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Candy Darling on Her Deathbed: Subversive Memorial in the Photography of Peter Hujar

Lizzie Merrill

Lizzie Merrill is a PhD candidate in the Centre for Women's Studies at the University of York. Her research project applies the artist, Jo Spence's, artistic practice as an arts and health intervention, with the hope of improving the experience of those diagnosed with cancer. This work is supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council, through the White Rose College of the Arts & Humanities.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many have been forced to consider the changing roles that death and grief are allowed to play in our society. For Victorians, the dying person remained in the home, and as the twentieth century progressed, the dying moved from the home to the hospital, marking a separation between death and everyday living. For coronavirus patients, death has often happened in isolation from loved ones and separate from the home, marking a further departure of death from reality. Geoffrey Gorer suggests that removing the dying from the home prompted the first step towards death becoming a taboo.¹ Michel Foucault classifies the hospital as a system of supervision, which acts to “transform and improve” docile bodies which enter it.² However, its framework was created with normative (straight, white, cis, able-bodied) bodies in mind. Thus, I will question to what extent a queer body can be transformed and improved within a structure unspecialised to queer identity. There was a huge disconnect between the medical field and the queer community during the AIDS crisis, with AIDS activism focusing on failures of the medical field and turning to social practices like mass memorial. Michael Moon addresses how the Freudian model of mourning was insufficient when applied to queer communities affected by AIDS.³ An outcome of this was the formulation of new, specialised mourning practices. Hence, I will explore the notion that queerness posits the potential for an array of alternative mourning practices, due to the instability of queer identity.

A photograph which explores the subversive potential of the socially deviant body is Peter Hujar's *Candy Darling on her Deathbed* (Fig. 1, 1973). This image was produced prior to the AIDS pandemic, offering insight into an individualised mourning practice in a queer context. Darling was a trans actress, known for her roles in Andy Warhol's films. In 1973, Hujar photographed Darling in her hospital bed as she was dying of lymphoma, and the image has since become one of his most well-known. James Rasin's documentary *Beautiful Darling* (2010) (a resource for first-hand accounts of Darling which is later referenced) attests to Darling's influence when producing the photograph and her love for it; thus, its creation appears guided by both artist and subject. Looking at the construction of the image and how it operates within a contextual narrative, I will outline instances where the unstable categories of queerness, femininity and death intersect. In exploring outcomes of these intersections, I will identify how instability poses the chance for subversive difference.

In life, Darling's trans identity represented a gender deviancy which was both socially rejected and restricted. This deviancy is addressed frequently in *Beautiful Darling*, whereby Darling's gender identity thrusts her into a precarious space, open to questioning and social rejection by Andy Warhol, who she worked alongside, her friend, Fran Leibowitz, and Darling's attorney, Richard Golub.⁴ Hujar's representation of Darling in death, occupying the deviancy of illness as well as transness, operates differently to other visual depictions



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of the dying person. Due to *Candy Darling on her Deathbed* engaging with photographic visuals, the site of the hospital and a politics of queer healthcare, I will frame parts of my analysis in relation to AIDS related mourning. My article seeks to focus on the visual operation of queer mourning, sexualisation of the dying queer person and the importance of adequate memorialisation for trans people. This paper is split into three sections. “Aesthetic Representations” situates how Hujar uses aesthetic likenesses to contain the threat of illness, as well as how visual representation is a site for queer communities to reassert control. “Death and Femininity” considers how these two unstable categories interact. By examining Darling’s illness as a metaphorical pregnancy, it appears that constructions of female monstrosity can be reworked to posit the mutable body as a site for subversion. Finally, “Queer Subversions” resituates the instabilities of femininity and death in relation to queer theory and queer art-making, addressing how queerness reframes and resituates mourning practices. Throughout this paper, it is important to understand that a portion of the aesthetic decisions made within *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed* were heavily affected by social attitudes towards gender and transness in the 1960s–70s. Building on J. Halberstam’s suggestion, “borderlands are ‘uninhabitable’ for some transsexuals,” I will argue that the border, for Darling, presents an ideal site for subversion to take place both from within and outside of the gender category: woman.⁵

Figure 1. Peter Hujar, *Candy Darling on her Deathbed*, 1973, photograph. © 2022 The Peter Hujar Archive / Artists Rights Society (ARS) Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, LLC.



Aesthetic Representations

In *Candy Darling on her Deathbed*, Hujar’s visual representation appears to defy reality. Pictured is a made-up young woman on a hospital bed surrounded by bouquets of roses. Darling’s beauty is almost ghoulish; her dark eye-makeup is heavy and, although beautifying, the gauntness under her cheekbones makes it appear she is wasting away. The suggestion of

dying, as referred to in the photograph's title, paired with the beautiful and preened subject, defies the photograph's hospital setting, likening it more to a "movie set" than its tragic reality.⁶ Markers of illness exist throughout the image, most potently in the hospital bed and the sheet which covers Darling. But the clinical whiteness of the hospital is subverted in the way the room is softened by perfectly ruched sheets and the absence of machines or medicines. The importance of fabric and texture, paired with the contrasting black and white scene, draws on the classical technique, *chiaroscuro*, to enhance the sense of drama and narrative. Hugh Manon suggests that "it is important to account for *chiaroscuro* not solely in terms of affect or mood, but as representing a specific kind of optical structure ... as well as a particular brand of criminal deception."⁷ Manon is drawing on uses of the technique specific to film noir; however, Hujar's photograph is coyly alluding to the hidden truth of Darling's situation. Pictured is a beautified version of the dying woman which appears to sexualise and aestheticise the act of dying. It is only by understanding the context in which the image was taken that a sense of radical representation is impressed. As the photograph was taken, Darling was being treated for lymphoma and was so severely ill that she died several months later. With this understanding, the most poignant visual element becomes one of tragedy, rather than of drama or vanity. The image attests initially to something unreal and unbelievable, so much so that it subdues the threat of Darling's illness. As the viewer comes to understand Darling's medical context, a heightened sense of tragedy bleeds into the frame.

This photograph of Darling offers the chance to posit a fantastical version of reality, without the messiness or ugliness associated with serious illness. Susan Sontag writes: "Whatever their degree of 'realism,' all photographs embody a 'romantic' relation to reality."⁸ The success of photography as a medium for artists interested in queer representation can further be understood due to its roots in representing social deviance and capturing the marginalised. Hujar was a prominent figure among creatives operating in downtown New York and his career saw photography emerge as an overwhelmingly popular medium for artists representing the AIDS crisis. The photograph gives physical presence to queer communities facing underrepresentation. During the AIDS crisis, some representation of those dying of AIDS was used to attest to presence and offer space for mourning. However, Hujar's photograph of Darling does not allow us to mourn in a typical sense. By employing a likeness to cinematic aesthetics, the image is entrenched in ominous drama. The unreal and the dramatised arise from the black and white film, mimicking film noir from the 1940s or '50s, as the shadow from the back wall creeps across Darling's starkly lit face and bed. The genre was known for its contrasting light and dark scenes as well as its theatrical melodrama, which is shared with this image. However, picturing death marks a departure from film noir, in the sense that Gorer, author of *Pornography of Death* (1955), suggests that he cannot recall any recent (to 1955) death bed scenes from television and film. Darling, the gaunt subject with darkened eyes, appears like a corpse. The implication of this dramatisation appears to make the image of death more palatable. Gorer goes on to suggest that by nature of its taboo in Western society, death has become "unmentionable" and its status as such categorises it alongside sex, thus making exposure to death in film and television appear a kind of pornography in its incurred intrigue.⁹ *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed*, thus, becomes shocking in its representation of the dying. However, due to the sense of drama, the "deathbed" is not explored completely literally. Therefore, Hujar is able to defy the taboo of death by containing it within a recognisable, albeit eerie, cinematic aesthetic. By marketing Darling's death as if it were a movie, Hujar brings the privacy of the hospital into popular culture and the realm of the social. With the popularity of photography as a medium for asserting queer presence, this defiance of taboo is presented with such vigour, through the inclusion of Darling's "deathbed," that it likens itself to the politically militant and heart-breaking images circulated during the AIDS crisis.

The militancy of defying death's taboo goes hand in hand with Darling presenting a hyper-feminine aesthetic, even while seriously ill. She appears to sustain a high-maintenance physical appearance, alluding to the importance of her visual representation. Douglas Crimp theorises the politics of mourning and representation during the AIDS crisis, suggesting that despite all the social and political activism taking place in order to reconstruct lives,

healthcare and sexual relationships, “the dominant media still pictures us only as wasting deathbed victims; we have therefore had to wage a war of representation, too.”¹⁰ Although an entirely different representational war, there is a similar intersection of death and queer identity experienced by Candy Darling, where queerness is socially constructed either at the root of illness or as the direct cause. The example in Crimp’s text is the notion that AIDS spread faster amongst gay men and was sexually transmitted. Here, gay sex is conflated with illness, a sentiment which was used to further problematic discourse around homosexuality as an illness. In a similar way, it is incorrectly speculated that Darling’s lymphoma was caused by her ingesting carcinogenic hormones, and so, in a similar sense, her desire to present as an alternate gender to the one assigned at birth, thus her queerness, is what was recorded in the media as having caused her eventual death.¹¹ Where Crimp suggests AIDS activists had to “wage war” on their appearance as dying victims, Darling does similarly, by being photographed as critically ill and still exerting control over her image. The notion that Darling does not allow critical illness to overcome her is echoed in the final letter she wrote, which describes death as a welcome thing.¹² In adopting this attitude, Darling asserts that focus must not be on the idea that her queerness led to her death but rather, if anything, it led to her escape.

This sense of escape is encapsulated when Darling’s queer identity also alters the parameters of mourning. A focal element setting Hujar’s image apart from others is the queer figure as the dying subject. Freud classifies mourning ritual as a “grave departure from the normal attitude to life” and states that mourning “leaves nothing over for other purposes or other interests.”¹³ Michael Moon suggests “mourning presents a difficulty for gay people, insofar as it promises a return to normalcy that we were never granted in the first place”; in other words, queer lives are inherently abnormal and so too is their mourning.¹⁴ If mourning is not directed towards a return to normalcy, it takes on a different role entirely. For people experiencing loss during the AIDS crisis, activism took place alongside mourning, going against the idea that one is unable to explore “other purposes” when experiencing grief. Hujar’s photograph, which arguably begins the process of mourning, equally seeks “other purposes”: it attests to Darling’s beauty and seeks to maintain a feminine representation. One potential reason for this is that funerals and memorial are often focused on the family of the deceased, yet for queer people who have experienced a breakdown or separation from their family unit due to homophobia or transphobia, there is a departure from the focus being on grieving relatives. Instead, memorial can exist more for the dying person and the purposes they deem to be necessary.

An exemplification of how mourning is an altered but sometimes violent space for queer people is the threat imposed on some trans people of being detransitioned after death. Karol Kovalovich Weaver creates two case studies of trans women, Jennifer Gable and Leelah Alcorn, whose “gender identities were negated after their deaths” and who were memorialised as men with their deadnames.¹⁵ Weaver explores the violence enacted on the trans person and the trans community when someone is detransitioned, and how the subsequent outcome is “contentious memorialisation and disenfranchised grief, which together prompt activism.”¹⁶ This activism often takes the form of mourning being re-enacted by trans communities to reaffirm the trans identity of the deceased. Hujar’s photograph avoids the need for such re-enactment by utilising self-memorialisation. Darling wrote in her final letter, “I have arranged my own funeral arrangements,” taking autonomy over how she is to be remembered.¹⁷ In doing this, Darling takes over the role of family and friends. Whether due to her own independence or a lack of trust, this points to the idea that memorial and posthumous representation were a site for Darling to enact control, as part of a community heavily affected by social interference.

The need for this control can be seen in Hujar’s photographs of Jackie Curtis: *Jackie Curtis in his Coffin* (Fig. 2, 1985) and *Jackie Curtis in Hospital* (Fig. 3, 1974). Of the four photographs of Curtis in the Peter Hujar Archive, these two explore the illness and death of another of Andy Warhol’s superstars. Curtis’s face and gender change throughout Hujar’s photographs (in life) for they presented as genderqueer. While representing gender unfixed dismantles the visual structure of binary gender, the final photograph taken of

Curtis solidifies a fixed memorialisation of them as a cis-passing man. In *Jackie Curtis in his Coffin*, Hujar photographs Curtis in an open coffin, wearing a suit and positioned alongside a photograph of Curtis as a woman with dark makeup. The photograph next to Curtis stands out in that it could be read to show a division of queerness or femininity from the body in death. For someone with a limited knowledge of Curtis, the photograph set aside from the body could signify the “purification” of the body or its return to “naturalness” in its appearance. If this understanding is affirmed, the feminine is conflated with the unnatural or that which must be removed from the body in death, as if a kind of costume. Subverting the defeminisation of the body in death is a pivotal action taking place in *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed*, for Darling forgoes the sense that her body must be desexualised or stabilised. Unlike Hujar’s photographs of Jackie Curtis, Darling begins subversive action from within a single gender category. As Darling presents as cis-passing, in some ways *Candy Darling on her Deathbed* is recognisable within a cis-normative framework. By visually conforming to the category of “woman” and being trans, Darling begins to queer the gender category, by process of engaging with the normative feminine aesthetic with difference. In spite of the reportedly abnormal circumstances with which Darling died from lymphoma, the photo narrative is normalised by its visually accessible cinematic aesthetic, and as such, the severity of Darling’s illness is dulled. The power of this image as a subversive tool appears greater due to its engagement with cisnormativity, for Darling begins to embody, control and reorient the category of woman.

Figure 2. *Jackie Curtis in his Coffin*, 1985, photograph. © 2022 The Peter Hujar Archive / Artists Rights Society (ARS) Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, LLC.



Figure 3. Peter Hujar, *Jackie Curtis in Hospital*, 1974, photograph. © 1987 The Peter Hujar Archive LLC. Courtesy The Peter Hujar Archive, Pace Gallery, New York and Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.



Death and Femininity

By engaging with a recognisable narrative, *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed* uses popular media as a tool for subversion. In the cinematic context, a woman as victim, dramatically laying alongside markers of her own tragedy, is not an unfamiliar sight. The feminine is associated with the fragile and this is aestheticised by Hujar. However, Darling hyperbolises the dying female in her overtly available posture and the theatrical tone of the image. She achieves in death what her friends, in the documentary *Beautiful Darling*, declare to be an everlasting Hollywood feminine and it appears that this feminine extinguishes the threat of death from the image. Elisabeth Bronfen states:

like the decaying body, the feminine is unstable, liminal, disturbing. Both mourning rituals and representations of death may seek strategies to stabilize the body, which entails removing it from the feminine and transforming it into a monument, an enduring stone.¹⁸

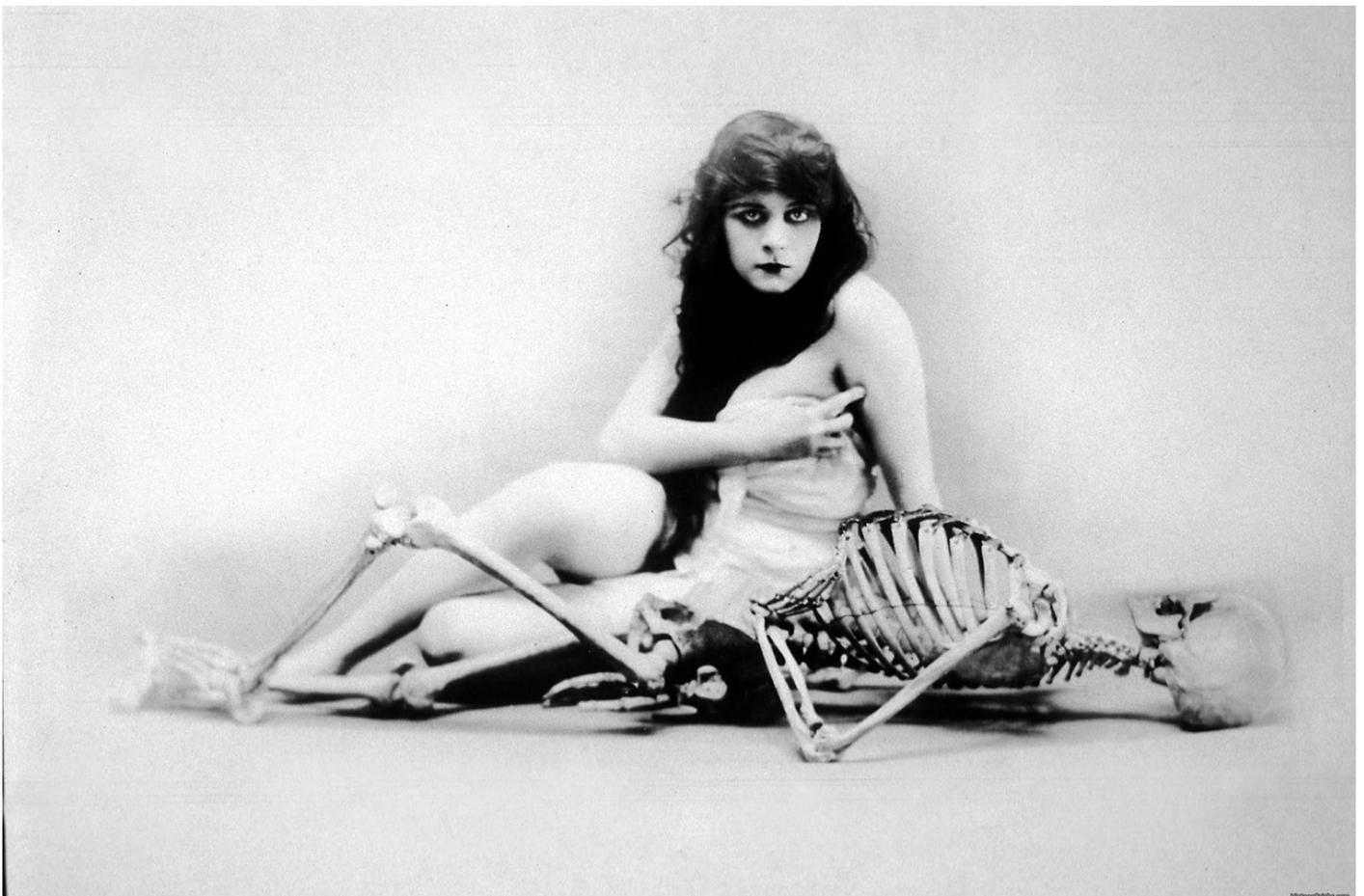
Bronfen suggests that death extinguishes the feminine, unlike in *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed* whereby the sexually-charged subject relegates “dying” to a secondary focus. Hujar’s photograph presents someone both feminine and almost-dead; visually, Darling mimics the corpse and becomes at once both living and dead. This sexualised and deathly aesthetic appears at odds with ideas of respectability and sacrality when dealing with a dead or dying body.

The invocation of something sexually charged and dead often prompts discomfort, as modern Western society abjects the dead or the unwell, making them unreal and unsexual.¹⁹ Julia Kristeva explains this by addressing biblical abominations which have

led to modern abjections. She describes the corpse as “a body without a soul, a non-body, disquieting matter, it is to be excluded from gods territory as it is from his speech.”²⁰ Kristeva then states that “corpse fanciers [are] unconscious worshippers of a soulless body,” suggesting that the act of sexualising the corpse is both anti-Christian and an act against god. Social abjection on the basis of religion is not reserved for the corpse, extending to marginalise queer people. Eric A. Stanley addresses how “the queer inhabits the place of compromised personhood” whereby they are considered less than or even nothing compared to “the human” (the non-queer).²¹ This positions Kristeva’s idea of “soullessness” precariously in relation to the queer, who was not necessarily afforded the same notion of a soul to begin with. In “Near Life, Queer Death,” Stanley poses Achille Mbembe’s question “what does it mean to do violence to what is nothing?” in the context of anti-queer hate crimes. For Stanley, graphic, physical violence, extending beyond killing to total bodily annihilation, is the primary way that violence is enacted on queer bodies that are otherwise seen as “nothing” and able therefore to be killed without recourse. Darling’s capacity to be memorialised as feminine and sexual in death, appears at least partially related to her capacity to die a queer death, where the violence (and impact) of dying is reduced because the queer body is socially perceived as nothing or less than. The dulled social impact of death and murder, as explored by Stanley, suggests the social deviancy of queerness presents the opportunity for subversion, whereby actions that are considered abject for the “human” have a lessened affect or abjective power when enacted by the queer.

Darling’s sexualised feminine does not escape fetishisation, for the tragedy of Darling’s cancer narrative is contained by what Magda Romanska defines as the “fetishized image of female victimhood.”²² When discussing art based on Shakespeare’s Ophelia, parallels arise in the way that femininity contains the threat of death in visual media. Romanska refers to Georges Bataille’s discussion of the beautification of the abject, whereby the abject is rendered palatable and its disturbing power is removed (a process which is at the core of fetishism): “the horror of the corpse as a symbol of violence and as a threat of the contagiousness of violence’ becomes contained by the limits of beautified femininity.”²³

Figure 4. Theda Bara, publicity photo for *A Fool There Was*, directed by Frank Powell, Fox Film Corporation, 1915.



For *Candy Darling on her Deathbed*, the disturbing power of Darling's lymphoma and the threat that it presents to Darling's health is neutralised by her beautified visual appearance. Romanska also focuses on the Victorian sexualisation of the dead or dying woman: "the 'Death and the Maiden' imagery was so popular that it eventually became a part of the Hollywood glitz and glamour."²⁴ Romanska then offers the example of "silent screen star Theda Bara ... poised next to a skeleton ... dressed in skimpy lingerie" (Fig. 4, 1915).²⁵ In this image, viewers experience the threat of death, from the present skeleton, through and on behalf of the suggestive actress. The skeleton evokes concern for Bara rather than fear for ourselves and thus casts her as victim. This photograph from 1915 shares a gothic, classical, Hollywood style with Hujar's photograph of Candy Darling. The gaze of the actress is fixed and confronting, while her nakedness suggests the vulnerability which Romanska references, and acts similarly to Darling's passive and inviting pose.

Hujar's photograph departs from Romanska's discussion of Ophelia when she states that "the emptiness of the female corpse 'freed the poet to impose any meaning he wished on her image' (Lehman 1996:55), as if 'tantalized by the void which is exhibited in her' (Chambers 1971:11)."²⁶ While there is a narrative strung from Darling's death in both Hujar's image and Rasin's documentary, it aligns with Darling's reported desires, for as Lebowitz states, "she asked [Hujar] to come up and take that picture."²⁷ Thus, Darling's behaviour follows Judith Butler's theory of subversive performance: Butler argues that "agency" is located when convention is repeated with fault, failure or difference and this "enable[s] the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility."²⁸ Darling undermines the notion of the "empty" female corpse by altering the non-autonomous role of muse and influencing the final image. Despite the photograph's aesthetic keeping strictly to classical cinematic likenesses, Darling becomes the unruly, unregulated muse, which is, in a sense, the opposite of the feminine subject who exists to have meaning imposed upon her. It is only by engaging with the predetermined emotive potential of such a recognisable aesthetic that the threat of Darling's power as muse and the threat of death is contained.

First-hand accounts in *Beautiful Darling* further narrativise Darling's cancer, making her illness a metaphorical embodiment of the most feminine condition. In Rasin's documentary, Jeremiah Newton suggests that Darling approached him with a swollen stomach and the belief that by religious miracle she was pregnant.²⁹ It swiftly becomes clear that this is in fact not a pregnancy but a cancer diagnosis and thus Darling's feminine condition is actually lymphoma. The conflation of cancer and pregnancy is not a new metaphor; Sontag in *Illness as Metaphor* states "Cancer is a demonic pregnancy" and references St Jerome's writing: "The one there with his swollen belly is pregnant with his own death."³⁰ The idea of an unnatural pregnancy begins to emerge, that which the body produces and which is also the cause of its demise. Simultaneously, *Candy Darling on her Deathbed* bears visual similarity to a photograph of a woman resting after labour with congratulatory flowers, but this metaphor subverts the idea of pregnancy into something quite opposite, bringing death rather than life. The metaphor also conflates dying young (the unnatural) with pregnancy (the natural). The metaphorical baby is welcomed and wanted, for Darling's last letter suppresses the idea that her death was against her wishes: "I felt too empty to go on in this unreal existence. I am just so bored by everything. You might say bored to death."³¹ For Darling, existence is the "unreal" thing: life is unnatural. Dying is not necessarily naturalised with the phrase "bored to death" but rather seen as the only adequate response. The outcome of this metaphor of pregnancy as death is the unification of life and death and the blurring of their definite boundary.

The action of uniting life and death attests to something monstrous. Barbara Creed argues that gender is pivotal in the construction of female monstrosity. Creed suggests that female monsters often become victims of their own monstrosity; as monstrosity is formed from their femininity, their demise can be attributed to their gender: "The act of birth is grotesque because the body's surface is no longer closed, smooth and intact—rather the body looks as if it may tear apart, open out, reveal its innermost depths. It is this aspect of the pregnant body—loss of boundaries—that the horror film emphasizes in its representation of the monstrous."³² A "loss of boundaries" can be attributed to Darling's condition in the same

way that it might to a pregnant woman, and it is in this sense that Sontag can posit cancer to be a “demonic pregnancy,” for tumours alter the body’s surface and broaden its boundaries. The description of the pregnant body as looking as though it might “tear apart, open out” is not dissimilar to a tumour or a bloated corpse. Creed draws on Kristeva when analysing pregnancy: “Leviticus draws a parallel between the unclean maternal body and the decaying body,” suggesting that the likeness in terms of physical bodily change is furthered by the visualisation of bodily fluid and matter.³³ What presents itself through Darling’s monstrous pregnancy is the capacity to resituate the trans body’s biological boundary: to imagine the trans woman with a womb. Creed suggests in an ancient context, “it was generally believed that monstrous offspring were created by the maternal imagination ... the child is transformed into a visible image of its mother’s desire.”³⁴ When considering this in relation to Darling, there appears a desire to be pregnant, to have her sex altered and also the desire for death which she talks about in her final letter.³⁵ Returning to Hujar’s photograph, it exemplifies how illness, pregnancy and transness are all mutable states which broaden the constraints of the body. The visuals of the photograph play around with the site of the hospital bed, which also constitutes the setting for all three mutations. This is not to suggest cancer is a point of departure for reasserting the fluidity of the body, but rather that the convergence of illness, transness and pregnancy are pinpointed by Darling’s death and Hujar’s image. *Candy Darling on her Deathbed* thus allows us to explore ways in which bodily configurations like pregnancy are deemed to be monstrous and how the invocation of such monstrosity is constructed. In determining this, it becomes clearer how the notion of mutation operates to deem ill and trans bodies monstrous also, and to deconstruct any relation this may have to the unnatural.

Queer Subversions

Rather than focusing on monstrosity in relation to bodily mutability, Halberstam outlines “potential” as the formative interest in art focused on trans bodies. In his book, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, Halberstam considers how artists Jenny Saville and Del LaGrace Volcano explore the shifting bodies and genders of their subjects within their artworks and states “the appearance of the transgender body in visual culture is instead part of a long history of the representation of unstable embodiment.”³⁶ In *Candy Darling on her Deathbed*, there is more than gender instability; the subject is also between life and death, while her stomach is subjected to a mutation. Hujar’s photograph represents an array of fluxes and transitions, and Darling personifies the in-between state. Halberstam suggests that art focused on trans bodies has a “technotopic potential,” which he defines as “a body situated in an immediate and visceral relation to the technologies ... that have marked, hurt, changed, imprinted, and brutally reconstructed it.”³⁷ This appears true when considering the idea that Darling’s hormone ingestion caused her lymphoma; however, there is further potential in the uncontrollable space into which Darling has been thrust. She appears between gender (evidenced in the gender uncertainty expressed in her diary entries), existence and bodily transformation, in the social site where most mutations take place, the hospital.³⁸ If mutability and flux can be reconsidered as actions which present potential rather than monstrosity, such potentials can begin to be utilised, ceasing the need for normative or “docile” bodies.

One outcome of such queering can be noted in the altered artist/muse relation taking place. Within the hospital setting, and the dialogue of mutation, the role of Peter Hujar is primarily one of support. Lebowitz states “she asked him to come up and take that picture ... she loved that picture and she really made a big effort to look like that because she already looked very unwell.”³⁹ Both this request by Darling and the nature of Hujar’s photography as “mak[ing] the viewer party to and part of [the subject/photographer’s] experience through the effect of attentiveness” makes Darling’s influence over this portrait profoundly clear.⁴⁰ Due to the fact that, “the difference between Hujar and any other photographer is that he gives consent pictorial form,” an equilibrium appears between Darling and Hujar’s shared

vision for the image.⁴¹ Therefore, *Candy Darling on her Deathbed* queers a focal artist/muse relation, as Hujar and Darling's relationship was not the sexualised, exploitative relation which inspired many famous works throughout art history. Despite the photograph alluding to historical voyeurism with its re-appropriation of the reclining nude, the image possesses more a sense of queer kinship. Harrison Adams suggests the "distinction between naked and nude further breaks down" in Hujar's photographs, based on the relaxed gaze of Hujar's subjects and his attentiveness to their vulnerabilities.⁴² Therefore, it is difficult to situate Hujar and Darling's relationship within any of the stereotypical photographer-subject relations, as his image lacks the detachment professed by some documentary photographers and is far from the discipline and supervision of medical photography. In a way, when Bronfen states "[the muse] is always incompletely accessible, always beyond reach," this is not the case in Hujar's photograph.⁴³ The body captured in the image is preparing to transcend life, but rather than being solely a "meditation on mortality," Hujar's work creates the conditions for the artist to adopt the role of visual caretaker, protecting and developing Darling's image in order for it to be immortalised.⁴⁴

Hujar's role as photographer may be one which, by Sontag's own definition, "exorcise[s] morbidity" as well as "evok[ing] its sweet poetry and its panic."⁴⁵ However, in a sense, the photographer becomes the funeral director, responsible for capturing beauty, truth and sadness, all in one. Sontag suggests photographers "are also—wittingly or unwittingly—the recording angels of death ... Peter Hujar knows that the portraits in life are always, also, in death."⁴⁶ She appears to allude to the death that takes place when making the living subject two-dimensional, but her words also attest to the instance where photographing, for memorialisation, is always pointed towards the knowledge of mortality. The photographer then becomes a paradox, bringer of death but also formulator of the eternal. For a queer audience, the recording of death during the AIDS crisis was pivotal to activism and redetermining truth. Within a homophobic society, archiving presence through photography and recording tragedy provided a kind of non-dismissible evidence. In a sense, Hujar's photograph of Darling is remarkably prescient of what is to come and sets a precedent for the role of photographers during the AIDS crisis. His image inadvertently attests to the political, social and medical struggles faced by trans people, while furnishing evidence of Darling as a glamorous icon. The action of focusing on tragedy and appreciation simultaneously operates, at an emotional level, similarly to a funeral. With queerness existing on the margins of society, the role of photography for mourning becomes amplified, for safety, fantasy and memory all exist in the image whilst not necessarily in life.

This desire for memorialisation, attention and tragedy appears to have controlled Darling's final months; Paul Morrissey said of Darling during her illness, "she said more than once, like she was acting in a Susan Hayward movie 'I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die.'" The satirical nature of this comment is addressed in Darling's diary and by Morrissey, who suggests she was almost "making fun" of Susan Hayward in the way that she said it.⁴⁷ Throughout *Beautiful Darling* it is suggested that Darling craved attention and appreciation, and so the image *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed* offered Darling the victimhood, tragedy and beauty she craved with such spectacular effect that it became the ultimate memorial. Holly Woodlawn considers how "Gene Harlow, Marilyn Monroe, they all died young, blonde and beautiful, Candy in a way wanted to go that route."⁴⁸ Darling's life, however, was inherently queer and alternate to such popular Hollywood actresses. In a sense, this made her death and Hujar's photograph all the more visually accessible, for the trajectory of her life did not align with the normative matrix imposed on the likes of Marilyn Monroe, for instance. Cisgendered icons who died young are often mourned for the disruption to their incomplete heterosexual role: the children they didn't have, or the partner they never found. With Darling, the notion of mourning is much more intimate due to the uncertainty of her life's course. It can focus on character and desire, rather than the imposition of a normative framework. Consequently, Halberstam's notion of "technotopic potential" is exemplified by *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed* for Darling, as a dying subject, becomes a true embodiment of her own hopes and desires, rather than those imposed socio-culturally. Thus, it is implied that the unpredictability of queerness creates a more personalised experience, which works to

increase the potential scope of mourning, broadening the boundaries of memorial.

Conclusion

Through Darling enacting a parody of the dying film star, she begins to expose gendered behaviours as hyperbolic and mimetic; the outcome is the removal of power from norms attributed to the woman in death. By re-enacting heteronormative, cinematic narratives of the dying woman, as a dying trans woman, Darling becomes a sexualised and a subversive body. In exploring narratives of pregnancy and death simultaneously, Darling begins to transform the linearity of living. The boundaries of life and death are blurred and it is suggested that death can be both a desire and a kind of rebirth. It becomes apparent that in order to access the power of bodily change, the notion that mutation is inherently monstrous must be disposed of. Darling begins to subvert this monstrosity by beautifying the mutations she experiences. Thus, subversion can not only be seen from within the heteronormative or cis-passing, but also from the place of the abject. Where Butler suggests that queerness is abject and hence positioned as oppositional to heterosexuality (arguing it is not the place to situate subversions of the hetero/cis-normative), Darling defies such a notion. She removes the disturbing power from the abject in her engagement with popular culture and cinematic aesthetics. Darling becomes the abject when visualised as the queer corpse, yet simultaneously ties herself to the heterosexual desire evoked by cinematic aesthetics and female victimhood. She exemplifies Halberstam's borderland, using her identifications with both femininity and queerness to re-determine the boundaries of mourning, the queer body and the role of the woman in death.

Precarity prefaces the subset themes of femininity, illness, transness and death, in *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed*. The precarity of queerness led Hujar to unite his subjects in a rhizomic visual catalogue. This queer family-making comes into play where nuclear family may otherwise be absent. There is much to learn from the insufficiency of unavailable or absent models of mourning and how replacement models can often be better suited, especially given the pandemic's recent restrictions on touch and physical presence. Despite undeniable differences between Darling's death, the AIDS crisis and COVID-19, all three seemingly pose challenges to mourning rituals like the funeral and outline its restrictiveness. Many are experiencing disenfranchised grief, as a result of being unable to physically connect with loved ones and this, although removed from the precarity of being marginalised for one's sexuality or gender identity, provides the need to recover mourning or readdress it in a new way. Where Crimp states the grief of gay men "had to be contained within the confines of manly acceptability," that system of oppression is now exchanged for safety and medical accountability.⁴⁹ What I am proposing is not that in order to refigure mourning practices we must experience disruptions, but rather that we engage with precarity, mutability and individuality so as to respond to death in ways which may be deemed socially improper. For, there appears to be undeniable value in attesting to the nuances of feeling and experience when faced with something as complex as dying.

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