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Suburban Panic: Chaotic Contradictions in Girlhood

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**Suburban Panic:
Chaotic Contradictions in Girlhood**

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts
of Bard College

by
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“Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, Talent– what do these qualities have in common? I don't know, I am not a scientist. I stand here, a charismatic woman, of grace and dignity, with a unique sense of humor and point of view.”

(And also, perhaps more importantly)

“... Party.”

-Katya Zamolodchikova

Suburban Panic: Chaotic Contradictions in Girlhood

Suburban Panic is a culmination of joy, self-deprecation, feminist or very not feminist anxieties, passive aggression, friendship, uncertainty, and an ode to the beauty of bean bag chairs. I'd like to preface it by saying that I have no answers, and I'm very comfortable with that. In fact, I am happy in the knowledge that nothing is stable or completely understandable. This process has been just that, a process, and it too has been confusing and full of questions like everything else that gets thrown at you. Except bean bag chairs, lest we forget.

When I got to Bard, my first thought was to completely disengage from my prior life in a relatively rural, conservative environment. Eventually I recognized that in doing so, I was completely dismissing the realities of my life and the people around me that I grew up with. More specifically, I was dismissing the women-identifying people in my life who did not exist in the vacuum of Bard and its particular demands of women. And it wasn't very feminist of me. This project was born out of a character study in the white suburban girl. She is me in a lot of ways, of course, so I didn't want to eviscerate her. Instead, I was interested in unpacking the conflicting beliefs and truths that make up her world and play out in her adult life. I was, and remain, committed to the notion that in avoiding her or condemning her, there can be no room for growth and personal reflection, and no room for happiness at the end of the road.

Analysis for this piece brought me down several paths, mostly centered in explorations of current feminist ideas and tracking their development. My formal

research was very much informed by foundational black radical feminist texts, several of which continuously point to the larger picture of oppression, and detail the positionality of white women within structural oppression. bell hooks, Kimberle Crenshaw, and the Combahee River Collective Statement were all incredibly helpful to my understanding of feminism as it stands today. In the fall of 2020 I took a Feminist Philosophy course on a bit of a whim, and encountered some of these texts, which were the most challenging and exciting material I've read at Bard. They ended up being essential to my process. I don't know why I thought that a three hundred level philosophy course would be a walk in the park, but while I felt completely out of my depth with the jargon used in the course, the underpinnings of the ideas felt incredibly familiar to me. The more texts I engaged with, the more I began to wonder about the realities of popular feminism's branches, and the women who engage with them. The people I am looking at through this character study hold a specific place in the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, a helpful term used by bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* to indicate "interlocking systems of domination".¹ While the white woman is affected by these systems, she also enacts them on herself and on women who do not look like her. She does not exist in a space of intersectionality in the way that women of color are forced to, so instead she fixates on her single locus of oppression as a woman.² In this piece, I

¹ Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. 1st ed., South End Press, 1984.

² Crenshaw initially coined the phrase "intersectionality", which identifies the experience of women of color as people harmed by both racism and sexism. Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, p. 1241. *Crossref*, doi:10.2307/1229039.

was interested in examining the passive aggressive world that these girls operate in, and seeing how passive aggression correlates to real physical harm. Passive aggression appears within *Suburban Panic* as an outlet for the characters, and perhaps the only socially acceptable one they are well-versed in. At one point in the script Eve says to Sav “I can read between the lines, what, do you think only your mom taught you how to be passive aggressive? We all got that gene. The one that makes other people, no, other *women* feel small.”³ This inherited knowledge of passive aggression is key to the play, because it is the mode through which the girls can assert their power while maintaining social decorum. If they were to be outwardly aggressive, as Kate is in the very beginning of the show, this would be a breach of their constructs of femininity and identity. Passive aggression grants these characters the opportunity to pass harsh critique and judgement with little consequence, since the delivery of the judgement is often blurred by the speaker’s social position itself.

A branch in the massive tree of feminism that stuck out to me during my preliminary research was that of “individualist feminism”, which is often connected to people like Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, or Sophia Amoruso, founder of Nasty Gal. These women have become propagators of individualist feminism through their work and economic success, and as a result of their notoriety in popular consciousness, have come to symbolize the extremes of the ideology. Individualist feminism prioritizes the status of the individual woman through white supremacist capitalist patriarchal

³ Baldwin, Ella. *Suburban Panic*. 2021. That’s fun to write!

machinations. For example, in Sheryl Sandberg's TED talk from 2010 "Why we have too few women leaders", she discusses the need for women to internalize their power and assert themselves in male-dominated spaces.⁴ This made me squirm. As Carol Rottenberg points out in her critique of Lean In, "The shift in emphasis: from an attempt to alter social pressures towards interiorized affective spaces that require constant self-monitoring is precisely the node through which liberal feminism is rendered hollow and transmuted into a mode of neoliberal governmentality" (Rottenberg, 7).⁵ As individualist feminism moves in an insular direction, placing the onus on the woman and avoiding the larger structures that have placed her in a male-dominated room to begin with, it becomes an agent for the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. When Sandberg places the blame of failure to achieve equity with a man onto a woman, a recalibration of the self takes place. The woman is told to view equity to the man as the ultimate goal, and simultaneously sees herself as the obstacle to this goal. This denies the complexities of systems in place that push women to this position of internalizing misogyny. The burden of inadequacy is deeply crushing, and especially so for the subject of my character analysis, for whom this hypothetical success is so painfully close. The Gen Z woman is unable to bridge that gap due to her gender, and is told by pop culture feminists like Sandberg that it boils down to her own mental blockades. It is only logical that as a result she may develop a deep self-loathing. Success

⁴ Sandberg, Sheryl. "So We Leaned in ... Now What?" *TED Talks*, 15 Jan. 2014, www.ted.com/talks/sheryl_sandberg_so_we_leaned_in_now_what#t-345942.

⁵ Rottenberg, Catherine. *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

is unattainable to her but she is continually bombarded with the prospect of it. Since this ideology is motivated by those aforementioned oppressive structures, individualist feminism inevitably merges with popular feminism and becomes the default. In the same ways white women with a level of privilege motivate the economy, they also motivate the popularity of certain ideologies and social norms.

The girls in my piece are white, cis, straight, and wealthy, but not men. They have been conditioned, as I have, to view white maleness as a goal which they may be able to achieve, at least in terms of equity. They are unable to opt out of the hierarchy or imagine a different system because of this gleaming carrot dangling above them, but the disappointing reality is that the carrot is not a prize at all, and will never bob low enough to grasp. It's a bit of a Tantalean existence, and I think one worth exploring. In taking a closer look at the individualist feminists' coming-of-age, I think it's also crucial to examine the joy and depth of these characters. The characters within the narrative all reflect various components of individualist feminism, and more broadly, white feminism or neoliberal feminism. While I wasn't exactly thinking with this political terminology in mind when I crafted the narrative, it was sometimes helpful for me in delineating the various perspectives I wanted brought out in rehearsals from the text.

Beginning in the summer of 2020, I sat down to write the script. As a double major I figured I would write a mix between prose and playwriting, hand it in as my Written Arts work, and adapt the script into a full length play for my Theater & Performance work. What ensued was definitely more convoluted, but ultimately exciting

and fulfilling. When I started writing, I was really only sure about the characters and the importance of their complexity. They had to have political opinions which collided with their identities, they had to say incredibly ignorant things but maintain a self-righteousness that perhaps only an eighteen year old girl can know. They had to care for each other deeply, and show the audience (or the reader) just how expansive love between teenage girls can be when they're on the precipice of self-discovery and confusion. The conflicts between the characters were crucial to me as well, because I was using the arguments as a way to sort through my own feelings about the world around me and how I relate to it. I read *Lungs* by Duncan Macmillan and began to wonder: *Do I want kids? How does my relationship to happiness feel?* The focus started to shift away from the philosophical feminist quandaries and identity politics that I researched, and more towards my gut impulses about the characters and their lives. The more I wrote, the more I uncovered about myself and the universality of experiences between people conditioned as women. I didn't necessarily get answers to my questions, but that was okay with me.

As the script developed, so did my ideas about the logistics of the production. Initially I wanted to score it with Golden Age music from Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Cole Porter, and the like. I thought that in using dated lyrics I could perhaps highlight the incongruencies in these characters, and hopefully even have the actors singing or speaking the lyrics themselves. I researched quite a bit about the ways that Berlin, Gershwin, and Porter all interacted with race within their work, and found

enough info for several senior projects right there. I considered centering the piece in the contradictions of these white characters and pairing it with songs that reflected their ignorance about race, specifically using the aforementioned white composers who so often utilized black musical tradition in their work. Like I said, that could have been a whole four year project, and frankly, I felt underprepared for the task. I didn't feel as though I would be doing that piece justice. My conceptualization of the singing ended up falling away as an idea, in part because of Covid-19 and the difficulty around singing, and in part because my relationship to the music shifted. The more I talked with professors and friends about the role of music, the more I found that I am not attracted to those songs because they are opportunities for socio-political exploration or unpacking the legacy of co-opting sound. After a conversation with Nilaja, I realized that I love those songs because they are beautiful. It can be that simple. In giving myself permission to be moved by a piece of art, I stopped feeling pressurized to make sweeping political statements or offer a lesson to the audience, and started to enjoy the process again. While I'm not entirely sure that the music selections entirely make sense within the piece, I think I'm content in the notion that not everything has to make sense.

When it became clear that I would have to rewrite my entire play to fit into the Written Arts requirements, I was frustrated. The story itself began to torture me. *Who cares about this? It's so trite and insignificant, and it feels like I'm beating a dead horse.* In rewriting the narrative, I was forced to push through that doubt and work solely on my technique. In all honesty, I think I had forgotten how to write prose over the last few

years. Much of my focus at Bard has been on crafting or adapting narratives for physical representation, be it in theater or song, or a combination of the two. In the original script, a good portion of the stage direction was actually written in my prose voice, even though I was not conscious of this when writing it. Every time we read the script, the actors would mention the stage directions, and how they were impactful and meaningful to their work developing the characters. I was happy that something was working, and did not really think beyond that. (Some of those sections transformed into longer monologues, which we pre-filmed to intersperse within the livestream. But I'll get into that in a minute.) When I started again on the fiction piece, I realized that those stage directions were my explorations in prose, and they served as the foundation to the Written Arts piece. There are a lot of things a piece of fiction can accomplish that a play cannot. I was able to dive into the consciousness of every character, play with temporality without any logistical limitations, and build up memory within the story from the characters' perspectives. It felt freeing to completely immerse myself in languid rich descriptions, and to stretch the muscles that I had not been using since the last time I was in a fiction workshop. The writing helped me in the rehearsal room as well, and I made an effort to share every edition of both the prose fiction piece and the evolving play script. I was able to give the actors much more context for the performance, and as we developed the world of the piece, I noticed that myself and the actors would reference the Written Arts story in our unpacking of the play. It ended up serving as a piece of dramaturgy for the condensed version that I settled on. That said, it also solidified my

love for theater in an intense way. It's pretty terrifyingly cool to see something you wrote take shape with real people, constantly moving and surprising you. I have always been drawn to writing, but I feel as though now I am more keenly aware that for me the words have a tendency to go stale if they simply stay on the page.

Originally, the play was about forty-five pages. It was chronological, moving from the opening of the evening through the act of violence and to the end of the night, or morning, rather. The Written Arts version moved similarly, tracing the trajectory of the entire night. The theater piece, however, ended up toggling between Act III content and Act I content. I wanted to condense *Suburban Panic* in order to avoid bogging down the performers, but maintain the joy at the beginning with the rupture and fragmentation of the relationships by the end. I think the condensed version actually ended up reflecting a lot of what I cared about, and I hoped that it would keep the audience more engaged than a linear narrative. The play opens right after the punch that exists in the written fiction story, and jumps back and forth to each character's entrance. The choice to begin an instant after a moment of violence felt compelling to me, and also propelled the actors into the arguments that followed in the text. I feel it's important to note here that the punch was once a stab. Everyone loved the stab, except for my advisors. Ben Hale noted that it felt unrealistic, and Miriam mentioned that it lent the piece a kind of *Heathers*-equivalent camp quality. The world I wanted to illustrate, though, was not one of unrealistic extremes. I wanted to show a space where women move as they do in life. Ultimately, I agreed that the stab put *Suburban Panic* into a

different realm, perhaps a parallel timeline, but it was difficult to say goodbye to a moment of such pure unhinged rage. There's nothing like a good stab. I think the choices that toned down the outright violence of the piece reflected the reality I wanted to display. Passive aggression operates in a specific way, as does outward aggression, and in foregoing subtlety I think I may have been glossing over the deductive capabilities of the audience, which is one of my biggest pet-peeves as an audience member.

Rehearsals have been the best part of the entire experience, hands-down. The pandemic has left so many of us starving for emotional connection and artistic inspiration, and there is something about a rehearsal room that satisfies all of those things. I was not entirely sure if I was shooting myself in the foot by committing to in-person rehearsals and an in-person performance, but now I feel that the piece would have disintegrated in any other format. The writing relies heavily on the interpersonal relationships and the multifaceted group dynamics, and thus performing it in-person became essential not only to the piece, but also to the well-being of everyone working on the project. I reached out in the late summer and early fall to folks I knew to be wonderful performers, listeners, and perhaps most importantly, people I enjoyed: Avis, Madie, Mica, and Ali (who joined the project later on). I tried to gather a cast that could move well together, offer each other grace throughout the process, and had an excellent sense of humor. I felt as though levity would be key to unlocking the extreme venom that lurks beneath the surface of the narrative. These actors have continued to surpass my expectations at every turn, and offer insightful, complex performances during

rehearsals. I am incredibly thankful that they are a part of this project, and have entrusted me with their time and energy. They are each growing exponentially within the roles, and developing given circumstances and tangential narratives that provide a whole other layer of richness I could not imagine alone. My prior directing experience at Bard was mostly with a musical I co-directed my sophomore year. I saw Senior Project as an opportunity to trust myself a bit more, because I definitely did not back then. I was no longer a tentative sophomore, deferring to the opinions of everyone around me and dismissing my instincts. This project means a lot to me, because it feels dangerous to put your whole self on the table. It has always seemed easier to me to give from within a character; to perform and let that be enough. This project forced me to be honest with myself, and honest in front of four other people every Wednesday and Saturday. I could not hide the parts of me that had experienced the things I wrote. I could not hide my nervousness around undertaking this project, either, and instead of creating a veneer of stability, I decided to be completely upfront and expose my ignorance around making something alone. When I tried things out, the cast was experiencing my gut impulses and reactions. This felt really terrifying, especially given the fact that I don't often trust those impulses. I had to explain the parts of my brain where certain character traits or scenes came from, there was no chance to hide behind the text, because it was all me. I can't say that I'm entirely comfy with that kind of vulnerability, but I can say that it has been an exercise in trust. I am learning to trust myself.

Initially, I started the rehearsal process with improv and games, trying to create a space of ease and excitement. The silliness helped to break down the harshness of the text, and the extremities within the narrative. As we worked more on characterization, I had the actors create Pinterest boards for their characters, which proved to be equal parts hilarious and helpful. The concepts and visuals they all brought to the table initially helped us to specify the world, as well as the relationships between the girls in the play. A scrunchie is very different from a standard rubber hair tie. Mid-rise jeans indicate a very specific style period in private schools, and convey a completely different mood than high-rise jeans. These nuances began to solidify and strengthen the project.

Nothing is worse than being in a show where the final product is good, but the process is arduous, unpleasant, and grating on your soul. Whenever I was losing steam in the process (which was frequently, since I was simultaneously cranking away at multiple editions of the piece), I would focus on making sure that the actors had a good time. If everyone was tired, I put on Solange and we just danced. If a line was funky, we cut it and moved on. If there was a plothole in the story, and there were several, we made up a solution for it. Every time Avis tells me that she's having a good time, or Mica tells me that she loves the writing, I feel like I already finished the project. The show is almost irrelevant, because what I care most about is that it's fun and fulfilling for the performers. This project felt complete in the process, because the product has been so unknowable and inconsistent. As reality shifted further from my vision for *Suburban Panic*, I realized that I was obsessing over the uncontrollable. I worried about if it would

be streamed or pre-recorded, if performers would be masked or unmasked, if putting the actors in the same space was even the right choice to begin with. The reason I'm interested in theater has nothing to do with the final product, I had to remind myself. The reason I love theater is the connection it creates between people. Once I delved deeper into my original passion for this bizarre, unpredictable art, the project began to make more sense to me. The focus did not have to be on the show, it could exist between the actors and myself. It could just be people living with and for each other.

That said, there's definitely a lot of room for growth in my directing. I have a tendency to leave things open-ended instead of committing fully to my choices, and this is a difficult habit to break. I have a theory that it might be partially conditioning, partially that fish-out-of-water feeling when you're used to performing but now the performers are looking at you. I question myself out loud a lot during rehearsals. Sometimes this is helpful because the actors will help talk through things with me and it lightens the mood, but other times it is just an obstacle to our timeline and the amount of text we need to get through. That's on me, I wrote a lot. On the flip side of that, I noticed I tend to hone in on specific tonal moments and work them to death, until the scene is devoid of feeling entirely. I have definitely dragged down the pace of things during certain rehearsals because of my commitment to a particular bit of text, which is no doubt a product of being both the writer and the director, and trying to weigh the importance of text versus performance. There's also something about directing that

makes me leave rehearsals now energized and uplifted, and that feels especially precious these days.

The version of this piece that exists in LUMA is a conglomerate of modes and ideas. The pre recorded monologues felt integral to include, partially to give the audience an idea about the rest of the actors' faces and the work they're all doing behind the mask, and partially to offer deep interiority. I wanted the live production to exist between the four girls in real time, but I also wanted the opportunity to show the stage directions I'd written in a more direct way. Since the stage directions often acted as mirrors for the characters and provided internal exploration, they seemed best-suited to film as monologues. My intention in this jostling between pre recorded footage and live action was to give a more complete vision of the characters. They are not only what we see in the room, fighting and wounding each other. They exist beyond that space for me especially because I wrote this narrative in prose as well. Their interior lives deserved a moment to breathe, I thought.

In a perfect world, I think *Suburban Panic* would exist somewhere between film and live theatre. Somewhere the worlds may intersect, and offer both interiority and distance for the audience to experience. Throughout the process I have also been deeply interested in the role of the audience through the camera, especially because the show is going to be livestreamed. It felt like a non-negotiable to me that a third party individual must have a camera in the space and offer the audience moving close-ups of the scenes. To me this camera action is meant to highlight the movement within the piece, as well

as the volatile nature of the interactions. Because I composed the piece in the round, it felt like a natural extension to lean into ideas of boxing and being in a ring. A camera lens seemed to me like a helpful way to involve the audience more directly, while including an element of danger and proximity. How does camera position affect the audience's experience? Is there a way to involve the camera/audience as a fifth character within the narrative? If I were to continue with this piece I would likely delve into these questions a bit more, because I think there is something undeniable about observation and the relationship of watching in the lives of teenage girls. That time of life feels like you're under a microscope, so it would be neat to play with scrutiny on a technical level and involve the camera more directly in the narrative.

One of the questions I've been trying to pursue during the course of this project has been surrounding my feelings of how to manage the contradictions in women (including myself) who have been indoctrinated with individualist feminism as a result of their social position. While my instinct is to dismiss the conservative politics that serve as a foundation for this white capitalist feminism, I can't ignore the reasons that many women find solace in it, and it feels unfair to dismiss them. Given more time with this project, I would love to analyze the beginnings of when this ideology takes hold within young girls. As the piece stands, the audience catches them on the precipice of womanhood, when they are trying to rationalize their beliefs with the world around them. It would be interesting to make a version of *Suburban Panic* that examines the moments in childhood or puberty where these girls receive problematic messaging in

order for them to internalize it into passive aggression, anxious feelings, etc. Since the piece also exists in a pretty insular space, I feel like the logical next step would be to track those connections made with people in the outside world. Making this piece provided me with a lot of room for self reflection, and I realized just how often I exhibit similar behaviors to the girls in the show. At the end of my feminist philosophy class, I was unsure if popular modern feminism actually allows women the chance to be happy, even those with immense privilege. I wish I had a clearer answer to my question of reconciling contradiction, but I feel as though a part of the answer lies in joy. I often wish the writing of this piece reflected more of that joy, and if I were to continue working on it I think a lot of my editing would include those moments of respite. How can we access joy in order to give it? Moving forward, I want to be able to offer both compassion and critique to myself, especially because that feels necessary in order to shift popular feminist ideology towards a more inclusive, happier future.

This project began as an unpacking, but has grown into something very different. It has been a massive lesson in multitasking, strengthening various artistic skills, managing expectations, and adapting. I learned to work through the circumstances of the pandemic, and in that space I've been finding some really wonderful pockets of happiness. The bean bag, for example. What a damn joy. If you do not have a bean bag in your life I can highly recommend it. The back support is questionable but the fun of throwing your body onto a bag of fluff outweighs that concern. Your sense of appreciation changes when life is inconsistent and difficult, and I am honestly grateful

for that too. I feel more excited now than ever to pursue what makes me truly happy, and what has the potential to bring others that little zip. If that's in the process, the product, the inconsistencies, wherever I can find it. Also, not to be too Hallmark about it, but I made something from the little seedlings in my brain, and I think that's something to celebrate.

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