

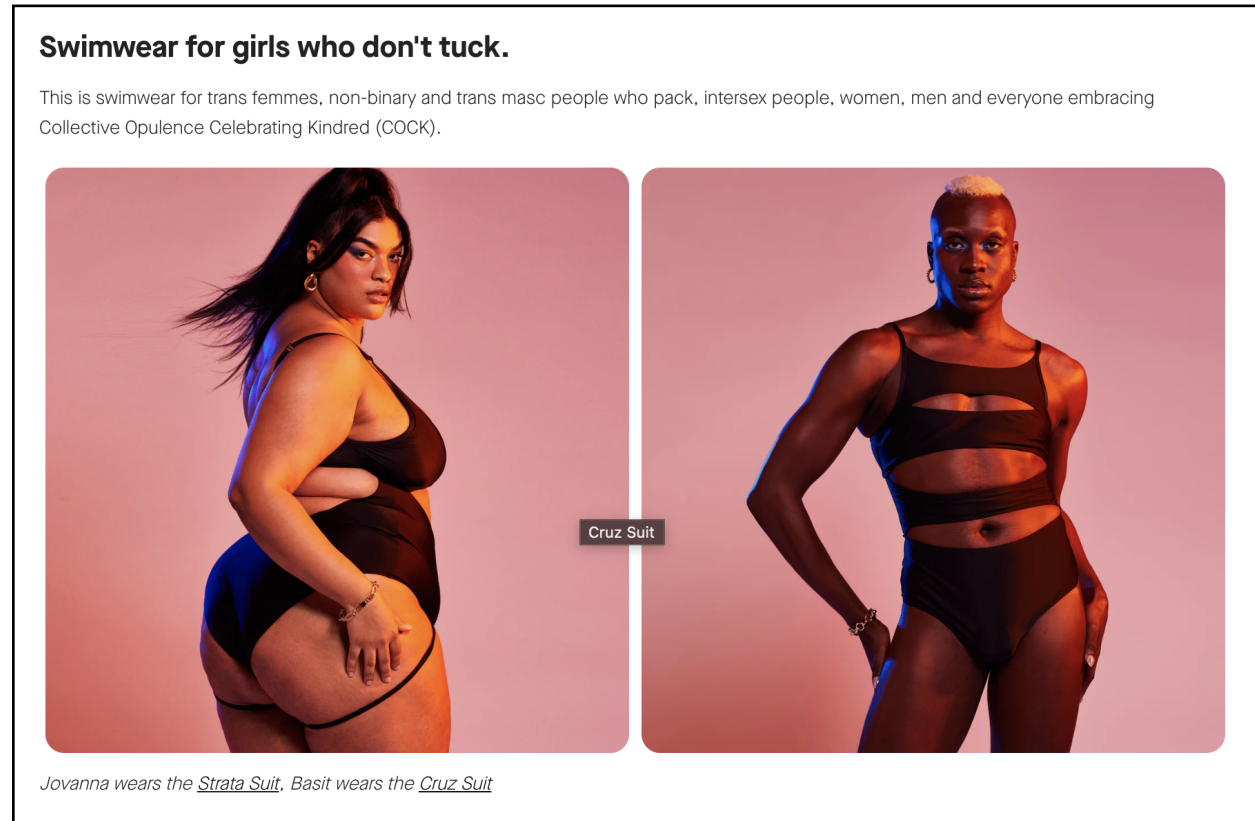


Figure 14: an advertisement for the C.O.C.K line from Chromat.

Tourmaline's clothing line Collective Opulence Celebrating Kindred (C.O.C.K.) for Chromat Spring Season 2022 consists of swimsuits for trans women "who don't tuck."²⁵ The branding is provocative but misleading. Women's swimsuits made for cis women, the overwhelming majority of swimsuits already on the market, are already designed for trans women who don't tuck. While the C.O.C.K. line is a celebration of trans women's genitals and a

²⁵ Jenny, Alex. "Inside Chromat and Tourmaline's "Lifesaving" Swimwear Show at Riis." *Them Magazine*, 16 September 2021, <https://www.them.us/story/chromat-x-tourmaline-swimwear-show-riis-beach>. Accessed 6 March 2023.

provocation that we do not need to assimilate, it prefigures a reality that simply does not yet exist.

It is not Tourmaline or any other trans designer's responsibility to fill the material gap in the swimsuit market for trans women who do tuck, whether for reasons of safety or fashion. Nonetheless, in its creation of a new market, the C.O.C.K. line implicitly suggests that trans women should not tuck. Louise Hay writes, "I ask clients with sexual problems to begin to relate to their rectum, penis, or vagina with a sense of love and appreciation for their function and their beauty. If you are beginning to cringe or get irate as you read this, ask yourself why. Who told you to deny any part of your body?"²⁶

Where does this leave trans and/or disabled people who are unable or unwilling to integrate their bodies? At what point does compulsory positive thinking mystify possibility in the creation of new markets? At what level do discourses of Manifestation and unlearning internalized oppression place the onus for structural change in the mind of the individual? In an impassioned speech one night at Wrenwood, Peter prefigures a liberated future: "what do I see outside me? I see the growth of environmentalism. Right? And holistic study...I see sensitivity training in the workplace! And the men's movement. And multiculturalism. I see all these positive things outside in the world because what I'm seeing is a global transformation, identical to the transformation I revel at within." Peter's version of liberation is constituted by an almost exaggerated model of neoliberal inclusion. His theory of change repairs structural oppression through diversity trainings like the workshops developed by Ricky Sherover. These ideologies of

²⁶ Hay, 131

internal transformation flow from Marcuse's essays of the 1960s to Tourmaline's art and fashion of today.

While the Wrenwood Center is nourishing for Carol in that it takes her disability seriously and attempts to meet her access needs, it simultaneously shames her and her cohort anytime they experience despair. Peter's healing method doesn't leave any room for grief or pain, and the ethos of Wrenwood Center disavows structural ableism and class oppression in general by condemning residents who read the newspapers. While Wrenwood Center is nominally opposed to the capitalist individualism of the outside world, it ends up reinforcing a performative care network that individualizes disability. Peter believes that sick people need to overcome their illness and that each sick person is solely responsible for their own healing project. In this way, *Safe* demonstrates how both mainstream and New Age approaches to debility are rooted in similar medical models of responsibility and care. Wrenwood Center, just like Carol's friend group in the Valley, depends on ideas of independence for their material prosperity and reproduction, forbidding chronically ill and disabled people from building coalitional movements across difference.

PART 2: SYDNEY & KIM

Sydney & Kim is a 17 minute short film about the demise of a close friendship, exploring how sickness and debility transform what we hold most dear. After 25-year old Sydney is released from the hospital following a major facial surgery, her best friend Kim cares for her at a motel during her recovery. What starts as a dynamic full of hope and possibility, reveals itself to be a messier and more contradictory portrayal. As Kim's flirtation with the motel manager escalates, Sydney's resentment begins to boil over and the friends remain unable to name the complicated realities of projection and isolation. Instead, Sydney and Kim meander haphazardly, underneath the Hollywood fantasy of unscathed trans sisterhood and everlasting cis-female-friendship. Through the nuanced exploration of this specific friendship, I look to find implicit ways to grapple with bigger questions around reluctant care-work, unruly becoming, commodified representation and the precarity of unconditional love amidst constant instability. I also hope the film will serve as an invitation, precisely through its admission of failure, to resist the neoliberal demand to be desirable, exceptional, beautiful or even kind, as a prerequisite to forms of deservability.

Inspired by the performativity in 90s films like Cauleen Smith's *Drylongso* [1998], Whit Stillman's *Metropolitan* [1990], and Richard Linklater's *Tape* [2001], the narrative arc is driven by dialogic events. As each character's flaws and strengths are revealed, the audience is left to wonder who's the hero and who's the villain. Ultimately, the friendship itself becomes the main character, as its toxic logic motivates Sydney and Kim's actions. *Sydney & Kim* analyzes the challenges of queer and trans chosen family, where liberatory mantras of interdependence collapse into revenge fantasies.

Many scenes in the short feature a layering of performance: Sydney adlibs along to COPS; Kim takes selfies in the desert; Kim and Sydney records a Tik-Tok; Sydney films a softcore porn video with JR and Kim. Through these moments, I hope to create a film-within-a-film, illuminating the gap between the type of messy, human, and unremarkable world these characters exist in, and the sterilized and exceptionalist mainstream world that looms over so many girls' heads as their only means to belong.

By shooting on 16mm film instead of a digital camera, I'm interested in proposing a formal metaphor for transfemme experience. While digital images are recorded as pixels and undergo several series of compressions, filmic images exist alchemically. Film stock is cellulose plastic and gelatin emulsion. Gelatin is derived from animal bones, skin, and connective tissue. Film stock is kept in the dark, exposed to the light for a fraction of a second, and then processed in chemical solutions to produce images. Trans women are born in a body that doesn't feel like a home, and often undergo several major medical procedures and hormonal replacement therapy in order to see themselves. Because *Sydney & Kim* is a film about gender affirming surgery, I chose 16mm film stock as a material analogue to the magic of transition.

Sydney & Kim is influenced by domestic dramas, coming-of-age films, chick flicks, and cinema verite documentaries. The film embraces the theatricality of a dialogue centered script and imagines the motel room as a stage. The one-location setting becomes a metaphor for the claustrophobia of Sydney and Kim's relationship. Handheld camerawork emphasizes the internal worlds of the characters, alternating between boredom, sickness, and inebriation. Intimate verite scenes are interspersed with stylized wide shots of the desert landscape around the motel. This montage technique emphasizes how the main characters are alone, together.



Figure 15 (above): Still from Linklater's *Tape*.



Figure 16: Still from *Sydney & Kim*.

Ultimately, I conceive of *Sydney & Kim* as a text that complicates positive discourses around queer and trans healing. By establishing a demanding and problematic relationship of care between Sydney and Kim, I hope to show the contradicting layers of power and complicity that exist in the western-trans medicalized process which is often either vilified or presented as a linear heroine's journey. Part of Sydney's self-conception of healing is taking revenge against Kim. In the climactic scene Sydney jeopardizes Kim's bodily autonomy, exposing her to overdose, injury, sexual assault, and being outed. While these fleeting moments of reprisal provide an outlet for Sydney's resentment, they evidence a dysfunctional relationship that needs one friend to be sick at all times. Not only does Sydney's recovery trace a circuitous path, but both Kim and Sydney understand their closeness through a power differential of taking care, where sickness is imagined as the state of equilibrium. For Sydney and Kim, any movement away from debility requires a taking-back of care-work. This relational dynamic has a psychoanalytic bent that is specific to friendships between transwomen.

Girdickcentrism

14 years ago, on October 17, 2008 I wrote an Art History midterm entitled, "Mary Miss and the Male Gaze." I remember feeling like a real art historian as I sprawled next to Mary Miss' subterranean sculpture outside my undergraduate art museum and scribbled notes. In the paper I write things like, "the socialized viewer, therefore, is forced to discover and greet the work herself, as she has no cultural precedent which would inform her to look underground for work." My use of 'she' for the third person general makes me cringe a little bit; I imagine myself with my feet up on a desk somewhere, surrounded by philosophy books, an earnest closeted woman in

drag as a philosophy guy. I'm interested in how I applied the feminism I was consuming, notably Laura Mulvey's article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, referenced in my midterm.²⁷ It's also endearing to ask my 19-year old self to mansplain feminist film theory to my 34-year old femme-self. He writes that:

...when the male infant sees that his mother lacks a penis, he believes that she has been castrated as a penalty for wrongdoing, worrying that the same fate will befall him. In the Lacanian mirror stage, the male infant enters for the first time into subjectivity as he views himself in the mirror and is for the first time conscious of his separation from his mother. In the mirror stage, the child begins to make inferences from the visual image. It is from these two infantile developments, Mulvey argues, that the woman's entire function in the creation and interpretation of the visual image is concretized.

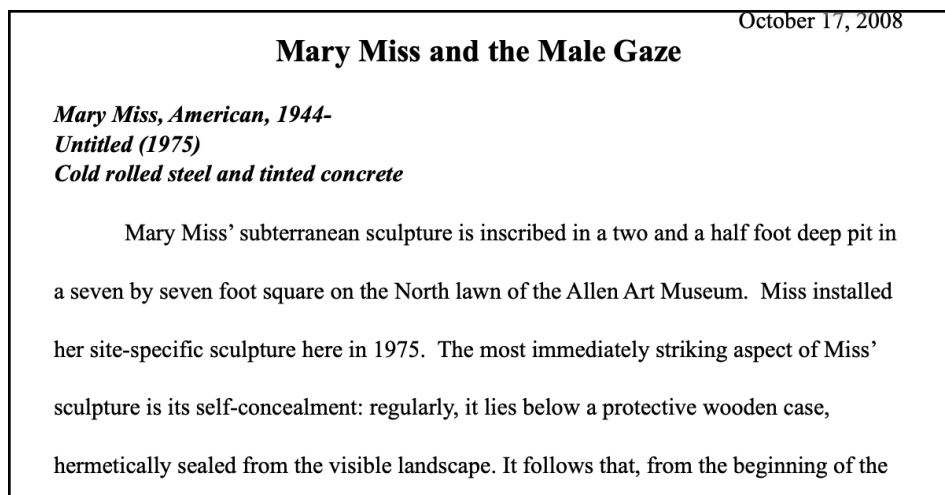


Figure 17: 2008 midterm entitled, 'Mary Miss and the Male Gaze.'

I remember October 2008 because that was the year the Phillies won the World Series. October 17 would have fallen in the middle of the week of off days the Phils had between clinching the pennant and the start of the Series in Tampa. I wrestled that month with a feeling of emptiness at the Phillies success. The Phillies hadn't won the World Series since 1980. Why

²⁷ Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6-18.

wasn't I more excited about an event I had been waiting my whole life for? After the Phillies beat the Rays that year and I had time to digest my fandom emotions, I wrote a paper for a class called Screening Spirituality about my baseball faith. In this piece I wrote sentences like, "Baseball's indeterminacy is alluring. Cavell writes, 'In viewing a movie my helplessness is mechanically assured.' Fandom is similar."²⁸ The syllabus for Screening Spirituality lists Laura Mulvey's article as well.

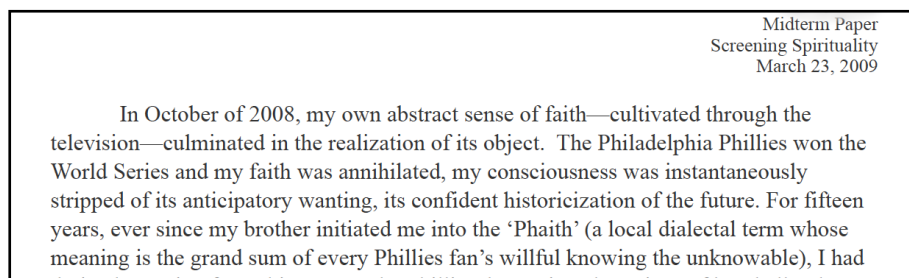


Figure 18: 2009 midterm entitled, 'Faith.'

In October of 2022 the Phillies were back in the NLCS for the first time in 12 years. This year they played against the San Diego Padres, and I was privileged to attend game two. I didn't wear my Phillies red this time--my baseball jerseys have been making me feel too manly--so the couple Phils fans I saw in enemy territory were unsure about my allegiances. They eventually accepted me, and as the men got drunk during the game, they looked at my boobs saying things like, "I like your dress," and "what does the writing on your dress say." The Phillies lost, and I descended into depression, which was alleviated somewhat knowing that had they won, I would have felt depressed at my lack of euphoria.

²⁸ Cavell, Stanley. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. Harvard University Press, 1995.

There's a lot to deconstruct here, but I'd like to first return to the Phillies. In my paper on baseball faith, I followed Mulvey in changing the spelling of faith to "phaith," not because of the phallus but because that's what Phils fans do--we change all Fs to Phs. Our beloved mascot is a nonrepresentational green creature named the Phillie Phanatic, who dresses in drag and has a long tongue made out of a party horn. Mulvey, Freud, and even my psychoanalyst ex-boyfriend might say that I'm drawn to the Phillies specifically because of an ambivalence toward my own phallic phase, but I would respond that my older brother Danny indoctrinated me into Phillies fandom when I was five years old. Daniel, my ex, might say, 'five years old is the phallic phase, and why do you think I have the same name as your brother?'"

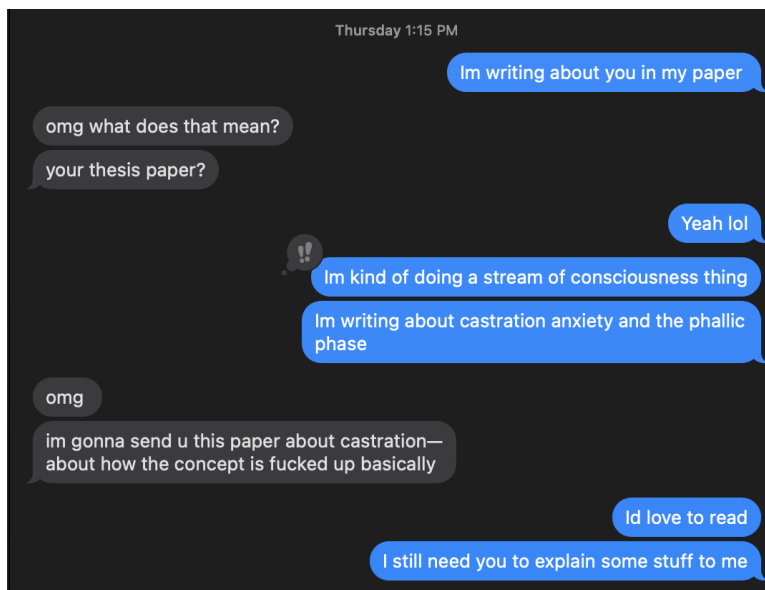


Figure 19 (left): text message exchange between Hazel and Daniel.

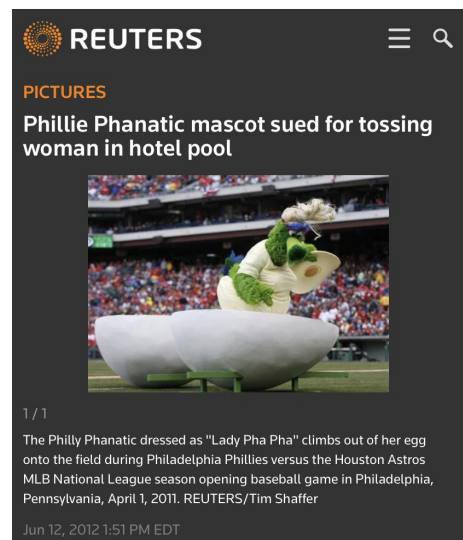


Figure 20: (right): Reuters news article from 2012 with an image caption reading, "the Phillie Phanatic dressed as 'Lady Pha Pha' climbs out of her egg onto the field."

Often while TAing at UCSD my professors have engaged Mulvey's article about the phallus. During one such lecture, I noted a connection between Mulvey's phallogocentric cinema,

pornography, and gender affirming surgery. If, for Mulvey, phallogocentric cinema exists to fulfill a patriarchal desire, traditional pornography necessarily follows as a cinema of consumption. Might gender affirming surgery similarly cater toward a consumptive male gaze? While for plenty of transwomen, surgery provides a much needed sense of embodiment, safety, and self-realization, there are others of us who struggle with the post-surgery reality that we've simply made ourselves more desirable to heterosexual men. The day before my facial feminization surgery, my surgeon and I were discussing possible rhinoplasty procedures. At one point he exclaimed, 'well I'd prefer to give you a Korean woman's bridge because I think Korean women are the most beautiful.' At a friend's facial feminization consultation, her surgeon regaled us with tales about his longstanding judgeship at Miss USA beauty pageant: 'my patients agree, I have a deep understanding of what makes a woman beautiful.' I concluded my notes by wondering whether it might be relevant to ask Monique to give me a play-by-play of surgery.

Monique is a transwoman who I interviewed in 2021 about her ex-best friend Sulka, who was an early Tranny Porn performer. Monique and Sulka were toxic transfemme bffs in the 80s and 90s, but they haven't talked since. Monique told me how they used to drive down together from the Valley to Tijuana to get affordable silicone injections. Monique's injections have since become toxic to her body and she has debilitating pain even though she looks amazing. She told me that she assumes Sulka's in even worse shape, because Sulka's always battled mental health issues and addiction and probably doesn't go outside anymore. In the interview Monique offers an explanation of why they fell out:

We met at the Queen Mary in North Hollywood and we became friends. And for some reason I never gave my age. She just assumed I was younger than her. And I played into it. And I was actually just a year older than her. So this whole time she

had thought that I was younger and she'd always introduce me to other people as, 'this is my baby sis.' And one day I left my ID at her house and I didn't think it was no big deal. I called up just to say, 'Do you have my ID?' and she goes, 'yes bitch, I have your ID.' I said 'Okay,' and she goes, 'And why didn't you tell me that you are a year older than me! You know what? You're just a cruel bitch,' something like that. I said, '[Sulka] calm down!' But she really took that to heart, and that really caused some sort of a rift in our relationship.²⁹

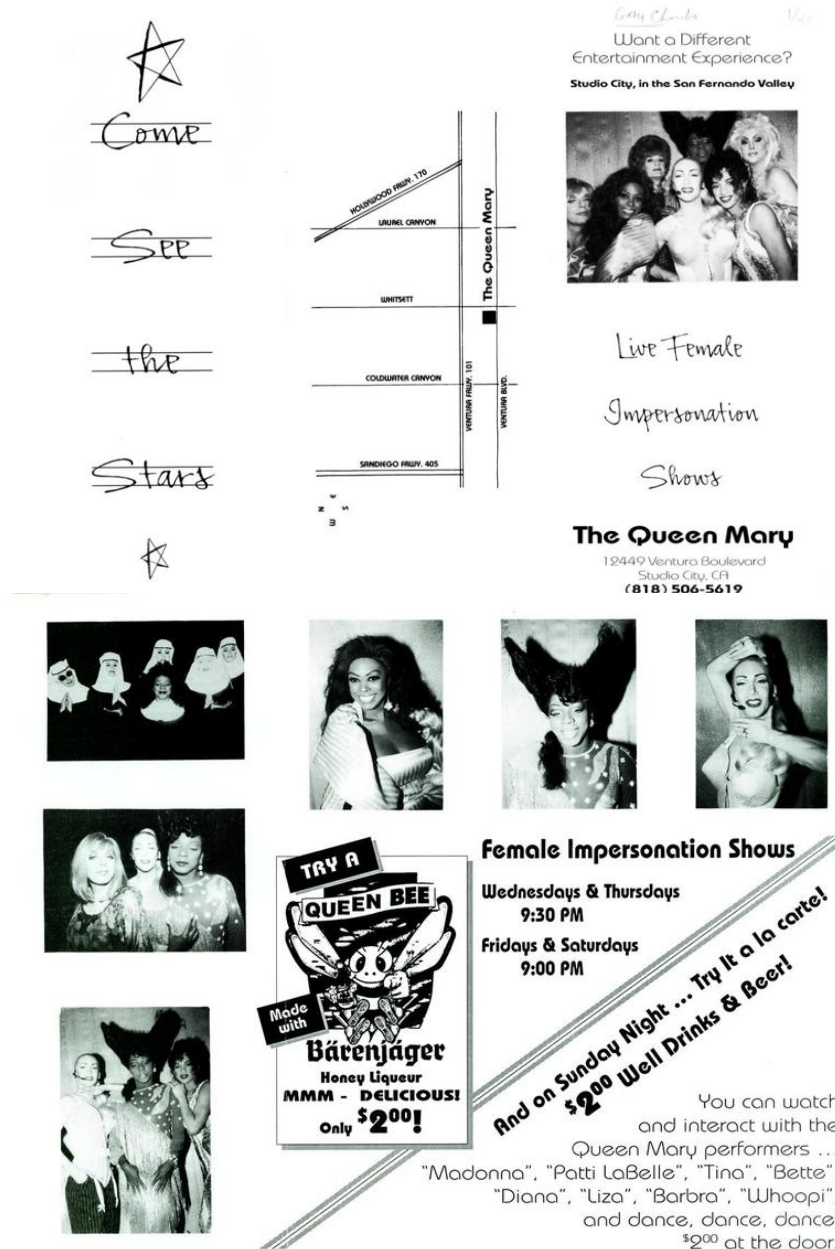


Figure 21 & 22: Brochures from the now defunct Queen Mary drag bar in the San Fernando Valley.

²⁹ Allen, Monique. Interview. Conducted by Hazel Katz, 8 Oct. 2021.

Sulka performed in her first film *Dream Lovers* in 1980, while she still had a penis, but she had bottom surgery in time for her next film, *the Transformation of Sulka*. Monique told me that for her and Sulka, the surgeries, injections, and fillers became an addiction. Transfemininity for me, even in the eggy days of 2008, has always been an addictive competition. Sulka and Monique were competitive with each other, not just about men or beauty or youth, but also about who was who's big sis and mother. For the girls, neither motherhood or daughterhood is ever absolutely privileged, but as Monique explains, both girls need to know who's who in the relationship. I never asked Monique if she was envious of Sulka's acting roles, which were exploitative and destroyed Sulka's long term health, but nevertheless placed her in the limelight.

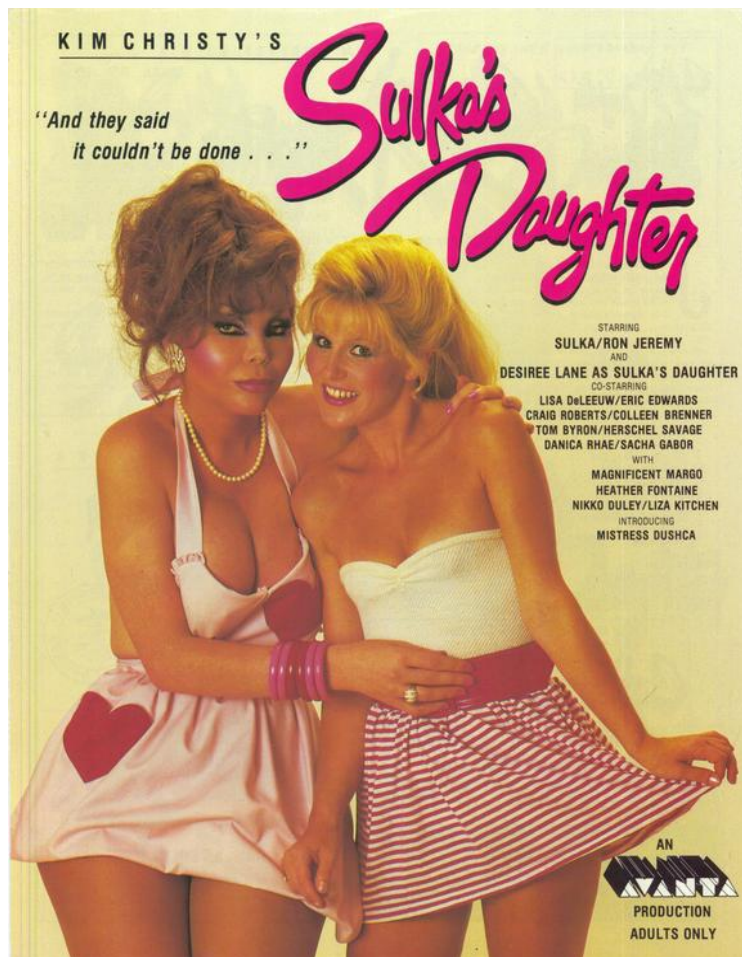


Figure 23: Poster for Sulka's 1984 film *Sulka's Daughter*.

In my short film *Sydney & Kim*, the characters' relationship is classically transsexual. Both girls implicitly accept that Kim is Sydney's mother and big sis. In age, transition timeline, and emotionality, Kim mothers Sydney. The equilibrium in their friendship is predicated on Sydney's parentification of Kim. *Sydney & Kim* is framed by Sydney's surgery recovery. The recovery is also what begins to rupture their implicit familial arrangement as Sydney gets closer to cis femininity and outpaces Kim in their transition timelines. Sydney's surgery is also a symbolic castration. While it's a facial rather than genital surgery, Sydney's still permanently relinquishing an anatomical 'masculinity.'

The Scopophilic Phan

Freud writes that during the phallic stage of psychosexual childhood development, children first become aware of their bodies, the bodies of other children, and the bodies of their parents. Part of the Oedipus complex is that XY boys notice XX girls lack a penis and assume that XXs have been punished with castration for feelings of covetousness. Similarly, XX girls experience the 'female version' of the castration complex, Penis Envy, because they believe their penises have been removed.³⁰ While living as a boy in 2008, I wrote that for Mulvey:

the scopophiliac manipulates images in order to assume power over the represented subject. He converts anything he sees into a symbolic object. For the scopophiliac, this object is only meant to produce a predetermined emotional reaction; he has obliterated any semblance of give-and-take between the viewer and the viewed. On the other hand, man loves to make images which fulfill his idealization of himself. To this end he works to create more perfect versions of himself that allow for the conflation of self with representation and ultimately guarantee his successful realization of goals and desires. Both of these patriarchal compositional techniques "masculinize" the viewer.

³⁰ Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Translated by James Strachey, Imago Publishing Company, 1949.

In a 1981 piece, Mulvey expands on her 1975 article, explaining the psychoanalytic experience of a hypothetical female viewer. Mulvey refers to Freud's theory of girlhood development. Girls go through a period of the phallic phase, "before the development of femininity sets in," where they hope to become masculine but fail.³¹ For the female spectator consuming patriarchal moving images then, "trans-sex identification is a *habit* that very easily becomes *second Nature*. However, this Nature does not sit easily and shifts restlessly in its borrowed transvestite clothes.³²" Mulvey repeats this phrase again in the conclusion of her piece, which is paired appropriately with the phallicized fantasy: "the female spectator's phantasy of masculinization is always to some extent at cross purposes with itself, restless in its transvestite clothes."³³

At the baseball game I felt restless in my transvestite clothes. My dress, to be specific. Did the other Phillies fans know I was trans? Baseball fandom is a form of spectatorship; in-person attendance at a stadium is the theatrical version of watching on a television or computer. The Phillies won game one but game two made me restless. I was restless during the bottom of the fifth when the Phillies bullpen came in and I was restless in hour four of the game, when I had sweated out my higher femininity.

When Danny introduced me to baseball during my phallic phase, I immediately fell in love with the game. I memorized statistics, made a scrapbook entry for each game, and played the game myself. If it was supposed to be a symbolic interest, I didn't notice. I identified entirely with it and dreamed of becoming the men I watched in moving images, choreographed

³¹ Mulvey, Laura. "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by 'Duel in the Sun' (King Vidor, 1946)." *Framework*, vol. 15-17, no. 15/17, 1981, pp. 12-15.

³² Mulvey, 1981.

³³ Mulvey, 1981.

gracefully on the diamond. 2008 was also the year I gave up my dream of becoming a baseball man. It wasn't because girls can't play baseball, though the homophobic homoeroticism practiced by my teammates was annoying. I just wasn't good enough, I wasn't strong enough, my elbow was damaged from years of overuse, and I couldn't hit breaking balls. In retrospect, my crisis in faith when the Phillies won the World Series was also caused by the emptiness of not knowing what I would be when I grew up.



Figure 24: a baseball card from Hazel's phallic phase in 1993.

Baseball is gay though. Unlike many other sports, baseball athletes come in all shapes and sizes, and the spectators' love for them, while truly libidinal, is not idealized in the same way as scopophilic Hollywood cinema. Baseball men are poor actors; they can hardly speak in postgame interviews. If I learned how to be a man through watching and listening to baseball, what does it mean that I opted out of manhood?

Hollywood cinema indoctrinates us into patriarchy, the male gaze, and scopophilia, but movies also give us our primary archetypes of transfemininity. Not only do normal boys and girls have Hollywood, they have a whole familial psychodrama to imitate. Trans girls only have cinema. The first trans women I saw were on television. They were on the *Howard Stern Show*, *Jerry Springer*, *Sex and the City*, and the Hollywood reruns on TBS. Whether the characters on TV were real t-girls or not, their depictions shaped the internalized transmisogyny that has molded my life. Feminist film theorist Karen Hollinger describes Mulvey's contribution thusly:

from the perspective of male characters with whom the spectator is encouraged to identify, the sight of the female body evokes castration anxiety. To counteract this evocation, two means are employed: fetishistic scopophilia, or disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetishized female object for the feared object; and sadistic voyeurism, or the investigation of the feared female object in order to reenact the original trauma, reassert control (usually by punishment), and thereby disavow castration.³⁴

If on the *Howard Stern Show*, the spectator is encouraged to identify with Howard Stern, does the sight of Siobhan Meow--for instance--not bring up castration anxiety because she's a woman with a penis?³⁵ Siobhan is a fetishized object, but she's not a fetishized female object. What happens in the mind and body of the trans spectator while watching Siobhan? Do the girls wonder whether she has her neovagina yet? Does she make them think about their own penis or

³⁴ Hollinger, Karen. *In the Company of Women : Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

³⁵ "Tera Patrick and Siobhan on the Sybian." *Howard Stern on Demand*, created by Howard Stern, season 2006.

lack of a penis? While Mulvey's theory of spectatorship unravels, her stress on the importance of spectatorship sticks: Siobhan is always already the first transsexual at least one trans spectator has ever seen. Cinema is the trans spectator's mirror stage. I might rewrite my 2008 passage as:

the egg enters for the first time into subjectivity as she views herself in the television and is for the first time conscious of her separation from her own body. In the cinema stage, the egg begins to make inferences from the visual image.



Figure 25: Siobhan Meow on the Harold Stern show in 2006.

The Transfemme Friendship Film

Sydney & Kim is a film about how transfemme competition derives not only from internalized transmisogyny but also internalized sexism. It's about who gets to be who's mother and where our mommy complexes come from. It wants to tear down the idea that trans women are sacred beings and instead show us in our true messiness. There are few mainstream films

about trans female friendship, possibly none directed by a trans woman. Transfemme cinema, even when gatekept by transfemme people, overwhelmingly centers cisness and cis spectators.

The San Francisco Transgender Film Festival, for example, the longest running trans film festival in the world, was started in 1997 by Christopher Lee and Alex Austin, two filmmakers of trans experience. The most recent iteration of the festival in 2022 featured work by only 7 transfemme directors out of 49 overall directors (14%). Despite the festival being run by a trans woman, there were 14 cis directors included in the festival lineup (28%). This festival is not an anomaly. In 2021, 19 film directors at Outfest won awards, none of them were transwomen. Of the 16 media artists featured in Made in LA and Shattered Glass - 2021 art exhibitions showcasing young LA-based artists - none were transwomen. Nonetheless, many of these artists are making work about transfeminine people: the girls are always present on screen, whether or not their producers have our blessing.

This phenomenon shows us that, in the contemporary art and film imaginary, transfeminine images *are* synonymous with the bodies of transfemme people on screen. But what does that make work that is made by transfemme people and that is not explicitly about transfeminine experience? Transfemininity is an extremely unspecific experience that has been consolidated by prevailing film and art curation. The opposite of trans films made by cis people isn't trans films made by trans people or trans films about the cisgender experience. Instead, what if trans film is not about anyone? What if trans film describes moving images that use self-reflexivity as a means of representation? The author pointing back to herself through the materiality of the images she creates, rather than through the explicit reproduction of her body in pixels.

Karen Hollinger describes that the female friendship film is a distinct genre film that comes out of the women's film genre, which developed in the 1930s and 40s for a female audience. The female friendship film, according to Hollinger, became popular in the 1970s and 80s and dominated the women's film market. Hollinger follows Janet Todd, who proposes five categories of female friendship in literature: sentimental friendship, erotic friendship, manipulative friendship, political friendship, and social friendship. Using Hollinger and Todd's rubric, *Sydney & Kim* alternates between a sentimental and manipulative friendship. Hollinger describes manipulative friendships in literature as "[showing] the signs of sentimental attachment without its substance. She uses her friend, controls her, and rejoices in this control. The rhetoric and features of sentimental female friendship are employed to manipulate the friend for selfish, twisted motives." For Todd and Hollinger, sentimental friendships are "close, emotionally effusive, dyadic same-sex unions. They are conventionally represented as nurturing and psychologically enriching partnerships that also exhibit a fervent passion that is reminiscent of heterosexual romantic love...its function is primarily to serve as a temporary respite from the problems women face in their heterosexual romantic encounters."³⁶

The trans female friendship film is different because it involves trans sisterhood and trans motherhood which don't apply in the same way to cis women. In her book, Hollinger discusses psychoanalytic theories of female friendship, notably, that girls' early childhood development with their mothers predicts their subsequent adult female friendships. Women want "nurturance and independence" and these dynamics originate in the mother-daughter bond.³⁷ Real transfemme friendships are seldom represented in films. It's also important to me to show that

³⁶ Hollinger, 1998.

³⁷ Hollinger, 1998.

white trans women, at least, share a lot with cis white girls. In *Sydney & Kim* I want to explore whether a transfemme film can actually be more cis than a cis-female friendship film. Indeed, many of our toxicities are inherited from the cis-authored trans people we watch in movies and TV.



Figure 26: Still from *Sydney & Kim*.

As the idea of chosen family trickles from t4t dungeons into Conde Nast’s *Them Magazine*, we risk glorifying an experience of sacred kinship that was never sacred in the first place.³⁸ Queer and trans family has always been fraught, possibly more fraught than cis family, because it involves deeply traumatized people. Exceptionalizing transfemininity also collapses the diversity of transfemme experience and disallows deviation from a preconceived norm.

³⁸ Park, Coyote. “The Timeless Fluidity of T4T Love.” *Them Magazine*, 16 May 2022, www.them.us/story/the-timeless-fluidity-of-t4t-love.

Further, it prevents feminist and gender expansive solidarity across difference. While trans people shouldn't have to appeal to cis women for our liberation, we are less than 1% of the US population and will need support from a broad coalition to continue to build our movements for freedom.

Bad Trans Objects

Cael M. Keegan writes about the importance of bad trans objects in the popular imagination. Keegan explains that the recent explosion in trans representation on screen only makes room for “good” trans people. Keegan refers to Kiley May’s “May Test,” the trans version of the Bechdel test. May wants trans characters to be depicted as “safe, stable, and secure,” “happy,” and “in love;” and not be “a sex worker, dealer, or thief.” Keegan remarks that the new “good” trans subject is supposed to correct the historical “bad” trans subject. This dynamic reduces transness to a legible flatness that coheres to the legal parameters set by cis bureaucrats. It also erases older trans people’s experiences of embracing the heroes we saw in cinema as young people. They were “bad,” but they were all we had. Keegan writes:

Truly embracing badness means moving beyond a politics in which cisgender people grant the least disruptive forms of transgender identity a marginal amount of inclusion. It means, instead, pursuing a world in which the distinction between cis and trans ceases to exist altogether, because the systems enforcing binary sex and gender are dismantled. Achieving this new, bad world might very well mean looking backward at the lessons that less currently valued media objects contain. This analysis is therefore intended as a form of “trans care” for the dated, awkward, inauthentic archive of bad trans media, for the trans people who love the bad object that the transgender body is, and for all those who wish to find ways of continuing to be resistantly gendered subjects—now and into the bad future.³⁹

³⁹ Keegan, Cael M. "On the Necessity of Bad Trans Objects." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 75, no. 3, 2022, pp. 26-37, <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2022.75.3.26>.

Audre Lorde has written about hatred between black women, where it comes from, and her lifelong difficulty in forging the black sisterhoods that she desired. Lorde describes that in her life she often felt a suspicious competition that derived from black women's internalized hatred they received as girls:

If I have learned to eat my own flesh in the forest--starving, keening, learning the lesson of the she-wolf who chews off her own paw to leave the trap behind--if I must drink my own blood, thirsting, why should I stop at yours until your dear dead arms hang like withered garlands upon my breast and I weep for you going, oh my sister, I grieve for our gone.⁴⁰

I want to be clear that I'm not interested in paralleling cis black women's experience and white trans women's experience. I do think Lorde, writing in 1984, anticipated struggles that some 21st century transfeminine people face. The messages we internalized as young people about our gender and bodies make trans female friendships extremely challenging. We learned to repress our deepest realities and censor our innermost thoughts. Many of us learned to live in a suspended state of lonely dissociation, from our bodies, our minds, and our families. In *Sydney & Kim*, Sydney spends a lot of energy complaining about how she feels ugly, unloved, and unrealized. While Kim is adept at sidestepping Sydney's complaints by patronizing her friend, Kim's internal thoughts scream, 'me too, bitch, so what? I'm here trying to take care of you! Have some humility!'

Lorde writes, "Survival is the greatest gift of love. Sometimes, for black mothers, it is the only gift possible, and tenderness gets lost. My mother bore me into life as if etching an angry message into marble." Lorde's mother, a biracial woman, hated Lorde's dark skin, darker than

⁴⁰ Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider : Essays and Speeches*. Crossing Press, 1984.

the rest of her siblings. Her mother thought it cursed Lorde.⁴¹ Kim's mother-love for Sydney is similarly mediated through a bitter veil of internalized self-hatred. Kim hates that Sydney feels like a victim because Kim is embarrassed about her own self-victimizing tendencies. Kim also wants Sydney to remain in a place of smallness because their relationship depends upon Sydney coming to Kim for validation. Kim self-actualizes through knowing things about trans experience that Sydney does not. Indeed, there is nothing about trans experience that is solid and can be poured from a mother vessel to daughter vessel, except for unconditional love and care. But Kim and Sydney's dynamic is predicated on the existence of the teachable, the transferrable, the inheritable.

Manifestation Destiny

In this way, Kim and Sydney's friendship becomes a two-person cult. The girls' psychotherapeutic register is the displacement of their inability to confront the unhealthy aspects of their own relationship. Both Sydney and Kim become "bad trans objects" and also evidence the dead-ends of t4t identity-based solidarity. The pair also uphold elements of whiteness as seen in *Safe*. Carol from *Safe* manifests her whiteness as physical malady. Sydney and Kim, too, are sick for the majority of the film. By bringing *Safe* into conversation with my film, I'm interested in establishing a provenance for a film genre I'm calling the Toxic Western, where a logic of Manifestation evolves from manifest destiny and themes of irresistible white entitlement to nonwhite spaces persist.

⁴¹ Lorde, 1984.

If the classic Western film is centered on white male experience, the Toxic Western is focused on white women. Ian Haney Lopez has written about whiteness as respectability and power. He argues that “whiteness is a set of ideas that say, to be white or light is to be better, it’s to be rational and law-abiding and hardworking and deserving and fully human. Whereas to be dark and especially to be black is to be violent is to be pathological is to be irrational is to be undeserving, to be threatening.” Lopez says that people of all skin colors and ethnicities can subscribe or unsubscribe from whiteness, because it is a concept. Many immigrants buy into the idea of whiteness when “they are not given another identity story to frame their belonging in this society.”⁴²

When I’m referring to whiteness, I’m referring to it in Lopez’ sense. In the Toxic Western therefore, whiteness is an excessive allegiance to respectability and power that weaponizes its own madness as normal and sane. The underside of whiteness is a bad object, but its appearance is still good and respectable. While whiteness might have nonwhite qualities of insanity and pathology, its practitioners still aspire to the rationality inherent in whiteness. The characters in a Toxic Western might also embody a spiritual whiteness, a quivering devotion to respectability, one replete with self help gurus that deify respectability and make power seem natural and the market magic and flirty. Kim and Sydney, because of their transness, aren’t fully white women, but their investment in professionalization and clout is a commitment to whiteness.

In the classic Western film, generally speaking, white cowboys must domesticate the lawless land and its people in service of manifest destiny, a cultural belief from the 19th century that white settlers were destined to expand across North America. It was the responsibility of US

⁴² Lopez, Ian Haney. *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America*. The New Press, 2019.



Figure 27: Audre Lorde with her mother, Linda Gertrude Belmar Lorde, 1946.



Figure 28: the San Diego Padres mascot, 'the Swingin' Friar', dressed in a military camouflage habit.

white people to “redeem and remake the West in the image of the agrarian East.”⁴³ For example, the Phillies’ 2022 NLCS opponent--the San Diego Padres--are an homage to Catholic missionaries who violently colonized the Indigenous inhabitants of present day California. In my proposal of a neo-Western subgenre, I want to make a connection between cowboys and influencers. In *Sydney & Kim*, Kim reassures Sydney with therapeutically infused cocktails of banalities. Like the artists and activists described above, Kim taps into influencer-ready slogans to simultaneously subdue Sydney’s complaints and develop a gurulike aura around herself. These

⁴³ "Manifest Destiny." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 30 Jun. 2023, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_destiny. Accessed 17 Jul. 2023.

interpersonal strategies reinforce Kim's motherhood role and steer the friendship towards a chronic debilitation in which healing is impossible.

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