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Alexandra Juhasz
CUNY Brooklyn College

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

From the Scenes of Queens: Genre, AIDS and Queer Love

Alexandra Juhasz

Introduction: St. Luke's Hospital, 1993 / San Francisco, 1994 / Pasadena, 2005

It's the lack of resolution, the nothingness of another death from AIDS that kills me. In 1993, a man dies at 29 – a talented man/a regular man – and he didn't accomplish his life's work, he didn't figure out what he was here for, he didn't have his greatest love or his final song. He never wrote or directed the plays he would have if left to live on. And, the reason I'm so angry: he didn't explain death to me. He simply died. Or rather, he painfully died. Died with despair, and humiliation, body parts distended, bloated, shrunk, withered, wearing a diaper, unable to speak. At that point – so much agony – I wanted him to die, he wanted to die. The practical considerations of a body in pain take over the metaphysical: there is little time to consider the meaning of mortality when you're holding the hand of a weak and tired man who's scared of the hospital but wanting to be free of the pain as a nurse shoves a tube up his nose and down his throat to clear those passages of fluid so that breathing will come more easily. You hustle through the living of dying – so much to do – to find out later that it doesn't add up, it doesn't amount to something you can put your heart or mind or words around. So, a year after his death, in San Francisco, in 1994, I wanted to read, to learn what death means from others ... always the academic. In the process, I'm struck by my own lack of resources: an atheist, a

scholar of *video* of all things. I can't seem to find the right books. I give up. In my summer's quest to master the imponderable, all I seem to locate is my own cynicism, and a few trite sentiments from dominant culture like balloon-bouquets or weepie good-bye scenes. I've been taught to mourn through movies and clichés.

The years go by and the grief subsides, hides. AIDS goes underground. I repress what I was supposed to do: remember, feel, witness, explain that man, that love, that time. Yet, here in Pasadena in 2005, researching this essay, I find myself immensely moved by private resonances aroused by images, feelings and thoughts of AIDS encountered, so many years later, in the films of Todd Haynes.¹ For, perhaps ghoulishly, I crave reminders of Jim's horrid last months (and our beguiling first love) so that I can remain emotionally and ethically accountable for his glorious and shattered life, and my place alongside and surviving him. My private, AIDS-specific guilt, responsibility, anger and love take shape through Haynes' public work. I salute him for this service: contributing to my slow cure, my snail's-paced education in the existential.

I want to illuminate this interactive process rather than something 'about AIDS' in Haynes' films. I want to acknowledge how his art, and my interpretation, are a shared cultural and political project of witnessing and accounting, mourning and healing, produced from similar experiences, in a mutual time of catastrophe, through a common culture, and across texts.² I want to demonstrate how *his* images locate and free my memories, creating *my* images, albeit in a different but related form. While art and criticism often so dance, the conventions of these practices demand that this interdependence stays obscured, formative but not the form itself.³ Yet Haynes is a formidable genre player who lets criticism structure his work playing against 'the recalcitrance of the binary opposition between intellect and emotion', (Doane 2004: 17) just as I will let the affective and anecdotal share this scholarly frame. AIDS was understood during its earliest days as a crisis of signification, at once overdetermined and insufficient. To this day, our representational efforts in its awful wake must and can never do it justice. But what if we work together to represent in tandem and across genre? I will compose this necessary impossibility – fathoming AIDS – as communal and political, by producing conversations across texts, memories, time and methods. Haynes' filmic characters, preoccupations and styles are used to tell this scholar's story of activism, youth and love.

But Haynes' films already tell this: how one gains identity and history through researching and revelling in the ready-made roles performed and packaged by others.⁴ In his films, young men learn to be gay, and sometimes women discover how to be girls, through illicit investigations into consumer and other cultures. In *Velvet Goldmine* (1998) the intrepid journalist, Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), not so long ago a glam-rock-groupie himself, knows that by investigating the tabloid histories of now vanished pop-idols he might learn about *himself*. Stuart explains about his quest that 'in some mysterious way, their lives had been his own'.⁵ I learned to be a lesbian, a queer and straight woman, a scholar, an AIDS activist and survivor, through the rules and roles of genre, and from the culture of gay men. I learned how to perform love and grief through popular culture, and from the scenes of drag

queens. Haynes instructs us that generic systems of representation – in film, writing, the social – both limit and produce what we might know, how we might be, what we must tell, and how and where we are supposed to say it.⁶ Like Arthur Stuart, I break out from the norms of my profession to investigate my personal and idiosyncratic wants and history through another's glamorous tales. There, in Haynes' performance of a related project, I find words for my love and loss of one man, James Robert Lamb, to AIDS.

Poison / The Saint, 1986

We first met, while in our early twenties, in NYC, while participating in the birth and heyday of AIDS activism. Todd Haynes and I share a micro-generational cultural milieu of pop, theoretical and political references. In the 1980s, we had common friends, had both moved to the city after completing college, were members of ACT UP, were part of a lively community of twentysomethings inventing 'queer cinema', and mutually maintained our private queer loves, Todd with his best girl-friend from Brown University, Cynthia Schneider, a lesbian who was my friend and fellow AIDS activist, and me with my first love, Jim, a gay man I had met at Amherst.

Then Todd exploded into popular culture when Jesse Helms, and other enemies of the National Endowment for the Arts, lambasted his first feature film, *Poison* (1991), for its graphic depictions of homosexuality. Meanwhile, other cultural pundits heralded the film, particularly its section 'Horror', as an allegory for the very hatred, violence and fear represented in Helms' powerful condemnation and censoriousness of gay art which was being fuelled by the increasing visibility of homosexuality and AIDS. *Poison* was positioned as one of the first feature films to be 'about' AIDS and in the 'right way', in that it was authored by an AIDS activist espousing less a depiction of life in the time of AIDS (this is never seen in *Poison*, or any of Haynes' films for that matter) than a representation of the meanings of AIDS. This subject, AIDS as primarily a matter and crisis of signification, had been collectively deduced and articulated by a community of artists, intellectuals and activists over the preceding five years. Haynes contributed to and made popular culture of this vision or version of AIDS, one indebted to contemporaneous activism, art and theory that understood the crisis of AIDS to be as much one of meaning as medicine. In my contribution to this strain of thought, *AIDS TV*, I write: 'a body of AIDS theory suggests that this invisible contagion is the logical culmination of the postmodern condition, *only* manageable in representation' (1995: 3). Douglas Crimp more famously asserts, 'AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualise it, represent it and respond to it. We know AIDS only in and through these practices' (2002: 28).

In this analytic/activist/ACT UP worldview, as in *Poison*, histories and practices of homophobia, and their sanction and reification through media forms, are the root of the crisis, not a little-understood and fully invisible virus. 'The whole world is dying of panicky fright', broadcasts the inter-title that opens the film. In 'Horror' (one of the film's three inter-woven sections that also include 'Hero' and 'Homo')

the dread behind this fright is personified and named as Dr Graves (Larry Maxwell), a scientist researching the 'mysteries of the sex drive', who mistakenly swallows his own scientific serum and symptomatises his misguided curiosity through sexually communicable sores, and an associated sexualised violence. Speaking through the disease, he threatens his love interest and fellow research scientist, Dr Nancy Olsen (Susan Norman): 'Do I look lascivious? Like the pitiful result of some indulgence? I'm a monster!' In a (recent) time before AIDS, the visible symptoms of indulgent and illicit (homo)sexual encounters would be much harder to see. Such excursions left only mysterious marks: tics of behaviour, slips of the tongue, body language, apparel. These symptoms evidenced sublimated and secret desires, but only for those who knew how or where to look: for instance, in the behaviours of the boy, Richie, who in 'Hero' strives to be hurt, or the violent tendencies of a young inmate, John Broom, who in 'Homo' prefers to 'reject the world that has rejected me' through revelling in a life of criminality. The panicky fright comes from a fear that such untraceable lasciviousness is contagious; that sodomy, like the plague, spreads effortlessly but invisibly. In the 1950s B-time of 'Horror', the guilty body is marked with sores (in the parallel present-day world undepicted in the film, homosexuality finally gains its visible symptom as well, in the purple sores of Kaposi's Sarcoma). At Dr Graves' pathetic but violent order to be kissed despite his putrid sores, Nancy responds as Haynes might wish for us all: 'It doesn't disgust me in the slightest. Quite the contrary it breaks my heart.' Yet this moment of genre-required romantic pathos is unique in a film whose three sections repeatedly figure aggression as the requisite response to panicky fright.

In this sense, the shared concerns of all three sections – about the links between homophobic dread, sexualised violence and genre – mark the entire film as being 'about' AIDS (analysis and activism). Haynes creates three narratives, and one text, in which inherited and easily repeated systems and histories of meaning are what make and mark the diseased conditions of his sorry protagonists. In *Poison* (and in all works that follow), genre is the system, homophobia (and/or patriarchy) the history, self-hatred the condition, panicky fright the response, punishment the solution, and flight (or rarely, community) only a meagre possibility. In *Poison*, and across the Haynes oeuvre, his leads learn to name their disease only through what is purchasable from a highly judgemental mainstream culture, and an ever so slightly closeted popular culture, both suffering the rule of genre and history. The AIDS crisis becomes only today's manifestation of a sanctioned homophobic violence, and its repeated stories, enacted and then re-told to curtail and punish the deviance and deviants within. Similarly, as his heroes attempt to self-name, with only dominant culture as their guides, they are fated to repeat these oft-told tales of their own deviance. Good students, they punish themselves before the culture needs to. Outside of the glimpse of rocker community located in a long-ago, nostalgic past of 1970s glam rock in *Velvet Goldmine*, his characters can look for their likenesses only in the tortured, disease-riddled queers and women of dominant culture. Thus, all of Haynes' films are about AIDS if we allow *Poison*, and particularly its most overtly allegorical section, 'Horror', to create a template for analysis.

'Horror' makes its visual and narrative focus a literal revulsion towards sexual contagion, and the hysteria that is its result, while the other two sections can be seen to share such topical and structural concerns at an only slightly more metaphorical level. 'Hero' uses the prurient voyeuristic codes of documentary to investigate a neighbourhood-wide loathing (and fascination) for a masochistic child who suffers ongoing suburban brutalisation and ultimate disappearance, while 'Homo' internalises this dread into the norms of the penal system, where violence, homosexuality and fear are the rules of the prison and prison-film. Haynes' career-long project of the genre-pastiche, most overt in this film where three such parodies are intercut and therefore highly self-reflexive, establishes that certain forms best carry the burden of fanning fear and then punishing the victim.

Importantly, these three genres' panicky fright leads to further aggression against the outcast on top of the authorised communal violence which begins their pain. All three sections also centre upon a resulting self-loathing, or 'internalised homophobia', itself mirroring the sanctioned rules of social ostracisation, and demanding a self-styled sexualised, ritualised 'punishment' of murder, suicide, defilement, rape, self-starvation or brutality (of course this is the central theme of both *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) and *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993)). In 'Hero', Richie plays secret games that insure that he will be ritually punished, especially by being spanked, his penalty of choice ... and he never fights back. He suffers 47 visits to school nurses, and twelve kids are suspended and three expelled as punishment for the punishment he forces them to enact on him. 'Mostly you wanted to hit him. You wanted to see him get creamed,' explains a neighborhood playmate. His departure through a second-floor window – suicide, escape, miracle – echoes Dr Graves' similar gesture as the disgusted, distorted faces of his neighbours egg him to it. In both cases, the outcasts become martyrs when they are visited by angels, redeemed for crimes only logical within the structures of documentary, horror films and generic American repression.⁷ In 'Homo', John Broom rapes the man he loves, Jack Bolton, this brutal love-act inextricable from the sexualised violence directed at them both by the penal system. He explains, 'I always gave that life [of sex with a man] a violent end.' Douglas Crimp identifies a devastation and self-abasement that has often been the flip-side of (AIDS) militancy. He believes that the melancholia experienced by gay men during the years of AIDS activism has often been repressed and he believes we must venture to admit how often this violence then becomes self-inflicted: 'By making all violence external, we fail to confront ourselves, to acknowledge our ambivalence, to comprehend that our misery is also self-inflicted' (2002: 29). Laura Christian puts it simply: 'In *Poison*, identity is instituted through injury' (2004: 98).

Stories of the pain and pleasure of queer self-abasement as punishment for generic crimes is certainly Haynes' most generous and consistent contribution to AIDS representation. I have a similar story to tell about queer love: women's love for gay men; gay men's love of women. For *Poison* (and Todd's later and earlier films) are unimaginable without the loving participation of his female collaborators, friends and facilitators: producer Christine Vachon, and co-writer and co-producer

Cynthia Schneider. *Poison* introduces this story as well. It begins with a young boy's hand as it curiously creeps across a feather, a bead-encrusted purse, pearls, through shadows, nylons, silk, tassels, cards, a bell, a book. The slightly pudgy child's hand guides the camera movement as we follow his illicit vision: the point of view of a boy worshipping, exploring, the objects of women, the fetishes of femininity. 'Produced by Christine Vachon', is then etched across the boy's loving touch of brush, comb, mirror, silver coin purse, cross, pill-box, silk panties, then ... slap! Off to prison for the thief caught red-handed! Haynes depicts the love for things female, a guilty, illicit and luxurious obsession, and one often punished in his films' narratives. I also know a bad queer love: one that ends in AIDS and death. But before this, there was good love – Christine and Todd, Alex and Jim – a self-made system outside sanctioned structures, a form of mutual support and desire between gay men and women, a life-changing romance between a pair who cannot and will not use sex to express their love, and instead pursue their desire into art and politics. In the compositing of Christine's name onto Todd's visuals about a desire for things female, I also see the Saint in 1986. I see myself grafted onto gay male spaces.

Under a starred dome the music crescendos, tambourined hands emerge above the sea of heads in a prayer-like salute to the disco beat, shirts are thrown to the room's ragged edges, steam jets from the floor, and I am made yet again into a body that experiences the numbing, erotic escalation of dancing in a room flooded with hot, gay men even as it also knows complete negation, utter invisibility, virtual non-being. I am a woman dancing with my dear friend Jim at the Saint. Ours is the hyperactive, frenetic too-much-joy of a straight girl and homosexual boy in love in our early twenties. Ours is the hyperactive, frenetic last-joy of the gay male club scene before the reality of AIDS sinks everyone into a deep-freeze of inactivity that will only be thawed in the late 1980s by AIDS activism, transformed again in the early 1990s into a desperate, depressed nihilism, and absented and erased by the new millennium. In 1986 at the Saint we all pretend we haven't heard of AIDS, that it can't matter here in this magic palace where Jim assures me that men fuck all night in the balconies above the dance floor.

He points out these sex pits with such eagerness. Their sticky surfaces confirm the ongoing potential and the current reality of his insatiable virility, newly released as it is from the closets of college, and suburbia before that; in our New York, at the Saint, desire, beauty and glamour are still voracious and alive. Seven years later he is dead. He didn't desire sex – anonymous or otherwise – during his last year, locked away in his East Village apartment, a self-imposed exile to vanity, a celibate victim of weight and hair loss, his once-idolised body ruined by immense purple sores that swell his genitals, his lungs.

But in 1986 at the Saint, I wait alone in a dark, back alcove on the second floor as Jim takes a very, very long time in the bathroom. I do not find it particularly exciting, interesting or important that men fuck in the balconies or in the bathrooms either. That's not why I'm at the Saint.

Roaming through the packed bar downstairs, my gaze catches leather-clones posing masterfully on carpeted podiums and porn videos in endless duplicate

playing soundlessly over the bartenders' heads. Enlarged dicks and nipples on ceaseless parade. I see them. They don't see me. Except for Jim, who looks up from conversation with a blond, vapid bartender to signal me over for free drinks. For these few hours, unlike the rest of my busy day in New York City, I am outside the fear, uncertainty, danger, ridicule and anger of men's voyeuristic desire – *hey mama-sita, hey, hey legs, mmmm baby, why won't you say bello?* For these few hours I am in the closest of proximities to Jim's real desire: I force him to see me outlined against the backdrop of identical male bodies which frame and overwhelm me.

Jim provides me access to sexuality, erotic energy, taut, tan bodies and writhing dance floors without the inevitable danger that accompanies such glories for those in women's bodies. Of course, at this place, sexuality itself is denied to me – the most simple, if self-abnegating way to insure safety – my pleasures are vicarious. And I realise, with hindsight, that even with all those buffed, styled, beautiful male bodies surrounding straight-girl me, neither do I desire. Except for Jim that is, who will never – can never – desire me back, at least not in that way, although he loves me more and deeper than those endless erotic crushes, or so he said.

It would be too easy to say that my life at the Saint was for and of Jim, that my sole inspiration for living this lifestyle which was never my own was an unfulfillable, unrecognisable, perhaps therefore somehow perverted heterosexual desire: queer love between straight woman and gay man.

But at the Saint with Jim, I experience many pleasures in their own rights: from the adoring, envious, ravenous gazes of gay men who covet my vintage dresses and lipstick, to the heat of the dance floor as the pace picks up, to the joy of leaving the sanction, anonymity and drabness of straightness. Next to Jim, I often find that I can live myself as a woman in ways otherwise unavailable to me: de-sexed, all-energy, like a man. As we circle each other, letting our love for the opposite sex pull us farther from our own gendered prisons, we invent the exuberant possibility for departures from the confines of the limpid stories we had inherited, the set structures that seemed immutable, the generic imperatives with no escape.

Safe / Fire Island, 1993

Safe (1995), like 'Horror', allegorises a mysterious, life-threatening, blame-the-victim disease – environmental illness (one of a 'cluster of immune system breakdowns based on environmental conditions') – to comment upon the contemporary cultural politics of AIDS. Set retrospectively in 1987, the time of AIDS' first appearance into 'mainstream culture' and AIDS activism's related birth, we are reminded of why this movement first sought to create words for its disease. A hushed and hesitant conversation appears towards the beginning of the film. Carol White (Julianne Moore) and a girlfriend, engulfed within a too-white room, imprisoned by vertical blinds and too-tall chairs, engage in an interaction of avoidance, camera as removed and bland as are they and their kitchen retreat: 'It wasn't?' 'No, that's what everyone keeps ... not at all. Cause he wasn't married.' 'Right.' 'It's just so unreal.' 'Did you see the den?' 'It's gorgeous.' 'You know I'm suing the contractor. You don't even

want to know.' It is much later, in this sole film from Haynes' oeuvre, that AIDS is actually named. This when Carol flees the suburbs and goes rural, to Wrenwood, the healing community where she suffers the sermons of the centre's founder, Peter Dunning, a PWA ('person with AIDS') with a host of theories and practices of self-healing. The same vision that frames *Poison* – of a negative and judgemental modern world with its associated panicky-fright and resulting self-loathing, and this self-hate's concomitant social, somatic and physical disease – becomes the central concern of *Safe*. However, in this case, what our lead suffers and internalises, rather than homophobia, is the cruelty of patriarchal domination and its linked violence of consumerism (as is also the case in *Superstar* and again for Moore, this time as Cathy, in *Far from Heaven* (2002)).

In *Safe*, Carol is infected by patriarchy's toxic diminishment of women's personal possibility, the meaning and purpose of her life no more substantial than the artificial, noxious man-made goods that she must ceaselessly consume to fill the emptiness inside her: couch, smog, fad diets, 1980s hair-styles, dry-cleaning solutions, aerobics. Carol, like many of Haynes' protagonists, tries first, without success, to be cured by a shrink. Days later, recuperating in her pillow-piled, floral-infested bed, she ceases to be able to recognise her room, husband, or self: 'Oh god, what is this? Where am I? Right now?' 'At our house. Greg and Carol's house.' 'Who are you?' A talking cure can be of little avail for one whose disease/punishment is the disallowing and absenting of self-knowledge, shared history and a language of self-naming. Psychiatry cannot cure her (or Carol's husband Frank in *Far from Heaven* or Broom in *Poison* for that matter) because none of these victims know the name, history or cause of their disorder. Without analysis, activism, a movement, self-naming, control of representation, and with only popular culture to guide her, Carol is left speechless. Thus, at Wrenwood, the cure is a reverse emptying with an anticipated self-filling and self-fulfilling. Here, the sexes are separated, the meals silent, the dress restrained, and thus a vacuum is created that could be filled by 'personal growth and personal transformation'. By leaving the polluted detritus of mainstream patriarchy behind – by clearing one's load – the sufferer can reach a clarity of perspective that will allow her to locate and self-name her curative, essential, and good purpose. Says Dunning:

Look into each other's eyes and see personal transformation. Why? Because we left judgement behind and with it the shaming condition that kept us locked up in our pain. What I want to give you tonight is an image to reflect on. A world outside as positive and free as the world we have created here. Because when you look out at the world from a place of love and forgiveness what you are seeing outside is a reflection of what you feel within. Does that make sense?

He preaches that we can teach our immune systems to be positive if we can convince ourselves that we are safe; that we make ourselves sick, and can re-make ourselves well. Sadly, and as evidence of Haynes' black and caustic critique of what was at

the time a popular self-help remedy for AIDS – self-blame leading to the putative powers of self-love – Moore is unable to cure herself through this private project of self-knowledge and naming. She reminds us that the affective and anecdotal (like my memories of Jim) are only one way of knowing; a practice that is often inclusive, impractical and introspective when unlinked to a project of analysis and activism. The rapid expectations and experiences of women created through the codes of our dominant society leave her utterly blank and entirely inexpressive.⁸ Meanwhile, Dunning's cure of atomised self-knowledge, while literally set in the space of a community, allows for no connections outside of the acknowledgment of private feelings. At her big public speech, weeks into her healing at Wrenwood and in response to a surprise birthday celebration, Carol is only capable of these faltering, incomplete incoherencies:

I want to thank Chris and everyone here. You've pulled me through a hard period ... couldn't have done it without you. I don't know what I'm saying. I hated myself before I came here ... trying to see myself more as I am. More positive. Like seeing the pluses. People's minds are opening, like educating, and AIDS and other types of diseases, and it is a disease and we have to be more aware of it. And people aware of it. Even ourselves, and reading labels and going into buildings...

In this way, Haynes maintains his (and the AIDS activist movement's) focus on the historical, social and cultural, rather than the personal, at root cause of all (auto-immune) disorders. Later that evening, alone in her porcelain igloo, at last really embarking on her cure of self-acceptance, Carol repeats 'I love you. I really love you' to a mirror-image of her diminishing and ever more ravaged face (itself a mirror image of Dr Graves' and Karen Carpenter's riddled, diseased maws). Her voice, always weak and prone to end proclamations as if sentences, is fully unconvincing. There can be no cure for Carol because there is nothing there to (self-)love. Laura Christian writes of Carol that 'the subject speaks, but does not manage to feel what she speaks' (2004: 106). This must be because she has neither a developed interiority nor external culture against which to reference her acquired self-help language. Here I see women's invisibility, our worthlessness, and the bankruptcy of interiority and intimacy created from its empty shape. This we share with the gay men that we love: how we are reduced to nothingness through the cruel vision of homophobia and sexism and the culture made in its name. In the hopeless, bleak years of *Safe*, we sometimes enacted this ruthless gaze against each other. Our love did not prove strong enough to undo the structures we inherited, as well as those that befell us. I see Fire Island, Summer, 1993.

It's so hot in New York. I'm involved in a new relationship after a painful break-up with Scott that occurred during the cold, grey months of Jim's death that same year. The winter and spring have been a time of loss. The summer finds me warming up in New York. I have struggled, by having many joking conversations with my straight and gay friends, about my sexual infatuation with a lesbian friend. We

decide to have sex – just friends – and become quickly and seriously involved: just like lesbians. It is August, and I am, for the first time, involved with a woman – Jim would have been so happy. He loved women, but he loved lesbians most. He always wanted me to be gay, too. Cheryl is very much like him.

We need to take a vacation. We don't have any money. It's so hot in New York. We are madly and passionately in love, but we hardly know each other. Where should we go? I've never travelled as a lesbian or with Cheryl. I've never travelled with a lover who is black. Where will we feel comfortable? We end up going to Fire Island – it's close, I know that women and people of colour go to Cherry Grove, Jim's ex-lovers Miguel and Joe are there, so they can help us find a free place to stay on such sudden notice.

We arrive on the weekend of the Gay Men's Health Crisis' Mourning Party. There are no empty rooms in the Grove. Miguel invites us to sleep on his living room floor. We join him and his guests for a 24-hour vacation. We hang out on Fire Island with Jim's lovers, Joe and Miguel, Jim's first lover, David, Miguel's Cuban, body-builder buddy, Eric, and Miguel's latest flirtation, Mark. My first vacation as a lesbian is lived as a gay man: Cheryl and I tan on the beach with the boys, smoke a lot of pot, eat vast portions of grilled meat, have sex under the glazed glare of a Tom of Finland lifeguard hanging on the living room wall, and evaluate the fitted and minimal costumes our housemates choose for the day-long beach party. Mostly, however, we talk about gay male sex.

I believe that it is my presence as a lesbian that permits this discussion. When I am a straight woman among all-gay-male gatherings (a fag hag?) the attitude of the men tends towards coddling, mothering, protecting. This is an act that we all enjoy: a campy celebration of the female as fetish. The men in the room take on their roles with an almost courtly décorum, a little too polite, a little too formal. A straight woman friend in the room focuses and highlights how very gay the men are, what they all have in common; oddly, their shared femininity then permits the men to act sort of straight. And I am much more straight as a woman among gay men: a kind of pretty, girlish girl. When things get racy, dirty, *normal*, it is only after a nodding of the head in my direction – you can take this, right? But this is all a performance because, of course, everyone in the room knows that a fag hag has heard it all before, knows as much about gay male life as gay men do, revels in it. This is a space to play out, play with, gender roles – for a moment men can be men to my woman, roles we would all refuse to play in most other circumstances.

Yet when I was with these men as a lesbian, the mood was slightly different. Although certainly continuing to act polite – there were women in the room – our presence became less an excuse for 'male' behaviour, as it did for *gay* male behaviour. I was less of a girl, and more of a grown, sexual woman. I got my sexuality back, and so did they. As a lesbian, I ate lamb chops and drank red wine to a stream of stories about dick cheese, the pains and pleasures of large cocks, and the pros and cons of circumcision.

So much meat. It was a little overwhelming. We fled back to the city while the boys were out partying. As a lesbian, all this maleness felt something more like an

attack. As a lesbian, not a straight woman, the maleness *was* more like an attack. But perhaps by 1995 there was more anger and less play all around. Some of us were more punished for our overt departures from the rules of the gender closet. While Todd could tell the story of the self-hatred of AIDS through the evaporation of a woman, perhaps those of us living, not representing, these times were not yet ready to be so forgiving. As much as I might want, women are not equivalent to gay men, although they often play the same function, just as gay men are not precisely the same as lesbians, or even queers, even as we study for these varied parts by expertly reading the visible symptoms of these (auto-immune) conditions.⁹ For of course, gay men, especially the white ones who served as stand-ins for AIDS at this time, always got to be men in the end.

Velvet Goldmine / The Gaiety, 1986

Our narrator proclaims: 'Histories, like ancient ruins, are the fictions of empires, ever threatening to return.' Be so warned to this now familiar theme: our characters will be uplifted and brought down by their queerness and all its fictitious legacies. Haynes' third feature continues his preoccupation with the imbrication of gay history with popular culture. The film opens with a glance at the strange birth (from Mars?) and childhood of Oscar Wilde in 1854, moving quickly to the reincarnation of his type, in 1954, with Jack Fairy, who is soon to be a queer idol of his own time. The re-playing of this gay role, learned through scripts made available as merchandise, is symbolised in the re-gifting of a fabulous green-brooch that travels time and space as it is passed like a baton from one queer idol to the next, offering him both the promise of gaudy, giddy self-transformation and its required catastrophic pay off. No teleology here, the hundred years or more spanned in this film mark little variation in function for this icon. If anything, there is a reverse progress in this history, where a glam return to the wild ways of Wilde is threatened by an ominous but not-to-be-represented black cloud of impending disease that hovers on the characters' horizon. Lucky for them, the film ends on the brink of this apocalypse. While *Velvet Goldmine's* main action occurs via flashback to an idealised 'gorgeous time, when we were all living in dreams', a time 'ten years before', set in a 1970s of sparkle make-up and glittering frocks, the film's heuristic present is a bleak 1984 New York, a defiant and also wistful move for Haynes who sets the film on the yuppie cusp of our shared crisis.

Of course, these glittery boys would become the very first victims of AIDS, if the movie was to take us there, but it need not. They have been punished already with the pre-determined sentences of their learned crimes. The end of glam takes them to places worse than where they started. Thus, stories of self-loathing and gay unfolding, linked to the limits of generic form, are also this film's focus. In this case, there is a ballsy homage to the structure and style of *Citizen Kane*, a genre unto itself. And yes, again we find our characters inventing themselves as gay, with little but popular culture to guide them. 'That's me! That's me, Da!' shrieks Christian Bale as the young Arthur Stuart to his parents, as they watch Brian Slade's (Jonathan Rhys

Meyers) gender-bending performance, in platform boots and glitter eye make-up, appearing via television in their very own working-class suburban living room. The vagaries of history allow Arthur Stuart (and his micro gay generation) to make the leap Carol is not capable of, because for a time, in 1970s London, there was a visible pop culture engaged in sexual revolution. Queer costumes, songs and style were for sale and easy to find in fan magazines, on the tube and in records in wide-release. Through glam and glitter, isolated, inarticulate suburban boys could find others like themselves only a bus ride away in the big city. This one Haynesian boy travels out of the confines of his suburban home, and performs himself, for a while, as he might truly desire. His glorious adventure is captured on film but quickly lost to memory before his well-deserved and requisite humiliation and torture are played out. As in *Citizen Kane*, all of the characters who circulate around Brian Slade during their triumphant youth, are by film's end and narrative present, lonely, isolated, abandoned, broke, and one (his fey first manager) even seems to be dying of a mysterious, unnamed gay-male disease.

Of course, Todd, Jim and I were children in the 1970s. By the time we took the bus to the city, history had circled back, ancient ruins unearthing themselves.¹⁰ Sure, we pretended that the safe and campy 1970s was still ours, that New York in 1986 was as exuberant and playful as it had been only ten years previously. Jim and I performed these roles at the Gaiety on Times Square in 1986 while we were still in college, acquiring most of what we knew about (the ancient ruins of) gay culture from *Interview* magazine. Jim would return to Amherst with wads of cash, new clothes and lots of presents. He said he got this money as a bartender at Uncle Charlie's, a gay bar in the West Village. At some point during that final semester of college, he told me that he got it stripping. He worked at the Gaiety, and these were his wages. Only later did I learn that the big bucks actually came from the hustling that occurred after the show in a room off the lobby called the Kick-Off Lounge. At the time, in the spring of 1986, I was a young twenty-two, and Jim's stripping seemed hot, glamorous and very dangerous – a seedy, tawdry, adult world of sex, money and desperation that I had never known, would never have known, without my relationship with this gay man.

Sometime that spring when I was visiting Jim in the city, he left our hotel room in the Village to go uptown to work, and after a safe elapsing of time, I secretly shadowed him there. I walked to Times Square high on one of the most daring adventures of my sheltered life. Suddenly I was privy to the real secrets that motivated the people of New York on their night-time roamings – strip joints, sex for money – now I was part of that real city.

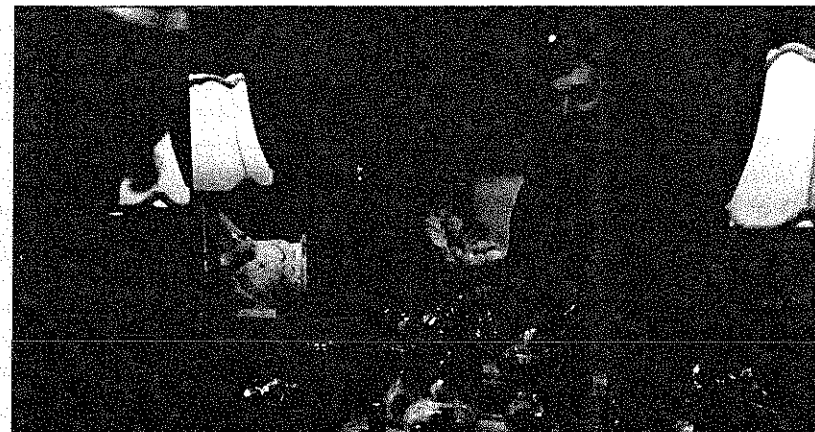
I found the door to the club, and made my way up the dirty, ripped-carpeted steps. An ageing woman took my money. I was embarrassed and trying not to show it: just the typical co-ed out for a peek at a gay male strip club. She was unresponsive. She'd seen it all before. I entered the dimly-lit theatre. There was only a smattering of men: judiciously interspersed throughout the crumbling seats to maintain a sense of both privacy and camaraderie. Together we watched an enormous man in leather disrobe and jerk-off. Together we watched Jim dance onto the stage dressed

collegiate: torn Amherst sweatshirt, baseball cap, youthful blush. We all admired his body, his good looks, his charm, his sense of irony and camp. They all masturbated. It was not an arousing experience for me, at least not in those terms. But I did get off in my velveteen chair on my dangerous secrets: that this man that they loved, loved me; that Jim would never know that I had seen him there (I finally told him during his last, sad year, driven by AIDS-related mania, often stuck inside; I thought it would make him happy, and it did); that I had the courage to enter spaces outside my safe, stable, ordered life as a straight, straight-A college student. This was the time of our gay adventures, our nostalgic trace of wistful forays into gay places that were already vanishing, copies of copies of ways that while initially exuberant had always ended badly.

Far from Heaven / Swarthmore College, 1993

Set in the distant 1950s and in an eastern suburb that must resemble the cheerful, expansive blankness of Haynes' boyhood California home, and one that looks exactly like Jim's in New Canaan, CT, *Far from Heaven* can only be about AIDS in its now recognisable authorial preoccupation with socially-constructed diseases – in this case homophobia, sexism and racism – and their fanciful and reinforcing cures of self-blame, self-censorship, social ostracisation and violence, all linked to genre's rules and preoccupations, and its special role as teacher of world, self and treatment. The film's 'shameful secret' is homosexuality, its damaging therapy is self-denial and anticipated conversion. Haynes' homage to Douglas Sirk, through sweeping Elmer Bernstein score, claustrophobic and colour-coded décor, expressionistic light and costume, and subdued but eruptive performances, reveals his commitment to underscoring the necessary links between generic language and social meaning and experience. But the genre must colour-code: matching fabrics, moods, lighting and message. This is how it speaks: woman=gay, man=black, sexism=homophobia=racism, same function, but some more visible than others: gender sets the colour code through *mise-en-scène*. But such equations, while structurally familiar, are instructionally unsound. Raymond and Frank (Cathy's gay husband) have tickets on the outbound train from Hartford, while Cathy and her black maid, Sybil (Viola Davis), stay stuck at home, each playing out her colour-coded role. There is no outside to this/these system(s), one introduced in *Poison* and played out for all of Haynes' trapped children: 'A child is born and he is given a name. Suddenly he can see himself. He recognises his position in the world. For many, this experience, like that of being born, is one of horror.' But there are different horrors and different systems. In *Far from Heaven*, both gay and black male identity are validated by 'certain freedoms and privileges that can be most clearly ascertained against the backdrop of female stasis'.¹¹

Stasis: that is my role, one horrible and ridiculous, as I recognise and identify with Cathy, but not because she is a woman, but rather through the drag qualities of Moore's performance: the costumeness of her costumes, her mannered movements checked by their exaggerated quantities and weight, the playing of woman



The props of femaleness in *Far from Heaven*

as if melodrama star. Cathy sits at her vanity table and puts on each of the props of femaleness to which we had been earlier introduced in *Poison*: gloves, pearls, hat, lipstick, purse. All matching. 'We ladies are never what we appear. Every girl has her secrets,' says she. *She?*

Jim was a player in Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company, one of several such drag-centred troupes that lost most of their original members to the decimation of the earliest years of the AIDS crisis. In fact, Everett Quinton, Ludlam's lover and often leading-lady, had taken over the company on Charles' death, and hired a new round of actors to continue the repertory in the charming West Village digs of the Ridiculous, located across from the actual Stonewall bar. A generation of men learned to be gay by lovingly copying the hysterical and spectacular women of melodrama. They founded a queer theatre, politics and lifestyle on this campy, female-focused homage. Everett, as Norma Desmond, as Camille; Jim as Valmont; Moore, as Cathy, as Everett, as Norma: she gets in the car, a lavender scarf enshrouding her hair, her hands also gloved, the wind and light and rear-projection allowing her somehow blank face to glow, lit from within because filled with a man: this is a drag queen I saw first on a stage in Greenwich Village in the late 1980s, and *that* queen died of AIDS.

And I saw her again at Swarthmore College in the autumn of 1993 when I decided to attend a lecture about Charles Ludlum hosted by that year's visiting dignitary, a stately lesbian theatre scholar who was teaching a class on gay performance. I was worried about going to a class about Ludlum because the Ridiculous were my friends: I had hosted them at countless parties at our Attorney Street apartment, I knew all the dirt about them, they had helped Jim's lover Joe and I host his memorial service only months previously at their theatre. I was worried about going to the class on Ludlum because the students and faculty there would never know that I knew the Ridiculous deeply, closely and lovingly. Their queer theory could not estimate my gay life.

I became increasingly enraged by the classroom conversation. The lesbian guest professor began to espouse an entirely credible attack on drag-theatre as misogynist. Much of it is. And as a feminist partaking in gay male culture, this interpretation of gay male drag had often been my own. The shows I had attended at Boy Bar and the Pyramid often slid into what felt like a mockery of the women who were being so carefully imitated – performances based on hatred, anger and distance rather than love, celebration or envy. And this had often been my interpretation of the floor at ACT UP or the Saint or any of the other predominantly gay male spaces I so frequently inhabited in late 1980s New York. But an understanding of queer performance that is limited to drag does not gain from the other gay characters we teach each other to play. If queer performance is campy, flashy, light and male (à la Oscar Wilde or Curt Wild), it can also be ‘weightier, burdened by envy, resentment and hatred’, and there was always some of this in the Ridiculous.¹²

Yet her comment triggered a defensive response because the possibility of an underlying hatred, disgust or simple lack of interest in women lines the experience of every gay male event for female participants. More so, the possibility of a matched self-loathing lurks (if often ignored, sublimated, repressed) in every gathering where a lone woman enacts her life with gay men. Wasn't this, actually, one of the inspirations for my life with Jim – focusing my lifestyle around men's pleasures, men's bodies, *Jim's* body, never my own – a belief that I did not deserve to have a body-with-pleasure myself?

These are the difficult questions. Why are women (straight and gay) drawn to the company of gay men? Why are gay men drawn to the company of women? Is self-hate and disgust always formative to these relationships: gay men and straight women hating their femininity, gay men and lesbians hating their homosexuality? For romance without sex is not the love of adults – it does not have its power and hold – although it is the stuff of movies, and it is more *romantic* than love with sex can ever be: you have to communicate passion, desire, intimacy, daring, closeness, adventure, without the use of the body, and only with the use of words, and acts, and performances, and events, through *mise-en-scène*. This is the best of queer love to me: a self-aware, over-the-top performance of heterosexuality drained of its patriarchal domination and bodily specificity. And this might also be the new genus of integrated AIDS criticism I seek: a cross-genre, interactive project that mobilises words to co-name and make communal our personal investments and desires, memories and analyses. As film must inevitably fail (and words, too) in the will to capture memories, emotions and the dead, perhaps there is something to be gained in their forced integration.

Conclusion: Superstar / Attorney St, 23 July 1987 / St. Luke's Hospital, 19 February 1993 / Pasadena, 2005

Superstar was made when Haynes and I were in college, and while AIDS existed only in the big city, and for the gay men who populated it. It was an urban-legend for us college kids protected away in the hinterlands: Todd and Cynthia in Rhode Island,

Jim and I in Massachusetts. At this time, and even earlier, during their boyhood in the suburban 1970s, I imagine Jim and Todd to be the same child, that beautiful boy pre-AIDS who populates all of Haynes' films, growing up in privileged, safe and sterile suburbia with a shameful but life-creating secret. That child who in all of Haynes' films guides the camera's point of view, as we see from his eyes, looking to find answers in the ready-made structures of conformity, the repetitive and repressive landscape of the suburb, and the tawdry products of popular culture and consumer society. Karen Carpenter's searching gaze directs the camera as does Ritchie's in 'Hero', poring over his mother's feminine talismans, but in *Superstar*, Karen is in search of the sick underbelly of the female fetish: Ipecac. Jim and Todd are Karen, too, with their will towards self-punishment, and Richie, and Arthur, and Carol. They are also that boy who makes for himself a love for women's things and ways located in campy popular culture: show tunes, melodrama and costume (as well as in all-boy places like college, prison and camp, their secret reverse). These are all places and things that reveal in mysterious ways the possibility of another life, another world, a world of men, and men's love. When they were young, their parents created for Todd and Jim perfect, expensive, sterile worlds of moral cleanliness, spacious houses, and access to a secret gay culture found only in the oddest places: the Brady Bunch, Jean Genet and the Carpenters. Without queer politics, and its overt queer culture, these boys looked to their mothers, and supportive girls, for information. Jim found me, Todd discovered Cynthia. But their look at and to us was, in part, a disease, and the boys were ashamed, guilty and deserving of punishment: a spank, a condomless fuck, a retro-virus, a death, all fair in return for this irredeemable, unnamable, illicit gaze and desire.

In college in the early-1980s, before AIDS and the queer culture it generated, gender and sex politics took place only under the banner of feminism, and so these smart, political and gay boys befriended and loved women, and learned and worked on the causes of feminism: date rape, eating disorders. *Superstar* is Todd's (and Cynthia's) story of anorexia nervosa, but woman does not equal gay man, as we already know too well. And then, in the mid-1980s, the boys got to go to New York, leaving the girls behind. There they entered the active, thriving, visible gay culture they had thought was only a suburban hallucination, a figment of their lonely dreams, but this was just as that culture was in its death throes. AIDS activism replaced something that was lost: it was exciting, and sexy, and gay but it was also a place of death and loss, fear and anger. Nostalgia for the 1970s and even the closeted, pre-Stonewall scene haunts these men's dreams and art. And then, in 1993, Jim dies of AIDS and thus becomes AIDS. Because Todd's films tell the story of that boy, my boy, Jim, they are all stories of AIDS. I see AIDS everywhere in Todd Haynes' films because they tell the story of my time and my friend.

23 July 1987. Jim's 24th birthday. We are on the rooftop of our Attorney Street apartment on the Lower East Side seeing the city unfold and glimmer in four directions. The light is that magical, glowing, blistering orange ray of a mid-summer sunset. Honks rise from street-level, but only to insure our distance from and simultaneous connection to the city we feel we nearly own. We are young, drunk on

champagne, about to go out to dinner dressed in our best. We nearly explode from this dizzy potential and look up to see a handful of balloons lifting into the air as if at our call. We laugh and applaud and follow them with our eyes. The world makes itself perfect because we know the secrets of love.

We go dashing and spiralling down the six flights of steps and collapse in a kiss – a real kiss – in the space between the two front doors. A sound stops us. It is one of our roommates coming in from the street and catching us in the act. The entire trip to our West Village French birthday café is consumed with delight at our mastery over reality – we can make it our own by transforming our delight into matter through performance. We tell the tale again and again as we stroll hand-in-hand. We actually made her think that we were a *real* couple; she caught us kissing.

19 February 1993. Jim dies in St Luke's hospital during the night. Someone, his brother Chris or maybe his lover Joe, wakes me from a deep, sleeping pill-induced sleep to give me the news. I had been up since about 4am that morning, when I was also awoken with a shock to be told that I had better come quickly because Jim had been admitted to the hospital. I took the train from Philly in a daze, spent the day at the hospital, and left him with a kiss in the evening. After the second call, alone in a dark studio apartment in New York, I am first in shock (I feel empty and hollow), then I shake (I am constricted and afraid), and then I think of balloons. Rising. Lifting. Soaring and light.

When I left him that night he was shackled to a doddering, shallow, dry and stiff body. No longer able to speak, barely able to swallow or breathe, painful tube down his nose and throat, yet doing all he could to hold on to consciousness though the haze of a morphine drip. All who was Jim was trapped inside his own ruthless and destructing body. Now there was freedom. Control. Air.

Over the weeks and months that follow, I was struck twice by the imagery that descended on me in the first minutes of my best friend's death. At some point I remembered the incident from five years before. Balloons! That's why that image reminded me of Jim... This recollection of our balloon-moment was joyous, locating the liberating feeling of that sudden, unexpected image into a Jim-specific context. We had a photo of those balloons carefully placed beside the other photos of our lovely times at Attorney Street: painting the apartment's ceiling, décorating our miniature Christmas tree, eating enormous spoonfuls of horrible rum and coconut pie. I decided that the release from my initial feelings of dread was sent to me, via balloons, by Jim, or at least the part of him that was alive as memory in me.

But, upon further reflection, something soured. I was infuriated and appalled by the simplicity, the triteness of my mourning mechanisms. My best friend dies and I have the internal metaphysical equipment of a made-for-TV movie. Why not then a Hallmark card with waves gently licking the shore or a cocker-spaniel puppy romping in fields of daisies? Why not a melodrama, or horror film, with some outlandish drag queen playing our ever-suffering leading lady? So this conclusion, like *Superstar*, must be self-labelled with inter-titles as 'a dramatisation', 'a simulation', a play with generic style that can only get us so far without genre's rules slapping us back in place, getting in the way of our dreams, forcing our reveries to conform, foreclosing

all possibilities.¹³ And, that's the end. The woman must suffer. She, Karen, dies of anorexia nervosa at 32; he, Jim, dies of AIDS at 29; some, Alex and Todd, live on to remember and tell these stories of hurt the best way they know how.

Notes

- 1 I am not the first to note this function in Haynes' work. Laura Christian writes: 'Poison does not, in my view, offer a model for contemporary queer political practice as much as it creates a narrative space in which loss – above all, the overwhelming loss of loved ones and community members to AIDS – can be mourned' and 'Haynes' films insist on the necessity of registering psychic pain, of carrying out the vital political work of mourning, lest the losses foreclosed by normative (and many counternormative) discourses return with an even more violent force' (2004: 120). Her article was published after I first prepared this piece. I have chosen to let my original writing stand, not taking full textual account of these important contributions to the understanding of Haynes' work. Instead, I have footnoted selectively across my text where ideas I developed before reading this work and others are taken up, nuanced, strengthened and done better by this collection's contributors.
- 2 Here I build on Christian's point in the above note about the trouble with queer, AIDS politics and Haynes' films, by suggesting that it is what we *do* with texts, never the texts alone, in their own right, which might point to the possibility of political and textual politics.
- 3 This essay was workshopped in the LA Women's Group for the Collaborative Study of Race and Gender in Culture. The group, whose members include Gabrielle Foreman, Laura Hyun Yi Kang, Rachel Lee, Eve Oishi and Cynthia Young, theorises, writes and produces new scholarship within a progressive, collective feminist framework. I would like to express my thanks to the members of the group and encourage other scholars to create collaborative and supportive networks such as this one. During our lengthy conversation about my article, these women helped me to see and articulate the framework which now structures this work.
- 4 This is the focus of Lynne Joyrich's essay, 'Written on the Screen: Mediation and Immersion in *Far from Heaven*', where she describes how 'our desires and anxieties, identities and positions, are imbricated with those of the media' (2004: 191).
- 5 Edward O'Neill writes how the film 'deals with the simultaneous shattering and construction of identity through popular culture and Oedipal fantasies that culture refracts and even instigates' (2004: 159).
- 6 Susan Potter elaborates upon how Haynes 'redirects a conservative genre and presses it into the service of non-normative aims and outcomes' (2004: 126).
- 7 Christian (2004) opens up what these angels might mean as she writes about the relations between the masochistic embrace of abjection and 'Genetian saint-hood' and Kristeva's masochistic martyr-saint.
- 8 Doane (2004) draws the links between inarticulateness and pathos, melodrama

and genre.

- 9 As do I, Laura Christian and Edward O'Neill focus upon Haynes' tendency to parallel women's and gay men's experience. Christian illuminates my concern about this as a parallel by explaining that Haynes works this as a metonymy rather than a metaphor: 'that is to say, it does not so much suggest an analogical relation between the condition of feminine and that of male subjectivity "at the margins", but instead outlines their interfaces and the foreclosures on which each is founded' (2004: 95). O'Neill also focuses upon these issues in ways useful to my project, marking the very different relations women and gay men have to seduction, sexuality and violence, but the 'excellent opportunities of collaborations between feminist and queer critical work' (2004: 176) that such connections, fascinations and differences can illuminate. He ends by looking at the suffering of Mandy, Brian Slade's wife, who is ultimately excluded from sexuality in *Velvet Goldmine*, a tortured position I knew only too well.
- 10 O'Neill (2004) also thinks about this film as telling a story about a fantasy of gay history rooted in 'traumatic origins' that include the birth of gay male sexuality, women's sexuality, glam rock, Reaganism and the queer aesthetics of theatre.
- 11 My thanks to Cynthia Young for her several comments on race in *Far from Heaven*, and gender across Haynes' oeuvre.
- 12 This insight is Laura Hyun Yi Kang's, as are those that will end this section about the connection between queer love and academic analysis.
- 13 Mary Desjardins writes how 'Haynes self-conscious recontextualisations of generic conventions of the woman's film and star bio-pic, as well as his infamous use of dolls, do not necessarily result in an escape from either the fantasy potentialities or epistemic foundations of those genres, which promise the recovery, the plenitude, of the biographical subject' (2004: 24).

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FILMOGRAPHY

Assassins: A Film Concerning Rimbaud (1985) 16mm

Written and directed by Todd Haynes

Running time: 20 minutes

Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story (1987) 16mm

Directed by Todd Haynes

Written and produced by Todd Haynes and Cynthia Schneider

Cast: Gwen Kraus (Narrator/voice), Rob La Belle (Dad/Mr A&M), Bruce Tuthill (Narrator/voice), Melissa Brown, Michael Edwards, Merrill Garner

Running time: 43 minutes

Poison (1991) 16mm

Written and directed by Todd Haynes

Produced by Christine Vachon

Executive producers: Brian Greenbaum, James Schamus

Associate producer: Lauren Zalaznick

Cinematographers: Maryse Alberti, Barry Ellsworth.

Editors: Todd Haynes, James Lyons

Production design: Sarah Stollman

Art direction: Chas Plummer