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# The Girls: Queering the Family Archive

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# Abstract

Artist Kate Warren explores how queerness can offer a liberatory framework for confronting intergenerational cycles of grief that reinforce the dual closets of emotional and sexual repression. Rooted in her family's history of traumatic loss, she explores the dialectics of memory and identity in her interdisciplinary project *The Girls*. She explores how closeting operates in families and archives through several theoretical frameworks, including perspectives from Marianne Hirsch, Ann Cvetkovich, and Elizabeth Edwards. By investigating the gendered roles imposed by the traditional family gaze, religion, and shame, the text examines how photography, performance, and quilt practices can be used as methodologies for resistance. The final section outlines how they resist closeting through specific creative processes, drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and Jack Halberstam's writings on female masculinity. By challenging the veracity of archival narratives, the artist carves out space for the emergence of queer and feminist futures

# THE GIRLS

*Queering the Family Archive*

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Finally, thank you to my loving parents, Doug and Laura Warren, and our ancestors past and present who stand at my shoulder. It is an honor and privilege to steward our histories, mythologies, and archives.

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# Introduction

Loss and grief are foundational parts of the human experience. To love is to accept grief as an inevitability, joy and fear pulling against one another as we go about our daily lives. These dialectics are core to my work; I engage with what Roland Barthes framed as the camera's ability to reanimate the dead through the ritual of photography. Barthes explored the connections between memory and identity through his reflections on death and grief. The photograph becomes a portal of longing: for deceased loved ones, past relationships, and lives cut short by tragedy. The act of looking at photographs presents the viewer's identity as intrinsically tied to the subject's; by looking for a spark of life in the image, the viewer seeks themself.

My interdisciplinary process engages Barthes's theory of identity formation, centering self-reflection through archival activation to rewrite complex familial histories and legacies. I apply a queer lens to conceptual understandings of family dynamics, friendships, and romantic connections. Using bell hooks' definition of *queer*, my photographs, performances, and quilt works render my long-closeted queerness visibly present. "'Queer' not as being about who you're having sex with—that can be a dimension of it; but 'queer' as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and that has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live." (hooks)

In this project, enter into dialogue with artists engaged in identity as performance, grief, archives, and LGBTQ+ visibility. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, Zoe Leonard's *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993-1996), Diana Markosian's *Santa*

*Barbara,* Carmen Winant's feminist archives, and Joan E. Biren's depictions of lesbian domestic life in *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* are all touchstones. Writers such as Maggie Nelson in *The Red Parts* and Roland Barthes in his *Camera Lucida* offer nuanced ideas on grief that shaped the way those topics appear in the project.

I use the tools of the archive to explore the dual narratives of grief and repression: the first of a family loss fifty years ago, and the second of coming out as queer from my late twenties into my mid-thirties. I processed emotional challenges that arose through my artistic practice, meditation, therapy, and other therapeutic modalities, emerging from the process transformed and tender. This work documents a series of performative rituals that attempt to make meaning out of inherited grief while challenging internalized shame and homophobia. My genderqueer performances appropriate the visual language of heteronormativity as a way of subverting repressive norms and honoring my queerness, using the visual rhetorics of photography to write counter-histories that are my own.

# Chapter 1: Family Mythologies, Forbidden Archives


*Family Wedding,* archival image, 1962

My father grew up in the suburbs south of Boston with his father George, who ran the local hardware store, his mother Lucille, a schoolteacher, and younger sisters Beverly and Nancy. I never knew his father and sisters; they died tragically years before I was born. Grief rendered the loss unspeakable, closeted. It was particularly difficult to discuss my father's younger sisters. We barely said their names, referring to them only as "The Girls." The single moniker reflected how their identities eroded as those who knew them died, memories of them eroding as their story bound them together as a

tragic pair, frozen in perpetual adolescence and unrealized potential. The narrative of their deaths and the familial deaths that followed was one entry point for this project.

2 Sisters Killed In Crash

Two Braintree sisters, driving to Pennsylvania for a vacation in their grandparents' home, were killed yesterday when their car hit a bridge abutment on the New York Thruway near Syracuse.

Police identified the victims as Beverly Warren, 17, and Nancy, 11, of 18 Dean St.

New York State Police investigating the accident were unable to say what caused the crash.

The girls, daughters of Mr. and Mrs. George E. Warren Jr., were headed for Titusville, Pa., after having completed their school year.

Beverly graduated last week from Braintree High School and had been accepted for the freshman class at Plymouth State College in New Hampshire.

At Braintree High, she had been a member of the girls' basketball team, the drill team and took part in several other extra-curricular activities. She was also an active member of First Congregational Church in Braintree.

Her sister had just completed the sixth grade at the Lakeside School in Braintree.

The girls, according to their mother, left home at 6 a.m. yesterday for the vacation trip. Police said the crash occurred at 12:10 p.m.

TWO BRAINTREE GIRLS were killed yesterday when their car struck a bridge abutment near Syracuse. They were Beverly Warren, 17, left, and her sister, Nancy, 11. (AP)

*2 Sisters Killed in Crash,* Braintree Patriot Ledger, 1970

The Girls died first, two weeks after Beverly's high school graduation and ten minutes from where I live in Syracuse, New York. En route to the family homestead in Pennsylvania farm country from suburban Boston, seventeen-year-old Beverly lost control of the car with eleven-year-old Nancy in the passenger seat. They hit the double guardrail where it met the ground, careening the family sedan onto the rails. No one could explain what happened to cause the accident; it was a sunny June afternoon. The local newspapers in Syracuse and their hometown of Braintree, Massachusetts, ran graphic articles describing the accident accompanied by photographs of their small Volvo crumpled like a tin can against a Thruway bridge abutment. It took me months to

visit the stretch of road where the accident occurred after I moved to the area for graduate school. One cold, rainy night I drove out alone, took a single photograph, and cried as I wrote them a poem. My father does not remember the funeral.


*Bev's Room (6-18-70),* George Warren; *Bev's Room (2-20-23),* Kate Warren, 2023

My grandfather George photographed Beverly's bedroom the day she died (*Bev's Room, 6-18-70)*, then kept the room untouched for the next twenty-five years. I slept in the room when I visited my grandmother as a child, and ran my fingertips over her belongings that lined the shelves. I made my photograph *Bev's Room (2-20-23)* fifty-three years later at an estate sale in Syracuse. The home was the lifelong residence of a woman also named Beverly. It felt as though I stepped into an alternative universe in which my aunts lived a long life, a parallel timeline where there had been no accident. Grieving children often includes fantasies of potential futures, but to step into a space in which that felt possible was eerie. I photographed her room as my grandfather had, with floral wallpaper and the ephemera of girlhood connecting two Beverlys' rooms across time.

The Girls' death devastated their father George, a soft man who ran a family-owned hardware store with his brother. He kept pocket notebooks tracking mileage and grocery expenses, and after his daughters' deaths those details intermingled with plaintive missives of grief: *"Home isn't home anymore," "Sure miss Bev and Nancy."* His handwritten notes map the loneliness of parental loss within his daily routine. He never recovered. He succumbed to a heart attack at fifty-seven; loved ones said he died of a broken heart.

*Storm Door (Lucille),* 2023; *Storm Door (George)*, 2022

I brought my grandparents George and Lucille into the project through a pair of life-size portraits, *Storm Door (Lucille)* and *Storm Door (George).* The identically composed images were taken on bitterly cold Syracuse nights in the frame of the storm door on my house. The ice and snow-frosted glass adds a veiling effect that alludes to

familial secrets and emotional frigidity. The portraits present my grandparents together but separate, each an island in a dark sea of grief.

My mother warned us against asking to see the photographic family archive of my father's childhood; it was too painful. "Don't upset your father" kept us wondering, silent. Emotions themselves became secrets, grief building ever-higher walls through which we could not mourn. Without mourning, we could not heal. In our white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP), and Catholic family, norms dictated that we must not speak about difficult topics, and my parents scolded us for questioning the status quo. Grief stretched taut across the years.

My father's family haunted my childhood, a black hole about which we never spoke. Heirloom decor objects became stand-ins for the absence of their corporeal presence, superficially filling the void of connection. But any photographs of the Girls, my father, and their family remained buried in my parent's unfinished basement, gently growing mold in the decades since my grandmother's passing.

The project operates as a space to air these difficult histories, a container in which I can recount the unspoken, speak personal truths aloud, and find and construct a history that is my own. Marianne Hirsch explored this concept in her anthology *The Familial Gaze*. "Photos bring the past into the present; they facilitate the work of memory…memoir is the triumph of the child's view of the past" (Hirsch xviii). My fictionalized narrative triumphs over the silences of the past in this project; I carve out space for my experiences in my retelling. You cannot heal a wound about which you cannot speak; through my work, I allow my ancestors, and myself, to speak.

## Semiotics of Care

Care—for myself, my lovers, friends, chosen and biological family—is central to this work. Care is a curious, complicated task often embarked upon by those who do not receive as much as they give. Many turn it away or do not reciprocate. Ethics of care are fraught with tensions; I sought to heal relationships with those who didn't desire healing, to build knowing where ignorance reigned. The push and pull of doubt plagued my process. I struggled with what to show and what to tell, how much "private family business" to air in the public domain of my work. I use the artmaking process to hold these complexities.

I was angry when I set out to make work that cut through decades of silence, resentful at the histories I'd been denied by family members who closeted me. I understood my father's reticence to share his grief, but not the erasure that resulted from it. The process began as a negotiation of that anger, an attempt to transform it into understanding through creative analysis and the heightened fictional possibilities of melodrama.

After moving back to Vermont during the pandemic of 2020, it took more than nine months for my father to allow me access to the archive. It was a slow, indirect process. When he finally acquiesced it was not the result of persuasion but a passive acknowledgment of my presence in their lives. This tacit evolution of our relationship was, and remains, nearly imperceptible to me, but is evidenced in their tentative willingness to participate in making this work.

He agreed to let me see his family's archive with conditions. We only went through the boxes on rainy days—no sun was missed in service to the project. We

looked at the archive for twenty to thirty minutes at a time; the process emotionally exhausted him. I knew the memories were painful for him to revisit, so we struck a delicate balance. Together we unearthed images, ephemera, and objects as he told their stories. Through this I clung greedily to each anecdote and family name, gently penciling details onto the backs of curled and aging prints.

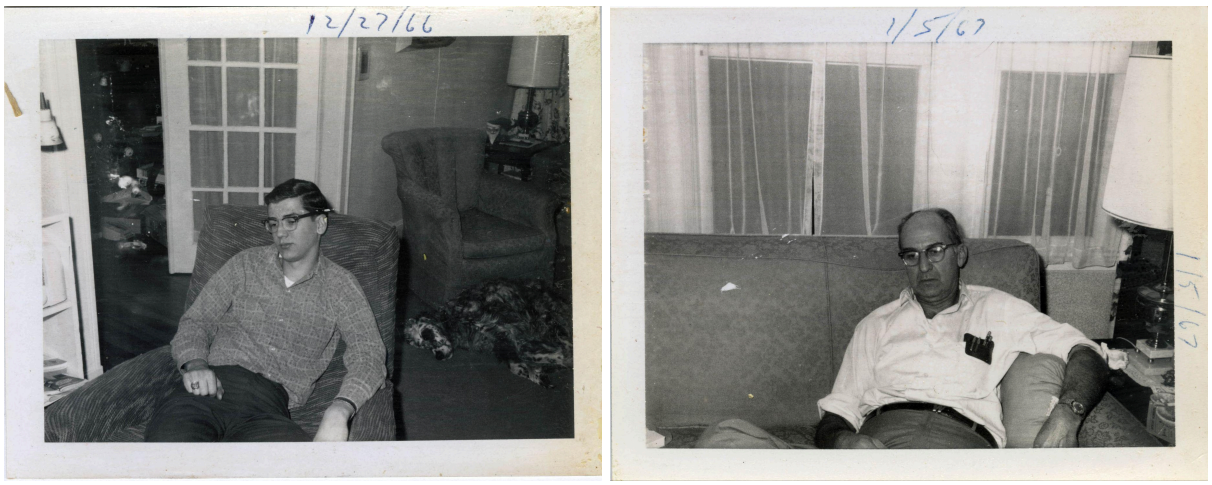
Though in moments I caught glimpses of my father's grief, he held me at arm's length, rarely making eye contact as we spoke. This distancing was excruciating but unsurprising; it mirrored many instances in which we struggled to connect throughout my life. Despite those resistances, my father willingly participated and we slowly worked through the archive from 1890 to 1947, the year his parents were married.

Then we stopped; he could not go through the images of his childhood. I saw the toll revisiting the past took on him. After more than thirty years of silence, I accepted what he offered of our family's past, but struggled with a lingering resentment at being denied my history. To what stories of heritage and experience are we entitled, so that we might learn from the past? Especially between parents and children, whose histories are whose and what is best kept private? What histories are doomed to repeat?

Sometimes silence and hiding are the same thing.

Winter came and my parents decamped to their house in Florida. In their absence I haunted their unheated house in the mountains, unpacking the years of the archive my father could not. The photographs introduced me to my grandfather's love of beautiful women, speedboats, big band music, and most of all, photography. The most interesting photographs emerged when moments of vulnerability punctured the visual tropes of vernacular photography: the unaware armchair portraits with a mile-long stare,

hair wrapped in a towel after a shower, newspapers strewn across the kitchen table with laundry waiting to be folded.




Warren family archival images of the artist's father (left, 1966) and grandfather (right, 1967)

Learning that my grandfather photographed all his life offered a thread of inheritance on which I could tug. Photography became my way into a history I could call my own, a lifeline that grew stronger the longer I spent with my grandfather George's images. I got to know the man I'd never met through how he saw the world That slender connection tied me to a past I'd been denied that helped me reframe my present. In many ways my staged images pick up where he left off, creating stories where silence remains. I have more questions than answers; closure is an impossibility.

# Chapter 2: Dual Closets of the Archive

Fate denied me my paternal aunts and grandfather, but intergenerational grief closeted their stories. Without the context that made my repressive family tick, how could I understand and be understood? How can we know who we are if we don't know where we come from? I internalized this approach, building and living within my own closet to hide my queerness for decades. As the black sheep of my family, I struggled to find a sense of belonging. Engaging with these histories opened space for a way out.

Archives operate as sites of history, storytelling, and myth. Physical photographs and objects impart shared memories, values, culture, mythologies, and traumas. Theorist Ann Cvetkovich explains the connection between sentimental archives and queerness in her essay *Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice*. "The archiving of queer experience can thus take the form of the labor of transferring artifacts from one medium to another in order not only to preserve and circulate them but also to suggest their affective significance." (Brown 281) I engage in this labor by photographing objects as props in staged images, re-photographing archival photographs, and taking on the likenesses of my family members. Old stories disappear, and new ones emerge. Time folds in on itself. I sift through the evidence from generations past before clicking the shutter to create my own.

Theorist Elizabeth Edwards explored ways material photographs function in various social relations. Her concept of *placing* referred to how photographic objects' meanings change within differing social spaces, a framework that informed my approach to archival image-objects. Considerations of "materiality, adjacency, assemblage, and embodied relations" frame the meaning of the image, transforming our experience of both the object and its affective impact.

(Edwards 224) This acknowledges how social identities shape the image and vice versa; the photographs within family archives carry different narrative connotations for my ancestors who made them, my father, and me, reading them a decade later. The presence of the photographic object both reflects and fosters identity. “Through placing, the photograph becomes a statement of its social importance and efficacy because it carries too a sense of the placing of the image within social relations. Photographs are used to cohere both kin and other relations through practices of adjacency and exchange.” (Edwards 226) Archival photo albums impart a sense of familial identity by creating a familial tome of narrative and myth that showcases both collective and individual identities.

Repressive family dynamics and shame were used to create various forms of identity closeting, pushing difficult narratives into the shadow of family lore. There is a fine line between the unspeakable and the unspoken. My work rejects what Allan Sekula called the “shadow archive,” visualizing long-silenced and hidden narratives. The shadow archive refers to marginalized or overlooked narratives outside official archives.

## Family Dynamics and the Gaze

Going through the archive was a masterclass of homogenous White mid-century norms and aesthetics. My father’s childhood family dynamics reflected the influence of television shows like *Leave it to Beaver* and fantasies of a middle-class American Dream free of conflict. In my own family, Christianity dictated rigorously enforced traditional family values. These included notions of respectability, caring about others’ opinions and judgments, the sanctity of monogamy, heterosexual marriage, parental authority, and strict gender roles. I spent my life pushing against these expectations, so

I enact performances of them in my images, denying their power by staging them with members of my queer community.

Marianne Hirsch refers to those ideals and how they manifest photographically as the *familial gaze*. “Familial gaze situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology, of the family as institution and projects a screen of familial myths between camera and subject.” (Hirsch 11) Though I never knew much about my father’s family, I read the vernacular images from the archive to learn about their ideologies, values, and myths. The images visualize those frameworks, illuminating additional familial context. By knowing them, I know myself more deeply. My work engages with how those narratives were established photographically and policed within the family and the archive itself. We all perform Family for the camera.

*Women’s Work,* 2022

My images subvert those ideas. *Women's Work* (2022) depicts my relationship with a queer, platonic friend with whom I share domestic responsibilities. On the surface, we appear just as my grandmother and her sisters did whenever we'd visit the family farm: ensconced in the feminine domain of the kitchen. Our relationship remains deliberately ambiguous in the photograph, introducing the potential for narrative tensions. We could be sisters, friends, or lovers; the audience is denied more information, an act of refusal that mirrors my experience with family secrets. We perform traditional feminine domesticity for the camera but our presence queers the familiar dynamic.

## Shame

Shame was a ready tool of emotional repression and control. Guilt is about doing, but shame is about being; specifically, the belief that oneself is inherently bad. Control, blame, and perfectionism enforce shame, denying feeling and our inherent right to flawed humanity. It kept me closeted for years; I denied all of myself in the wake of a lifetime of homophobia from my family and the Church.

Shame becomes manifest in the work through the use of the indirect gaze. I established an air of detachment and isolation by refusing to address the camera, creating distance between the subject and the viewer. The photographs' stylistic formality operates as a form of visual defense. Exacting, controlled attention to detail is at once liberating and confining. I build my visual world, but it can control who I become, the frame of the images growing smaller around me.

*The Birds* (2022)

Additionally, I introduce depictions of queer pleasure as an act of refusal. These images feel dream-like in their making, re-staging intimate moments that were at once both euphoric and conflicted. For years, queer imposter syndrome kept me closeted. *Kissing women is something other women get to do*, scolded a voice driven by internalized homophobia. I work to combat those narratives, the photographic object as evidence of that struggle. Images like *The Birds* (2022) externalize and make public the private process of de-programing internalized homophobia by celebrating queer connection. My images depict counternarratives that offer care as visible alternatives to shame.

## Semiotics of the Closet

Sexual closeting operates for many queer people, including myself, using symbols and behaviors that obstruct, deny, or keep our non-heterosexual identities hidden as an extension of dominant cultural power. The semiotics of closeting include dressing and acting straight, engaging in heterosexual relationships, or remaining silent—all of which I pursued out of self-preservation for many years. I was unaware of my nature, and later denied or tried to negotiate it by dating men who accepted my queerness. Both made me miserable.

Like many closeted women raised to seek male validation, I perceived myself as merely an engaged ally. My family policed my expressions; homophobic comments and judgmental commentary abounded. “How does a person come out of the closet if they don’t know that they’re in one? How do people know their identities when those identities are not allowed and there is no language in their life to describe them?” (Ramler 281) Denied examples of other ways of being, ignorance became a closet.

*Nameless (Bev's Room),* 2023

*Nameless (Bev's Room)* depicts the affective experience of closeting. Three images of me sit contemplatively on a disused bed in a room with floral wallpaper, a slight furrow in my brow. The hall-of-mirrors effect illustrates feelings of being trapped by presentations of false versions of myself performed for others' comfort and the affective experience of that. Behind me, the bed is strewn with discarded clothing, empty husks of my past selves.

My work combats the violence of that closet. The process of artmaking teaches me how to nourish myself, a ritual of healing through expression. Without art I strain to hear my voice; in my work, it rings through, sometimes a whisper, sometimes a howl. I create the visibility my family of origin denies me through an imperfect process of making, unmaking, and remaking, honoring myself through constant evolution.

Transformation is an element of both coming out and mourning as I seek to make meaning out of grief. After thirty-five years in some form of the closet, I use my work to mourn the family I lost and queer adolescence I never had. I shroud portraits of the deceased, build altars, and engage in rituals both grief-laden and pleasurable. Then I speak in self-revelation: to myself, to my family, and to my community. My voice feels strong some days, and feeble the next; this process is at once messy, unsatisfying, euphoric.

I take inspiration from queer archival ancestors, elders who came before me who committed their lives and work to making LGBTQ+ histories visible. Joan E. Biren's "Dyke Show" of the 1970s and 80s and book *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians* canonized intersectional perspectives of lesbian domestic lives. Her images of queer domestic intimacy rocked me when I first encountered them; here were women living free from the oppression of the male gaze, pursuing utopic visions of social community and selfhood. Biren's photographs and the work of her contemporaries like Tee Corinne inspire my own through the ways they made the everyday lives of lesbians both visible and celebrated.

# Chapter 3: Resisting the Closet

Manipulation of archival images is one tool I employ to disrupt the archives, performative self-portraiture, installation, and audio collage are others. All techniques facilitate constructing my narratives to carve out space where I can exist as myself. These methodologies began as self-discovery before I acknowledged my queerness, then evolved into active resistance as I felt my way into new iterations of selfhood.

## Strategies for Archival Intervention

*I'll Give You Something to Cry About, 2022*

My family archive is literally and figuratively alive; mold grows in the corners of old frames, hanging wires rust. My nose tingles as the smell overwhelms my senses each time I open the bins. Transformation is a constant, just as it is within all individual and familial identities.

My archival interventions use family photographs and ephemera as source material for artworks that carve out space for new narratives. My archival manipulations take cues from the physical archive. *I'll Give You Something to Cry About* depicts a boyhood school portrait of my father, bow tie trim and crew cut fresh as he posed as a man-in-miniature. The picture frame wire on a copy of the newspaper article announcing his sisters' death marred the object with rust across the crown of his head. The others obscuring his eyes and mouth are digitally fabricated, violent gestures that conceptualize the experience of mourning. Together the three festering gashes blind and render him silent, metaphorically mirroring the wounds grief leaves over time.

The image evokes unease, piercing me with emotion for the little boy with so much loss in his future. Like Barthes' evocation of his mother, I search my father's concealed face, landing on his earlobes; they are the same as mine. What is true and what is false when we are the ones who remain to tell new versions of old stories? Despite the violence of the rust, my father's recognizable face snaps into focus, his vulnerability mirroring my own. I ache for the tenderness of that little boy, knowing the hurt that's to come.

## Collaboration through Spiritualism

Being raised in the Catholic Church left me with deep internalized guilt along with curiosity about ritual and spirituality. After vehemently rejecting the Church both forms of inheritance continued to shape my artistic practice. I reclaim and oppose those rituals of penitent shame by making images as a form of catharsis. Additionally, I integrate elements of Catholicism's mysticism, which asserts our ability to commune directly with the divine. Those frameworks inform my work, allowing for dialogue and connection between the physical and spiritual worlds.

Many spiritual practices include elements of ancestor engagement or worship. The belief is that ancestors can influence the living and communicate through rituals that strengthen kinship ties, extending the family gaze across time. I view my art practice as a space to build similar bonds, learning about myself more deeply by learning about my kin.

*Don't Say Their Names, 2022*

I introduce this concept through alters, veils, and shrouds. The installation *Don't Say Their Names* presents an ancestral altar of archival portraits, passed family members turned away from the viewer to reflect the loss. The father's high school portrait confronts the viewer, the lone remaining memory of the family. Each image-object carries a spark of its subject, the materiality of the decaying frames standing in for the dead. The sculptural tableau operates as a memorial, transforming internal grief into external mourning to acknowledge the layers of loss humans experience over our lifetimes.

*The Veil (Beverly and Nancy, School Portraits),* 2022

The phrase "beyond the veil" is often used to describe the division between life and death. The image of a thin, vaporous scrim separates our Earthly world and whatever lies beyond; those who believe in the ability to communicate with the ancestors believe that the veil is permeable. In *The Veil (Beverly and Nancy, School Portraits)*, vintage floral handkerchiefs conceal hand-tinted school portraits of my aunts,

their features barely visible through the thin cotton. The pair of shrouded portraits transform their photographic images into photographic objects, making their presence tangible. This mirrors the effect of mourning; to honor someone who has passed is to keep them close while being denied the corporeal proximity we crave.

Finally, I formed new connections with my father's family through a session with a psychic medium to ask for their feedback and bring their voices into the project. The private two-person ritual was moving as the medium facilitated dialogue with my family, bringing an ethic of transparent communication and consent into the project to combat family secrets.

My grandfather George Warren "spoke" through the medium for the ninety-minute session, my young aunts interjecting playfully. I recorded the session, transcribed it, and used the text to write the audio collage *Ruptures,* designed as a sonic landscape of generational grief and un-closeting. Layers of harmony and dissonance transport the listener to the site of the accident, the parking lot of the morgue, and the liminal space between this world and whatever exists beyond it. The story of their death is woven with my struggles to come out.

The piece existed fully in my brain for months before I created it. Collaborating with musician and composer Luke McGowan felt like extracting it from my body. Together we composed forty-two layers of audio that included my voice in three different registers, sounds of domestic life, synths, drones, the Beatles, nonlinguistic vocalizations, and original 1960s organ arrangements.

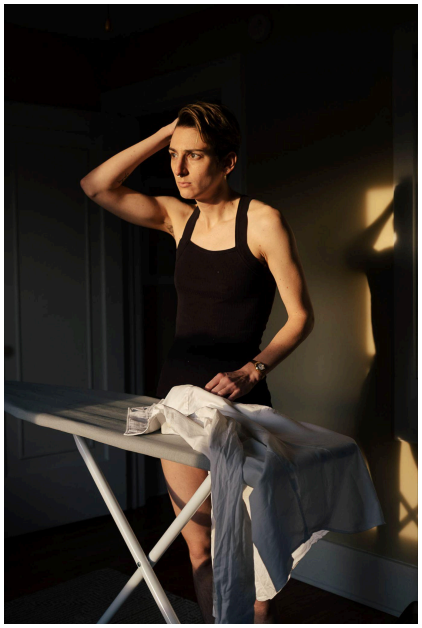
The piece operates as a lament, a public performance of care linking the present to the past and back in a web that renders time ephemeral. This form of authorial

divestiture was a collaboration in which family members tell portions of their story alongside me. Their voices reverberate across time.

## Performance as Acts of Becoming

The archive provided a visual language with which I could work, co-opting visual rhetorics of the family album. Gesture and movement became ways to physically embody a connection to relatives, often without me realizing it. On several occasions, I made photographs and later found visual equivalents in the archive, instances of serendipity between my work and my grandfather's. I also made photographs in response to particular images or photographed my performances intuitively and later recognized an equivalent image while editing.

Directly referencing images from my family archive, I perform as close and distant kin, both living and dead. Precise and careful use of period details allows the photographs to oscillate between the vernacular and cinematic. These are combined in larger installations with textile and audio works that use 1960s garments, archival objects, and hand-embellishment to create improvisational sculptures that serve as talismanic storytelling devices. I used melodrama to hyperbolize tensions between my homophobic family and queer representation, making images that at once felt familiar and uncanny, conflict bubbling just out of frame.




*Kate at Thirty-Four,* 2023; *Douglas at Eighteen*, taken by George Warren, 1968

That dialogue is present in pairings like *Kate at Thirty-Four* and *Douglas at Eighteen*, where I push my hair back to mirror my father's gesture in an image from 1968. I stand at an ironing board about to press a white shirt similar to the one he wears in the other photo, but it remains wrinkled as a rejection of feminine labor. Golden hour washes me in a romantic light that contrasts the harsher on-camera flash in my grandfather's image. Read together, the two photographs are a call and response across time that reflects on what it is to present as masculine.

The photographic gaze introduces an audience, calling attention to the constructed nature of gender. Performing for my camera extends that trajectory, positioning me as both the watcher and the watched. I am my own voyeur as I try on aspects of queer identity. After being straight and cisgender passing for three decades, I make my photographs a playground for gender.

To claim the social power of masculinity and redefine it through my queer images and identity is resistant. Jack Halberstam's scholarship on female masculinity emphasizes the multiplicities of masculinity and the subversive qualities of female masculinity. "Masculinity, of course, is what we make it; it has important relations to maleness, increasingly interest relations to transsexual maleness, and a historical debt to lesbian butches" (Halberstam 144). Female masculinity is not simply about adopting traditionally masculine traits but involves a complex interplay of identity, desire, and expression, which play out in my staged photographs. I perform as my grandfather, father, and my masculine self, constructing my own masculinity by "reworking and improving on the masculinities around [me]." (Halberstam 32)

*I'll Give You Something to Cry About,* 2021

Costuming played an important role in these transformations, transporting me to south Boston in the 1960s to enter into dialogue with my father as a young man,

claiming him as kin. In *I'll Give You Something to Cry About*, I adopted his dress and mannerism, reframing them as queer. I engaged in what queer theorist José Muñoz termed *disidentification*, the practice of minoritized groups performing elements of mainstream culture to survive and subvert inhospitable spaces. (Muñoz 4) I adopted the semiotics of masculinity as a form of resistant disidentification. I spread my legs and don masculine attire to co-opt the social power of maleness and androgynous clothing to affirm my gender queerness, balancing the masculine and feminine.

*Good Ole Boys,* 2022; *Lacy Underthings,* 2023

I explore gender fluidity in *Good Ole Boys* and *Lacy Underthings*, contrasting the gendered characters I perform. Presented together, the trans-coded photographs force the viewer to reconsider how one can subvert masculinity and the role of the phallus. I appropriate the semiotics of binary gender from a queer frame, shifting tropes from oppressive to self-representation to allow other gender identities to flourish. These images use playful flirtation to complicate relations of desire with the viewer. I create

myself by making the work, performance, queerness, and photography working together as acts of becoming.

By performing as male family members, I make visible the complexities of masculinity without proximity to the violence of maleness. Men learn that anger is the only acceptable way to externalize negative emotion, leading to outbursts that can turn emotionally or physically violent. I reject those cycles of harm within my personal life and images by centering care and tenderness. I challenge how dyke semiotics can subvert “being a man.” I present as male in physical appearance but softly feminine in my approach to emotional relations while identifying as non-binary. I recontextualize their masculinity through proximity to my queerness.

*Lady Things (Silk and Fur),* 2020

Mixing feminine and masculine signifiers is one methodology I employ to undertake that effort. I slide a silk stocking up my extravagantly hairy leg in *Lady Things (Silk and Fur)*. In other images, I don high femme attire as a form of drag, or slick my

short-cropped hair and power play with my girlfriend. Gendered mid-century signifiers become weapons for contemporary critique, the visual language of the 1950s/60s straightness wielded to queer performative imagery.

*Daddy's Girl*, 2023

Several staged photographs operate in gender-neutral or ambiguous ways. *Daddy's Girl* is one such image. I approach the camera with a playful, wry smile that twists a moment of controlled flirtation. My partner Tavonna Jones took the photograph as we fooled around in bed together. I gave her the camera to relinquish my control of the photographic narrative. The oversized white button-down belonged to my former male partner of six years. He left racks of business attire when he moved out with the suggestion I donate the clothes, but I began wearing them as relics of my past life in the months since he left. The shirt's inclusion in the photograph nods to my masculinity and the importance of that relationship; he supported my queerness from the day we met.

The deeper into this project I went, the more I resembled my grandfather and father as young men. Time seems to flow in reverse. As I make pictures and undergo a

genderqueer transformation, I wonder what it means to co-opt our resemblances to present myself as a non-binary, gender-fluid person. My visible presence presses against patriarchal masculinity; I hope it softens its edges. I create counter-narratives of female masculinity that depict vulnerability as a form of strength. I do not shy away from the unspeakable.

## Erotics as Resistance

I challenge the closet by conflating the visual signifiers of traditionalism with queerness to introduce confusion within the viewer. My images depict performances that are legibly straight then queer, cisgender then non-binary, fluidly moving back and forth. I tempt the viewer to witness my pleasure while making them reflect upon themselves, attracting and repelling in equal measure. What does it mean for a straight-identifying woman to be attracted by lesbian erotics? Do looking at queer images make you gay, or illuminate a fantasy you never knew you wanted? Do men feel entitled to lesbian pleasure, only to be rendered impotent by our lack of need or desire for them? Through the hair-thin dichotomies of attraction and revulsion, pleasure and pain inherent to queerness and subtly present within my work, I invite the viewer to question their own identities.

*Lover Girls,* 2023

To make queer intimacies visible through the act of photography renders them valid. My partner and I take turns taking photographs, and we invite other lesbians to take up the camera to show us together. The female gaze of my self-portraits is distinctly queer. Photographs like *Lover Girls* conflate sexual realities and fantasies, a tangle of limbs, and a tender kiss from my girlfriend expressing care in romantic late afternoon light. We refuse binary butch-femme dynamics in the images, exploring trans-non-binary erotics within our play. We do not perform for anyone's pleasure except our own; the image-making process deepens our connection.

For interracial masculine-presenting women, this visibility is radical; we do not see couples who look like us in mainstream culture. Through these images, we express intimately loving and being loved. Foucault describes that shift as "the power that lets itself be invaded by the pleasure it is pursuing; and opposite it, power asserting itself in

the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, or resisting…perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (Foucault 45). The pleasure of resistance becomes the resistance of pleasure.  Pleasure no longer flows from resisting taboos but from cathartic joy.

## Queer Platonic Relations

The role of pleasure in the project extends beyond the romantic to platonic friendships. Queer platonic intimacy is unique; it subverts the dynamics of women providing care labor that is often invisible and in service to patriarchal privilege. Queer sapphic relationships turn that energy into an act of resistance by caring for fellow queer women and gender non-conforming people in chosen family structures.

Chosen family is an integral part of queer communities. Many of us have complex relationships with our families of origin if any at all. We suffer rejection, shame, and heartbreak. It is through queer friendships that we learn how to give and receive love unconditionally, our identities not just accepted but celebrated. We could not survive, let alone thrive, without these vital support networks. Images of chosen families become sites of queer possibility within the everyday.

*Put Your Face On,* 2022

The ambiguity of these intimate queer relationships is reinforced within photographs that fictionalize my sapphic relationships. *Put Your Face On* further complicates these dynamics in an image of two female sitters posed crisply in a warm, wood-paneled room with heavy brocade curtains and wall-to-wall beige carpeting. The figure in the foreground kneels awkwardly on a stool at a vanity, her back to the viewer as she faces another woman in a checkered jumpsuit. The frame beheads both women, cropping the image at their shoulders. The perfectionism of the setting and the pain of the woman kneeling build melodramatic tensions exacerbated by the lack of further narrative exposition. What is withheld is of equal importance to what is shown.

*Mirror Study (0X5A9954)*, Paul Mpagi Sepuya, 2020; *Honeymoon Suite*, Kate Warren, 2022; *'My inner self is strong'...Lunhil Cleo Dladla, KwaThema*, Zanele Muholi, 2011

Photographic artists Paul Mpagi Sepuya and Zanele Muholi create imagery that depicts queer social constellations that influence my work. Sepuya's intimate collaborations blur the lines between photographer and subject. Sepuya's use of the mirror "is about grounding the work in the space of its production, and embedding my presence and the presence of others in the making of the work (whether reflection or trace)" (Campbell 98). My photograph *Honeymoon Suite* works in the same mode, compositionally centering the frame-within-the-frame of a hotel room mirror as my girlfriend embraces me. Though I hold the power implicit in the role of the photographer, my nudity presents me as more vulnerable. Sepuya similarly uses nudity to suggest intimacy in his images. His collaborative approach reflects a sense of community while challenging hierarchical power dynamics to foster a sense of shared authorship.

Activist artist Zanele Muholi depicts members of the South African lesbian and LGBTQ+ community in the series *Faces and Places*. Through formal portraits, wedding photographs, and other everyday imagery, they assert their community's visibility and agency in the face of violence and erasure. That act of representation as resistance inspires me; photography becomes a tool for legitimizing the voices and images of LGBTQ+ individuals. Both Muholi and I use gently augmented available light to maintain aesthetic accessibility in our work. That choice conceptually reinforces our desire to stand and be seen in the light of day as an act of refusal against shame and closeting.

## Textile: Vessel of Inheritance

I am a fourth-generation quilter. My mother taught herself to sew from a young age and quilted throughout my childhood as I played at her feet and helped. Women make quilts collaboratively to mark occasions, pass them down in families, and use creative symbols to convey personal narratives, cultural histories, and social commentary as forms of expression. Quilts also operate as memory and storytelling devices, merging form and function by keeping loved ones warm while sharing stories or adorning domestic spaces. By using quilting and photographic techniques together, I create textile sculptures that queer both traditional mediums.

Quilting and photography counteract another form of hereditary loss; blindness runs in my family. I am a visual artist destined to lose my sight. My mother began going blind during the pandemic, motivating me to move back to Vermont to quilt while she retained some of her sight. We spent a year collaborating, and the tactile ritual of making became an essential element of my artistic practice.


*I Get So Lonely For Them*, 2024

The sculptural quilt *I Get So Lonely For Them* (2024) combines 1960s domestic textiles (upholstery, curtains) with contemporary florals and color-blocked solids to create dynamic compositions that reference the patchwork qualities of memory and the archive. I quilt in an improvisational style influenced by collage and Gee's Bend quilters,

appliquéing gendered clothing onto the piece to lend a corporeal quality to the object. Doilies, white lady's gloves, a girdle, handkerchiefs, and a linen tea towel reference stylistic tropes of femininity, while my father's Boy Scout cap and medals conjure traditional masculinity. Quilts embody their maker and collective histories, and I constructed this sculpture as a family portrait.

The quilt also acts as a memorial. Out of the old linen towel printed with a calendar of 1970, birds, and flowering tree limbs, I removed June, the month my aunts died, and a pair of cardinals, animals associated with passed loved ones. Finally, I hand-embroidered excerpts from my grandfather's handwritten notebooks. Statements like, "We hate to leave for home, it is so different here," and "Sure miss Bev + Nancy, I get so lonely for them," took on new weight when rendered by hand, casual daily missives rendered precious as they were stitched into the fabric.

# Final Presentations

The thesis installations married the cacophony of archives with the aesthetics of collage. In one installation, objects from the 1960s-70s intermingled with staged performance photographs, custom wallpaper, and the audio collage *Ruptures* to present the viewer with narrative fragments as clues to unspoken family secrets. I invited the viewer to join me in piecing together the past while grounding those stories in the present. In the installation at Novado Gallery in Jersey City, New Jersey I exhibited a pair of performative photographs, the wallpaper, and the newly completed quilt sculpture *I Get So Lonely for Them* (2024), installed to create an intimate room in which guests could listen to the audio collage *Ruptures.*

*Installation documentation, Nancy Cantor Warehouse Gallery, Syracuse NY (2024)*

# Conclusion: Imagining Queer Futures

My work subverts the controlling norms within family archives, counteracting expectations through artistic intervention using photography, performance, and textiles. I acknowledge how repressive family dynamics and religious shame act as levers of repression, and outline the dynamics of the closeting that can result. Finally, I present resistant strategies that offer queer counter-narratives through the introduction of romantic and platonic performative photographs, an audio collage, and a quilt sculpture.

As I move forward, I continue to use the art-making process to connect with the community and foster relationships with elders who can show me new ways of living. I will build my queer archives and seek out those that have been hidden. I will take up the task of gathering the stories and wisdom of queer fertility, families, elders, and new forms of community. I will create collaboratively with those who came before me and in service to those who come after. Throughout these efforts that bridge art-making and living, I will foreground Jose Muñoz's concept of "queer utopia," which explores how queerness can be a mode of imagining and embodying alternative futures. He argues that pleasure, desire, and joy are central to the queer project of envisioning and creating a world that is liberated from heteronormativity, a world to which I contribute.

Many issues exist beyond the scope of this thesis that I aim to explore. I am researching the ways rituals of grief and mourning can further inform my process while extending queer theories of grief. Additionally, the intersectionality of oppressions is an area ripe for additional exploration, particularly dynamics of race and class as they relate to queerness. Whiteness and middle-class white culture are central to this body of work and reflect the dynamics of my family of origin. I spent the majority of my adult life

in romantic relationships with non-white partners, so there is fertile ground for discourse on alternative perspectives. Additionally, there has been much work done on queer utopias and family dynamics that would serve to support this investigation by offering alternative models to traditional heterosexual dynamics.

# Afterward: The Grief and Joy of Coming Out

I fully came out while making this body of work, giving up much of my old life to make space for a more authentic self. It is a blessing and a privilege to be visibly queer, but to lay bare my joy is to lay bare my grief. Those who come out in adulthood share this—to step into queerness is to step out of a beloved and fraught former life. My relationship of six years ended, though I am grateful we remain connected in love. My parents remained silent after I sent them a coming-out letter in November 2023, but they have since made small gestures of support. I lost decades-old friendships with those who deemed my life “too much.” I grieved these losses as I made this work, which became a mourning ritual. You see my transformation in the images, a theatrical rendering of the pain and joy of destroying an old life for a chance at living a real one.

I am transforming. The viewer can witness me change physically, sexually, and spiritually. I retired my femme clothing to the attic and cropped my hair short until it mirrored my father’s in his youth, symbolic gestures of cleansing and rebirth. I feel freer in this androgyny but am still unlearning prescribed identities. It is comfortable to be in flux, to find patience in uncertainty. Every day my gender feels different, a babbling brook gently flowing through me. It teaches me, and my artistic practice helps me listen.

# Appendix

## Artist Statement (Short)

Photographs, installations, and sculptures operate as tools of remembrance and resistance in my work, shifting family mythologies to a queer register. *The Girls* counteracts the effects of growing up in the dual closets of emotional and queer repression within a conservative Catholic family. Directly referencing images from my family archive, I perform as close and distant kin, both living and dead. Precise and careful use of period details shifts performative photographs between vernacular and cinematic registers, using melodrama to fictionalize family narratives. Images are combined in larger installations with quilt works that use 1960s garments, archival objects, and hand-embellishment to create improvisational sculptures that serve as talismanic storytelling devices.

My portrayals of female masculinity offer soft butchness as an antidote to emotionally restrictive masculinities. The past remains fluid in my work, becoming more mythology than memory; images blur the line between fact and fiction as time seems to fold in on itself across generations. By challenging the veracity of archival narratives, I carve out space for the emergence of queer and feminist futures.

# Artist Statement (Long)

Photographs, installations, and sculptures operate as tools of remembrance and resistance in my work, translating historic mythologies to a queer register. *The Girls* confronts the challenges of growing up in the dual closets of emotional and queer repression within a conservative, religious family. My art examines how we defy prescribed roles through queer interpretations of gender, family, and community dynamics.

Utilizing performative photography, I introduce melodrama to depict moments of theatrical domesticity, visualizing Judith Butler's concept of gender performance and Jack Halberstam's theories of female masculinity. These images resist the gendered dynamics of what Marianne Hirsch termed the "familial gaze." Directly referencing images from my family archive, I perform as close and distant kin, both living and dead. Precise and careful use of period details shifts performative photographs between vernacular and cinematic registers, using melodrama to fictionalize family narratives. Challenging hegemonic structures of gender, sexuality, race, and class, I use memory as a fluid medium to consider how we can challenge, shift, or remake inheritance.

My upbringing in and rejection of the Catholic Church informs my work, with ritual playing an integral role in my creative process. I oppose the dynamics of penitent shame by creating alters and images that act as spaces of catharsis and spiritual differentiation. Integrating elements of Catholic mysticism, which asserts the ability to commune directly with ancestors and the divine, my imagery navigates the tensions between the sacred and the profane, opening dialogue between the physical and spiritual worlds.

Uncanniness infuses the artworks with feelings of discomfort or unease, blurring the line between the real and the unreal. Themes of the supernatural, the subconscious mind, and the duality of human nature unpin fictionalized narratives, inviting viewers to question their perceptions of reality and consider deeper, often unsettling truths beneath the surface. Archives are revealed as repositories of flawed, incomplete, and biased histories ripe for reclamation within an intersectional frame as present-day personal experiences converge with historical and generational events.

I combine photographs with quilting and hand-embellishment in textile sculptures that reimagine collage techniques in softer, more tactile forms. Inspired by the improvisational quilts of the Gee's Bend quilters, my works use 1960s garments, archival objects, and hand-embellishment to create soft sculptures that serve as talismanic storytelling devices. These memorial objects emphasize traditional female craft ways and care work while challenging notions of gendered labor.

My portrayals of female masculinity offer portrayals of soft butchness as an antidote to emotionally restrictive masculinities. I explore my own gender identity through the mutability of the artistic process. The past remains fluid in my work, becoming more mythology than memory; images blur the line between fact and fiction as time seems to fold in on itself across generations. By challenging the veracity of archival narratives, I carve out space for the emergence of queer and feminist futures.

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# Biography

Kate Warren (b. 1988) is an artist and educator based in Hudson, New York. She explores intimacy, memory, and grief through photography, installation, audio, and textiles to re-examine established histories and exhume hidden pasts. Raised in the mountains of Vermont, intimate connection to the land, community, and rural romanticism underpin her work. Staged photographs, textile sculptures, and archival interventions highlight tensions between authenticity and performance, bridging taboos that include spirituality, sex, and loss.

Warren has exhibited at California Museum of Photography, Lightwork, Novado Gallery, Syracuse University, University of Iowa, and Washington Project for the Arts. She works with clients that include *The New York Times*, *Washington Post, New Yorker*, Planned Parenthood, and the Smithsonian. Awards include the American Photography 36, 37, and 39, Athens Photo Festival, *British Journal of Photography*, Lucie Foundation, and PDN. She was a keynote speaker on feminism and photography for Apple's StoryMakers Festival and FotoWeekDC, and has taught photography at Syracuse University's Newhouse School and College of Visual and Performing Arts College. She has an MFA in Art Photography from Syracuse University and is the Central New York Pride Parade Co-Director.