RURAL HYSTERIA: GENRE OF THE REIMAGINED PAST, SPECTACLE OF AIDS, AND QUEER POLITICS IN DIANA LEE INOSANTO’S *THE SENSEI*

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ABSTRACT

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Diana Inosanto reimagines the 1980s AIDS epidemic in her film, *The Sensei* (2008) and implements cultural issues on rurality, sexuality, and tolerance within the overall narrative structure. Finding it important to use the works of Rick Altman, John G. Cawelti, and Fredric Jameson, I theorize how postmodernism affects film genres and their evolution through pastiche and historical events. Within this genre cycle, *The Sensei* fits into several other film genre types that include the queer film, AIDS film, and martial arts film. Drawing from the works of Richard Dyer, B. Ruby Rich, Kylo-Patrick Hart, and David West, I place *The Sensei* into each category to develop thoughts on how hybrid genres work into film creation. Analyzing the works on myths of the small town and rurality, assumptions about queer migration, and stigmatizations about AIDS, I attempt to disprove these myths and assumptions through the works of Bud W. Jerke, Judith Halberstam, Michael Kennedy, and Emily Kazyak. My overall goal is to project social awareness about queer cultural geography, issues with AIDS in rural areas, and the vitalization of anti-bullying issues that have saturated our media landscape within the last two decades using Inosanto’s *The Sensei* as a vehicle to evoke thought.
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This project is dedicated to Brandon Teena (1972-1993) and Matthew Shepard (1976-1998) for their spirits and stories have influenced my completion of this project. A God has had nothing to do with the completion of this project.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER ONE: FEAR OF THE (REIMAGINED) PAST</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formula and Genre</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Reimagined Past</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Queer Cinema</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The AIDS Film</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Political Film</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Martial Arts Film</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hybrid Genre</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER TWO: FEAR OF THE TOWN</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filmic Representations of the Rural Queer</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queer Migration</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Myths</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Rural Queer</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER THREE: FEAR OF AIDS</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION: FEAR OF THE LOCKER ROOM</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding Goals</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Hysteria</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The Sensei (Diana Lee Inosanto, 2008) is an independent feminist queer film that evokes thought on AIDS, rural simplicity, and bullying. An analysis on The Sensei first requires an explanation on film genre. The Sensei falls into several categories creating a hybrid genre involving the queer film, the independent film, the AIDS film, and the martial arts film. After the genre has been stated and proven there are three sociopolitical themes that are important to the queer world: ruralism, AIDS, and bullying. These themes revolve around the character archetype of the teenage gay male—more specifically the teenage gay male growing up in rural America during the 1980s AIDS crisis.

In creating the chapters that will follow, it is important to place The Sensei into the queer and independent film category and discuss the sociopolitical themes Inosanto exposes her audience to. Does The Sensei fall into this category and why? What aspects of the film’s overall miser-en-scene, lighting, make-up, and narrative directly relate to what other film scholars claim a queer independent film and a martial arts film to be? Why is a reimagined past both socially and politically profound when producing a narrative about queers, AIDS, and bullying? How does the film defy the myth of rural simplicity? Why is the representation of the rural gay male important today? Finally, the overall objective of this thesis is defining what Rural Hysteria is and why it occurs.

I have been writing about AIDS since I was a freshman in High School in 1988. Mostly discussing AIDS in the workplace and the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, I concentrated mostly on how this Act was used to protect those with AIDS or HIV from being terminated from their jobs though the Act was formed to protect employees suffering from Tuberculosis. My connection to AIDS in the 1980s is highly connected to what I viewed the gay male community
to be in the 1980s as I was dealing with my own sexuality and coming out. Growing up in a rural area of Fremont, Ohio during the 1980s and early 1990s as a gay teenager was an experience full of loneliness, confusion, and anxiety. During the pre-Internet era there were very few Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, and Bisexual (LGBT) resources to help young people with their frustrations with sexual identity issues. There were no programs at my Jr. High School or High School. I kept my sexual identity hidden from my family and friends. This made me feel as if I were living a lie. When I was 17-years old in 1990, I began to escape to Toledo, Ohio to frequent gay bars to experience the gay lifestyle. There was no other escape for me at the time. Film and television had limited representations of the LGBT community, thus, I did not depend on a mediated escape. If queerness was represented through film or television it was either a vague representation or it involved AIDS.

Being a gay teenager and trying to find oneself sexually is a difficult process when there is no one to turn to. I was bullied since elementary school, being called names like “girl-boy” and “faggot,” being shoved into lockers, having my books punched out of my hands, sitting alone at lunch, and being chased by groups of masculine boys. I was afraid to go to school, so I didn’t. This affected my grades, my ability to participate in after school extra curricular activities, and trying to become a member of a community that I viewed who hated me and wanted me dead. There was no other escape for me in the 1980s but to travel yonder to an institution patronized by fellows like me. My reflections prove that bullying will inhibit academic achievement, social skills, and attendance in school. Bullying will cause young people to escape the cities, towns, and villages they live in and make them feel like they have no home—and their only hope is to participate in the urban gay migration. Brandon Teena, a female to male transgender who was raping and murdered in 1993 in Humboldt, Nebraska, spent
her life escaping what was around him by traveling to small towns that did not know him. Matthew Sheppard spent his last hours fighting two bullies before his bludgeoned death on October 18, 1998 near Laramie, Wyoming. Seth Walsh was found hanging from a tree in his back yard on September 19, 2010 because he was bullied at school in Tehachapi, California and later passed away on life support. Then you have me. I am lucky. I did not go through with my suicidal thoughts, I out ran the bullies chasing after me, I escaped to a university where I felt accepted for who I was.

In 1992, I was accepted to Bowling Green State University for undergraduate studies and it was there where I discovered the most about my own sexuality and I made several friends who made me feel at peace with myself sexually. At this time I was introduced to films that contained an overall queer narrative—now known as the New Queer Wave—such films were: *Torch Song Trilogy* (Paul Bogart, 1988), *Long Time Companion* (Norman Rene, 1989), *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991), *The Living End* (Gregg Araki, 1992), *Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993), *Jeffrey* (1995), and *Beautiful Thing* (Hettie MacDonald, 1996). With the power of these films I was able to identify and escape in the filmic reality of the queer underground; though some of the above mentioned films do not fall into the New Queer Wave they were absolutely important in the visibility of the gay male whether it was stereotypical or not. What do these films mostly have in common? The setting is strictly urban. Secondly, most of these films place AIDS into the gay male body or mention a fear of AIDS. Lastly, the gay male either becomes suicidal or dies in the end. It is these themes that drew me into *The Sensei*. Inosanto created a rural gay teenager growing up in the mid-1980s who becomes a strong warrior after attempting suicide but who does not die or suffer from AIDS—Inosanto places AIDS into the heterosexual male and female body in a place and time when the gay male was stigmatized as
a frail emaciated being. Inosanto created a reimagined past to correct the stereotype that AIDS is a gay male disease through placing AIDS in the heterosexual body. The reimagined past narrative highly depends on an anachronistic process of creation. Inosanto took events from the early 1980s through the late-1990s to create a narrative of reflection on how the gay male was viewed and bullied on Main Street, U.S.A. during the 1980s AIDS epidemic. Inosanto’s political agenda is to break these stereotypes—thus creating a new story archetype that shows the gay male as a strong, successful warrior against hate and homophobia instead of running away from it.

Film has always been a very important medium to me, because as a child and teenager I relied on film as an escape from the torments of coming out and bullying. There was nothing more enjoyable to me than being safe at home watching a movie. It was cozy. Film became more than just mere entertainment to me at a young age—it became my escape, a reality outside of daydreaming. I wanted to be the “Karate Kid” and I knew how “Pony Boy” felt as an “outsider,” I wanted to fall in love like Rob Lowe and Demi Moore in About Last Night, and I thought I was always going to die like Barbara Hershey in Beaches because I thought at one point every gay man was going to acquire the AIDS virus one way or another. This may sound like a very uneducated example, but to me film is about mimicry. The films I chose to watch reflected myself one way or another and how I felt about myself inside. I wish I had access to queer films when I was an adolescent boy struggling with his sexual identity.

When I decided to incorporate queerness into my graduate studies, I did so with a passion for helping confused, suicidal young people who have no support in their homes or towns to help them deal with the anxieties of the realization and coming out process. It is with this rationale that I chose to complete an in-depth analysis of Inosanto’s politically absorbed film, The Sensei.
Inosanto’s film takes the viewer on a journey back into the early 1980s where growing up gay led many to suicidal thoughts, suicide, and subjection to violence and lost hope. The film is set in a rural Colorado town whose residents do not understand homosexuality or AIDS. Most of the townspeople fear that AIDS is a gay male disease and homophobia is the hegemonic ideology of the town that isolates the one teenage gay male. He suffers from this isolation and it causes loneliness, suicide attempts, and a lack of cohesiveness from the rural community.

The first chapter, Fear of the (Reimagined) Past, primarily focuses on the stereotypes of the gay male in film; the creation of a hybrid film genre; and how *The Sensei* is a Reimagined Queer Independent Martial Arts AIDS film that uses pastiche to evoke a sociopolitical statement about rural queerness, AIDS, and homophobic bullying. I approach the remaining chapters through three other fears: Fear of the Town, Fear of AIDS, and Fear of the Locker Room. Fear of the Town discusses theory and myths about rural towns in the U.S., queer theory on anti-urbanism, and how judicial law lacks support for rural dwellers, specifically queer dwellers. Fear of AIDS focuses on the filmic transcendence of AIDS and how the gay male body has been stigmatized. Fear of the Locker Room concludes my academic research for this project with a thorough definition of rural hysteria and insights on the goals and contributions of the intolerance movement that saturates the U.S. media landscape today.
CHAPTER ONE: FEAR OF THE (REIMAGINED) PAST

Formula and Genre

Genre is the study of textual formula and the significance of formula in everyday life. A genre study can be a slippery slope if it is not thoroughly explained for a film analysis. Film genre analysis does not merely categorize films; it is an explanation on how a film reflects, shapes, and reimagines our culture. Because filmic expression is cultural, it is important to include characteristics about the film that explain plot and story locations, time period, and authenticity. These characteristics are important because most films have a political agenda—a more profound meaning under the layers of music, lighting, and choreography—it is genre analysis that surfaces the symbolic significance behind any moving image regardless of whether it was the director’s and producers’ intentions or not intentional. This chapter discusses nostalgia, the New Queer Wave, the AIDS film, and the martial arts film and how *The Sensei* falls into several socio-political categories beyond the “Drama” and “Martial Arts” film genres.

*The Sensei* has a layered storyline that is told in a non-linear manner with political issues on rurality, AIDS, and bullying that have dramatically affected communities all around the world for several decades. *The Sensei’s* real time is 1992 in Denver, Colorado where a main character, McClain (Michael O’Laskey II) begins the flashback narrative to 1985 when McClain was in high school in a small rural fictional town in Colorado. Within the 1985 narrative, there is an additional flashback that is also narrated by McClain and tells the story of his Sensei, Karen (Diana Inosanto), and her partner, Mark (Louis Mandylor) in the early 1980s. The flashback within a flashback technique is possible because McClain is narrating what Karen had told him, so it is possible that McClain can narrate a story that involves Karen before McClain and Karen met.
Because *The Sensei* is a hybrid genre film, it is necessary to review other films involving queers and AIDS because there is a stereotype/stigma that attaches queer men to AIDS, even to this day. Diana Inosanto used and changed this stereotype/stigma by implementing a mid-1980s storyline that involves McClain, a queer teenage boy, who has to defend himself from this stigma of AIDS. Inosanto created a rural community who believes that queer men are responsible for AIDS. However, the rural community learns that a young heterosexual female adult, Karen, has acquired HIV from her male partner. Karen returns home to her rural community to die, surrounded by her family. Inosanto places the grotesque of AIDS into a mid-1980s female heterosexual body within a small town in America where AIDS wasn’t thought of existing because gay men and AIDS were viewed as an urban decay.

Inosanto reimagines the past to tackle the AIDS stigma queer men have lived with for the past three decades. Inosanto also creates a queer male warrior (McClain) who protects himself from self-harm and a hyper-violent group of young men at his school. Presently, there have been huge campaigns devoted to anti-bullying practices in schools, however, what some may not realize is that bullying is not a new issue; it has been around even beyond the 1980s. With such issues that impact, reflect, and reimagine our queer culture, it is important to analyze how *The Sensei* fits into characteristics of nostalgia and pop-history using approaches on post-modernism; the New Queer Wave (Homo-Pomo); and the AIDS film—along with why the film projects characteristics from the martial arts and the political film.

Rick Altman and John Cawelti have both written scholarly work on the development and importance of genre studies. Altman, author of *Film/Genre* (1999), explains that during the twentieth century critical thinkers began to theoretically approach genre and formula expectations by audiences. Genre became more acceptable in scholarly analysis—formulas for
narratives are created, categorical labels begin, and audiences begin to expect specific formulas from specific genres. Basically, during the twentieth century, genre had become more extensive and predictable. The extensiveness of genres caused producers and scholars to create subgenres to keep audiences interested in textual narratives—basic formulas were used but they had to be changed and mixed-up because of genre recognizability (Altman, 7-11).

Cawelti writes about several attributes to genre study in his chapter “The Study of Literary Formulas” (1976). An important attribute to changing genres in the 20th and 21st centuries is equality movements, i.e. feminism, civil rights, and queer equality. Cawelti states, “we must exercise some caution in our inferences about the social and political views that the author and audience of such stories actually believe in” (32). These movements didn’t necessarily change formulas so much but changed character archetypes, according to Cawelti. Throughout history, genre socio-politically reflects the culture of the time and allowed for self-expression from the producer and the audience.

Cawelti states that formula reflects culture and culture reflects formula. Formula consists of two archetypes, character archetypes and story archetypes (Cawelti, 6-7). Character archetypes are based on stereotypes of race, gender, and sexuality. In The Sensei, these character archetypes appear in McClain as the lonely bullied teenage queer who succeeds as a warrior not plagued with HIV and Karen, who defies the female stereotype as a martial artist who acquired HIV from her male partner who was a boxer. Story archetypes are based on symbols within the genre. The story archetype in The Sensei is martial arts violence, which surpasses an average punch or kick. The violence apparent in the film is deadly but no one dies from the hyper-violent acts.
Genres are formulaic and it is important to slightly change the formula while keeping strong elements of the original formula intact—this both conforms to and veers away from archetypes—creating a blurred and unique formula and a change in structured genre. Cawelti states that formula changes based on how people view the past and see the present:

> The concept of a formula as I have defined it is a means of generalizing the characteristics of large groups of individual works from certain combinations of cultural materials and archetypal story patterns. It is useful primarily as a means of making historical and cultural inferences about the collective fantasies shared by large groups of people and of identifying differences in these fantasies from one culture or period to another. (Cawelti, 7)

Inosanto creates a structural change for the sake of audience reception and for fans of the martial arts genre—martial arts fans may view *The Sensei* not expecting a story about AIDS and bullying and vice versa. Inosanto does not change the AIDS, queer, or martial arts film genres drastically, she implements a reimagined past to give voices to martyrs unheard who were affected by AIDS and bullying. Inosanto gives voice to the heterosexual couples that suffered from AIDS and voices to Mathew Shepard who did not have a chance to defend himself from hyper-violent bullying.

**The Reimagined Past**

Inosanto relied on historical factors when writing and shooting the script for *The Sensei*. When a writer uses a past period in history to reflect a new narrative for the past with a political agenda it evokes thoughts on how culture views the past and the present issues created from the past in real time. It is an important postmodern technique to reimagine the past to “fix” what logically was merely assumed and to “learn” the suffering
of subcultural groups of the past though the subcultural group may be accepted in real time. Inosanto created a narrative based on the fact that gay men were stigmatized as sole carrier of the AIDS virus in the 1980s. The virus was even once referred to GRID (Gay-related Immune Deficiency) and the Gay Plague in 1982. Inosanto’s narrative defies this true past by including this stigmatization in her film but later within the narrative she destigmatizes the gay male by placing AIDS into the body of the heterosexual female who gained HIV from her heterosexual male partner in 1985. Frederic Jameson, author of *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), approaches postmodernism and formula by analyzing patterns in pastiche, history, and nostalgia:

Nostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation. (Jameson, 18)

Pastiche pays homage to a particular series of texts and this connects to Cawelti and Altman’s theoretical approach on genre and formula because Cawelti states that formulas change due to cultural shifts and Altman theorizes about genre cycles. In Altman’s fourth chapter, “Are genres stable?” in *Film/Genre* Altman states there is an evolutionary approach to look at genre—there is a genre origin that becomes classical and is experimentally refined which then may turn into parody and/or a baroque stage. During this cycle of change, as Jameson writes about nostalgia, he states how elements of the past and present are important factors in bringing together high culture and popular culture—when the two collide—postmodernism is a key element in genre re-formulation. Jameson’s first chapter, “The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” (1-54), approaches particular postmodern genre formula through an analysis of history and the
combination of high, mid, and low cultures for the sake of capital to change the repetition in what has already been done. Inosanto stated in an interview:

The inspiration for *The Sensei* was obviously a combination of the stories of Gilbert Johnson—who was the co-author along with my Uncle Bruce [Lee] for the Tao of Jeet Kune Do as well as my father's book, and of course the Matthew Shepard case—but, what really impacted me was when I went to the Ryan White Conference in Washington, D.C. one year after 9/11. I was shocked to learn that 30% of the people in New York who donated blood found out they were HIV+ or had full-blown AIDS and didn't even know it! This data wasn't even posted in the newspapers until 2005-2006 because national attention was on what was going on in the Middle East. That's *insanity*! (Guillen, para 10)

Postmodernism is based on pastiche, simulacra, and the recirculation of signs. Inosanto follows this pattern by basing the brutality that McClain suffers from bullying on the murder of Mathew Shepard in 1998; her AIDS storyline is inspired by Ryan White and the 2002 statistics on AIDS. Inosanto also stated that her AIDS storyline was developed in homage to a family friend, Gilbert Johnson, who acquired and died of AIDS due to a blood transfusion in the 1980s. Inosanto stated in *Black Belt*, an online martial arts magazine:

By the time the 1980s rolled around, the AIDS epidemic started to spread across the United States, where the illness was labeled a “gay disease.” Sadly, Gilbert was one of the first people I knew to contract the disease via a blood transfusion, which he needed after being involved in a car accident. And because of this, he quickly understood the discrimination and prejudice he’d face. As a result, he
became an activist to help spread awareness that AIDS can affect anyone, that compassion is needed, not hate. (Inosanto, Black Belt, para. 5)

Gilbert was a warrior in many ways who introduced Inosanto to the important fact that AIDS was not just a gay disease because Inosanto witnessed a straight man who perished from the disease and who stood up to destigmatize the gay community from AIDS during the 1980s.

Jameson’s ideas on postmodernism change the way film scholars may look at film genre theory. Basically, as stated throughout his first chapter in Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism — film narratives are a byproduct of formula, however, postmodern techniques blend different formulas and archetypes that cause a blurred boundary and at times a reimagined past. The reimagined past film genres are under the manipulation of postmodernism because the narrative relies on recycling what has already happened but discloses an unknown story and is typically based as an homage to an event or a martyr.

Cawelti discusses the change in the transcendence of archetypes and stereotypes in formula to what Jameson discusses as nostalgia and lost reality when new texts become somewhat too stylistic. The original archetype loses meaning and a new meaning is created.

This occurs in many present filmic representations of the past. Producers are guilty of creating anachronistic narratives that discover a new past or an unseen past in media constructions. The Sensei is an independent film that does not concern itself with anachronisms in costuming or music. The costumes are plain, low budget with a tint of the 1980s but it seems that costuming was left on the back burner because it is the narrative that controls the viewer and tends to be the most important aspect of the film. The issues of AIDS, equality, and bullying are what drive the narrative and not the amateur acting and the low-budget make-up, costuming, lighting, and
filming techniques. It is the symbolic and social significance that drives this film and not the quality of celebrity and amateur aesthetic.

On a final note, the reimagined past must not be confused with the remake. A remake is basically a simulacrum where audiences feel the final copy may be the original form or an up-to-date version of the original form. The reimagined past typically is based on real historical events and the narrative may be fictional or non-fictional.

**New Queer Cinema**

In an e-mail correspondence with Inosanto, I asked Inosanto if she felt her film was a part of Queer Cinema because I felt that *The Sensei* has everything to do with what the New Queer Wave of films in the 1990s were trying to achieve. New Queer Cinema (NQC) or Homo Pomo (Homosexual Postmodernism) has taken great strides in restructuring the image of gayness in American cinema (Inosanto, “THE SENSEI”). NQC is a term coined as a response to the fleet of gay and lesbian guerilla films from the early 1990s as a response to the repressive state queers were subjected to in the 1980s—in regard to the AIDS crisis, the gay male suffered the most—however, the entire American queer body was affected by this repressive ideology and Inosanto attempts to project how AIDS not only affected gay communities but heterosexual communities as well.

NQC, coined by B. Ruby Rich, gained notoriety during the early 1990s complimenting the turn of the Democratic Clinton-era. In *American Queer: Now and Then*, David Shneer and Caryn Aviv discuss the politics of the 1980s and how the queer body was affected by both AIDS and the republican era of presidency:

For gay men, the 1980s marked a turning point in thinking and talking about sex. The tremendous number of deaths from HIV/AIDS, combined
with the indignity caused by Reagan administration’s refusal to acknowledge such suffering, shifted gay men’s focus around sex and sexuality from pleasure to danger, from free expression to self-regulation, internal critique, and fear. (Shneer and Aviv, 93)

Female queers are not unattached from the movement; it is however the visibility of the diseased, grotesque male queer from the 1980s that this movement is attempting to destroy. Gay men responded to the grotesque, sickly gay male body by subscribing to the Adonis Factor at the turn of the 1980s into the 1990s. Overworked gay male bodies masked the HIV infection or did not contain the infection at all.

In *New Queer Cinema: A Critical Reader* Michele Aaron, B. Ruby Rich, and Monica B. Pearl give the history of NQC. In “New Queer Cinema: An Introduction,” Michele Aaron gives five political conventions that the wave of films attempt to express:

1. These films give voice to the marginalised not simply in terms of focusing on the lesbian and gay community, but on the sub-groups contained within it.
2. The films are unapologetic about their characters’ faults or, rather crimes: they eschew positive imagery. They homoeroticize crime.
3. The films defy the sanctity of the past, especially the homophobic past.
4. The films frequently defy cinematic convention in terms of form, content and genre.
5. The films in many ways defy death. (3-5)

A film that belongs in the NQW does not need to fall into all five categories; a film that follows any of the characteristics of the NQW can be theoretically placed within the walls of queer cinema.
The Aughts is an era when queer equality (and many other) issues were shadowed from the mourning of 9/11 and the U.S. came together as a whole. Along with 9/11, the Republican presidency was rarely concerned about queer political issues. It was through filmic expression that the door stayed open with mainstream films, such as Brokeback Mountain (Ang Lee, 2005) and MILK (Gus Van Sant, 2008). The New Queer Wave is responsible for the gay visibility in film and the screen presence of gay males as accepted mainstream, distributed filmic material that did not stigmatize the gay male with disease—they have been permitted to fall in love and they have been represented politically, specifically without the stigma of AIDS and with an accent on a desire to be a part of the norm, such as the gay marriage debate presently reaching the Supreme Court in March 2013.

Larry Gross wrote Up From Invisibility, published in 2001, that includes in-depth research and analysis in essays titled “Gay Films for Straight Audiences” and “Hollywood Under Pressure.” According to Gross, “1991 [is] known as the year that altered Hollywood’s relationship with gay and lesbian people as never before” (148). It is important to research the history of mainstream visibility of the gay and lesbian community in Hollywood, how it came about, and where it is presently because between 1973 and the present, the queer world has worked incredibly hard for visibility, equality, and to be taken seriously on such issues as marriage. Gross explains cinema history with the gay and lesbian community in mind and he explores the hypocrisy in understanding hetero-normative behavior. Gross states, “gays understand straights; but straights don’t understand gays” (151). The significance of this statement is what gay-themed narratives, in part, are attempting to show hetero-normative society—an understanding of the queer community and its oppressive, depressive characteristics in the last 40 years.
Gross quotes gay novelist, Ethan Mordden—“gays invariably comprehend straights, because, whatever our sexuality, we all grow up within the straight culture... but straights don’t understand gays any more than whites understand blacks or Christians understand Jews, however good their intentions” (150-151). Inosanto’s narrative includes a character perspective from the heteronormative and a character perspective from the homonormative; she blends it nicely to impact viewers with a slice of equality while achieving several political messages about hate and tolerance toward not only homosexuality and AIDS but also race and females.

One criticism about the NQW is how females are again left on the back-burner, claiming this to be a “restaging of the central aesthetic argument of the Frankfurt School as it might apply to the crises of representation engendered by today’s anti-gay backlash, violence, and television treatment of the AIDS era” (Rich, 17). As stated above, the entire American queer body was affected by the 1980s AIDS crisis; however, it is the queer male who was harmed the most and there is no intention of leaving the female out of the movement—the response was out of the high visibility of the gay male from the 1980s who was now stigmatized by the AIDS crisis. Another side-note to Ruby’s criticism of male domination of the NQW is that, unfortunately, males throughout history dominate the film industry. It is then important to recognize female filmmakers, narratives, and characters as a part of and in response to NQC. The Sensei incorporates the female hero and her struggles in an oppressive rural community and is directed and written by Inosanto who had to remortgage her house to finish the film in 2008.

The AIDS Film

New Queer Cinema tends to be known as a response to queer repression in the 1980s and tied to the AIDS epidemic of the same era; Kylo-Patrick R. Hart responds to films about AIDS differently in his book, The AIDS Movie: Representing a Pandemic in Film and Television. In his
fourth chapter (45-66), “Gay Men As ‘The (Primary) Other’ in the AIDS Movie,” Hart explains that there are very few positive representations of gay men in films about AIDS; he also argues that if the main narrative is about a heterosexual with AIDS, there is usually a gay character involved in the narrative. This ties the queer body to AIDS regardless of the overall narrative. The important example here is any film that involves AIDS that does not tie-in a queer character in the narrative whatsoever. As I’ve done my academic research, I have not found one film that involves AIDS and does not have a themed account of homosexuality within the context of the film.

The binary opposite of the representation of the gay male and AIDS in the underground movement of NQC is mainstream cinema. Hart discusses the gay male as “the (primary) other in the AIDS movie” (45). As stated above, gay men have been stigmatized with the AIDS virus from the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and the media responded to the crisis quickly through representation of dying gay men in made-for-TV movies and mainstream cinema, such as An Early Frost (John Erman, 1985) and Longtime Companion (Norman Rene, 1989), which both center around gay males who experience the AIDS crisis and are exposed to HIV/AIDS and die (and a few survive). It projected a moral panic that made the gay male become viewed subversively in the shadow of AIDS; thus, creating a need for gay men to stay in the closet, hide his HIV status, and succumb to the Adonis Factor throughout the 1990s. It is important for the queer body to step out of the closet so there is representation; to make any type of change there has to be a visible body of people who represent and support social change. Gay men and the representation of coming out to their family members have been associated with violence. Hart states, “[the] most common representation of gay men in AIDS movies portrays gay men as embarrassments to their parents, particularly their fathers, with whom they have especially
strained … relationships after they reveal their homosexuality” (51); this in turn creates an anxiety and a panic among young gay men, and they stay hidden in the closet. Another stigmatizing effect gay men have suffered is the representation of the gay male as highly promiscuous; Hart states, “…gay men in AIDS movies portrays them as sexually promiscuous individuals who irresponsibly put others at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS” (52). This affects how the heteronormative culture views the gay male and creates a sexual panic among gay males within the homonormative culture among each other. With America viewing AIDS as the grotesque and connecting the virus to the gay male it has been represented through mainstream film as an end of all ends with motifs of violence and non-acceptance with no hope of survival.

Representation of AIDS in mainstream and underground film is an important political movement; however, the representation does not always involve the gay male. There are films that represent AIDS as it pertains to the heteronormative culture; KIDS (Larry Clark, 1995) is about a heterosexual female, Jennie (Chloe Sevigny) who obtains HIV from a promiscuous heterosexual male, Telly (Leo Fitzpatrick). The cultural problem with KIDS is Jennie only had sex once in her life and Telly is the epitome of grotesqueness. Ironically and purposely, condoms are non-existent in KIDS; therefore, sexual promiscuity is even more dangerous. Though KIDS is about heterosexual sex, the film ties in a scene with two gay males in a violent, verbal encounter with a group of heterosexual male teens shouting “sick” and “fucking faggots.” (Hart, 63):

By focusing on heterosexual sexual transmission of AIDS, [KIDS has] the potential to undermine the perception of AIDS as a “gay disease” by incorporating characters who contract HIV/AIDS by non-gay means. In the end, however, they fail to live up to that potential by ultimately being
Larry Clark’s attempt to include the gay male couple with the verbal gay bashing motif is arguably a statement about the film as a whole. First, the gay males were not stigmatized by the disease, they did not appear unhealthy and they were openly walking through Washington Square Park holding hands, displaying monogamy. Clark’s inclusion of this scene is a statement that heterosexual teens are also at-risk to be subjected to HIV—HIV is also a heteronormative issue. However, throughout the entire film, the only time condoms are mentioned is at the health clinic where two female characters get tested. The statement Clark was attempting to make, and he did, was the lack of communication about sex with youth culture from a wise, adult figure.

*Philadelphia* (Jonathan Demme, 1993) uses a sickly gay male for political motivation to evoke thought about homophobic discrimination in the workplace. The film projects a gay male dying of AIDS who is fired from a law firm because he was gay and not diseased. Though the gay male is connected to AIDS the film takes a political direction that gay men do have AIDS and the film introduces a heterosexual character female character who is HIV positive. The overall outcome of the film, however, is the death of the AIDS infected gay male during a period in film where the gay male needs to be seen as healthy, since the mainstream representation of him is unhealthy.

In the queer world, everything is connected to AIDS and the queer body. AIDS consumes the queer body, AIDS is the parasite that destroys the queer body, and survival from AIDS is based on class. Some members of American society may view the queer body, mostly the gay male, as a commodified sexual disease who will become a parasite on every heterosexual male as a conquest—thus creating a homophobic reality in heteronormative society. Queer men are disgusting because queer men are disgusted with intolerance that, in reality, turns into a political message. To become accepted in the heteronormative ideals, the gay male must act like the media has wanted him to act since the Golden Age of Hollywood cinema—the “nancy-boys” and the “whores” and the “sophisticated” and the “fashionable” and the “pansies and sissies and faggots” of some society that never allowed him to achieve anything close to acceptance in the middle class work force, unless he stayed in the closet and acted the part to be accepted. This attitude shadows the U.S. military’s 1990s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” law, where queer men and women were forced to stay in the closet—in other words, conform to the heteronormative lifestyle to maintain a military career. It is fortunate that queers are now able to be queer and disconnected from AIDS; however, there is still a negative stigma attached to AIDS where the body infected is “dirty” and “useless” to society regardless if the body has a penis or a vagina.

Inosanto’s reimagined past in The Sensei includes placing HIV/AIDS into the heterosexual male and female body, exposing the lack of awareness (“swept under the rug”) of high school bullying as a historical problem rather than just a current problem, and sexism and homophobia within the martial arts community. Why does Inosanto have to reimagine the past when it is clear that these issues still exist today? The reimagined film may be acknowledged as a type of genre convention. The knowledge of the AIDS virus has significantly changed since the 1980s and reimagining this issue in 1985 with a film that was made in 2008 (a 7-year project)
adds more power to the narrative for audiences who are unable to identify with the stereotypes and stigmatization of AIDS in the 1980s. Also, it was most likely that anyone who acquired AIDS by the mid-1980s would not receive the proper medical attention due to both the lack of knowledge about and the fear of the disease; therefore, the heterosexual characters who do acquire the disease in Inosanto’s reimagined past tragically pass away for the melodramatic effect of the narrative.

It is interesting how Inosanto introduces the AIDS storyline in *The Sensei*, using a melodramatic genre motif by misleading the audience that she herself may be accusing McClain as a harborer of the AIDS virus. Karen, the hero the audience once trusted and respected, is now a part of the hegemonic rural culture that all gay men harbor the AIDS virus. This occurs when Karen rescues McClain from his second brutal attack where they are both bleeding. McClain and Karen both realize they are wounded and Karen steps back in shock and runs away screaming, “Don’t touch me!” (Inosanto, Scene 81).

Inosanto misguides the audience into believing that Karen may be a hypocrite and she may have put aside her hypocritical beliefs to protect the bullies from McClain (because he is the AIDS carrying queer). If Karen taught McClain martial arts (karate) then the bullies would fear him and leave him alone, thus protecting the town from the disease. However, it is soon discovered while Karen visits McClain at the hospital that she is the one with AIDS. The melodramatic tool used within the narrative structure allows the audience to become more attached to Karen because for a moment the audience disconnected her from good and lost hope in her. Once the audience learns the truth behind Karen’s actions, the audience is relieved and feels guilty about doubting the hero of the film.
McClain and Karen both experience oppression by the hegemonic rural culture—they are both marginalized in a rural town that believes that AIDS is “the gay plague” and where the female is not accepted as a warrior (either vocally or physically). Karen is marginalized by her family’s involvement in the martial arts culture—she has not been permitted to receive her black belt because she is a female. In a martial arts family, becoming a black belt is a rite of passage and unity; Karen is not offered these rites and separates herself from her family. After this separation, Karen returns to the rural town to confront her family with the news that she is HIV-positive and that her husband, Mark Cory (Louis Mandylor), has passed away from AIDS. Mark was transmitted the HIV virus from his career as a boxer. Inosanto defies the sanctity of the past by creating an AIDS story line that does not stigmatize the queer body. This story line becomes more powerful because the narrative is set in the reimagined 1980s.

When I asked Inosanto in an e-mail correspondence if she considered *The Sensei* as a part of the fleet of queer films, she stated, “I wanted to make a humanitarian movie that entertained yet showed the different shades of hate and intolerance, and how it can be manifested in different ways: racism, sexism and one's sexual orientation.” I consider *The Sensei* as a response to NQC and a member of the queer cinema fleet. Inosanto uses the gay male body (McClain) as a vehicle to raise the melodramatic reaction to the female hero acquiring and dying of AIDS. By using the gay male body, Inosanto is responding to the stigmatization of AIDS on the gay male body and attempting to reverse this stigmatization, thus defying the sanctity of the past.

**The Political Film**

Political films have five major social responsibilities according to Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas, authors of *Projecting Politics: Political Messages in American Films* (2005):
(1) Movies contribute to general social and political learning, including affective patterns.

(2) Movies provide information about and/or orientation to specific issues or events.

(3) Movies affect specific political behavior, such as voting in elections.

(4) Movies affect the knowledge and behavior of specific groups, especially political elites.

(5) Movies spark public debate and/or media interest in specific issues. (14-15)

Inosanto may or may have not had these five characteristics in mind when creating the script for *The Sensei*—it is fascinating how easily *The Sensei* fits into these five characteristics.

*The Sensei* contributes a social and political educational value on tolerance, anti-bullying issues, and AIDS awareness within the heterosexual community in rural areas. Inosanto created the narrative using past historical events to provide thought evoking debates over what is currently happening in the U.S. with queer equality issues, most importantly bullying in school and workplaces about sexuality and gender difference. According to Inosanto’s personal website, *The Sensei* is being used as an educational tool against bullying: “*The Sensei* producing team along with director-writer, Diana Lee Inosanto were vindicated by their hard work when they were notified that *The Sensei* was being used in a positive way to teach teens to stand up against bullying in a growing number of high schools across the country” (Inosanto, *Diana’s Buzz*, para. 1). Inosanto’s film very well may be producing non-discriminatory minds that will one day vote for Federal marriage equality and other equality issues in the future, including laws against bullying and involuntary manslaughter.
Overall, *The Sensei* does spark debate on using violence against violence and the definition of protecting oneself from violence. McClain wants to learn martial arts to protect himself so he no longer needs to fear attending high school. Martial arts, in turn, is seen as a weapon by creating a warrior against evil; however, it is up to the viewers of this film to debate if this is violence creating more violence which is similar to firearm laws currently being debated in the U.S. as a right to protect oneself versus the ownership of firearms by anyone as dangerous. The similarities of debate would hold the body as warrior to be like a firearm—both can kill a human, but which requires more training and skill to use? It is an interesting debate and this is exactly a prime example and motivation behind a political film.

**The Martial Arts Film**

*The Sensei* is a violent film. The violence that McClain endures on film is the equivalent of a death sentence in real life. McClain is first brutally beaten in a locker room beyond imagination in Scene 33 of the film, enduring over 29 punches and kicks, being dragged into a shower with an imagery suggesting that McClain is sodomized with a wooden pole. The U.S. martial arts film does not always rely on such imagery of violence. For example, *The Karate Kid* (John G. Avildsen, 1984) has a main storyline of fitting in, bullying, and protecting oneself. *The Sensei* is much more than a coming of age film about bullying; it is a film that politically projects more political issues because the violence is projected in homage to the murder of Matthew Shepard.

David West, author of *Chasing Dragons: An Introduction to the Martial Arts Film* (2006), states in his chapter, “Hollywood and the USA: The Introduction of Martial Arts to America,” that the genre elements of the martial arts film are “the master-pupil relationship, the importance of personal and spiritual growth, a series of confrontations leading to a climatic duel
and the mastering of a new technique required to triumph” (226). The martial arts film genre typically contains exaggerated movements while the protagonist and antagonist battle. The elements mentioned above are apparent in Inosanto’s *The Sensei*: Karen and McClain uphold the master-pupil relationship, McClain is taught by Karen to defend himself against hate and self-hate in an attempt for him to grow personally and spiritually, and McClain and Karen are both subjected to initial battle violence.

McClain has a duel with the main antagonists, described as, “If ‘hate’ was a bloodline, the Beard Brothers would be purebred” (Inosanto, Scene 26), on a dark road in town. McClain has little warrior experience at this point in screen time and has just been told by Karen (his Sensei) that she needs a break from teaching him martial arts. McClain is confused and accuses Karen of fearing his homosexuality (Inosanto, Scene 81). McClain runs from Karen into the darkness of the town. McClain is seen by his antagonists--Craig (Jonathan Camp) and Rick (Mark McGraw) [the Beard brothers] and their buddies Zeke (Phillip Held), Pook (Jefferson Arca), and Charlie (J. Michael Weiss)--running from Karen. The antagonists follow McClain. During the altercation McClain is losing the battle because he is outnumbered; Zeke ties a rope around McClain’s neck that is attached to a truck that Charlie begins driving, dragging McClain while the group chants hate speech and throws beer bottles at him—Karen comes to McClain’s rescue. This is a pivotal point in the film where the martial arts genre elements have been achieved, and the inciting incident of this altercation is where the heterosexual AIDS narrative takes over. After Karen and McClain win the battle—McClain and Karen look at each other and notice that each of them is bleeding. Karen yells, “Don’t touch me!” and at this point *The Sensei* delves into aspects of the AIDS film.
Hybrid Genre

Hybrid is defined by the *New Oxford American Online Dictionary* as “a thing made by combining two different elements; a mixture.” It is apparent by the information above that The Sensei belongs in all categorical genres of the queer, AIDS, and martial arts films. Inosanto successfully reimagines the 1980s as a time of confusion for the gay male as he is tied to the AIDS virus that in turn projects hate and homophobic values among a small rural town community with religious and heteronormative values. Three main themes and myths are brought to my attention through Inosanto’s narrative in *The Sensei*: (1) the need for queers to migrate to urban areas for safety, (2) a fear of AIDS, and (3) the affects and aftermath of bullying. Within the next three sections I will discuss these issues in length using specific details from Inosanto’s genre bending film.
CHAPTER TWO: FEAR OF THE TOWN

There is this idea that queers should consider migrating to urban areas to find themselves a close-knit community for a sense of belonging and to escape a rural culture of fear. There is another idea that queers are perfectly capable of living their queer lives comfortably in small towns or rural areas. This chapter suggests how either geographic location may benefit a queer and examines the myths and stereotypes that are associated with the rural and urban queer. Within this chapter, I use a concept of American capitalism during the industrial revolution on why many queers were able to migrate to the city near the turn of the 20th century. I review rural myths associated among the heteronormative and I theorize if it applies to queer ideologies. I discuss two sociological studies on rural queerness and identity that state a thorough social psychology on how particular queers feel about their rural surroundings they inhabit. I reflect on the fatalities of Matthew Shepard and Teena Brandon, who both were murdered in rural areas because of their queerness. I theorize on how law and gender mainly applies to the urban queer and is biased toward the rural queer. Overall, I apply how class, rural myths, queer fear, and the law apply to particular narratives within the film, *The Sensei*, throughout the chapter.

**Filmic Representations of the Rural Queer**

Films with queer-driven narratives typically have had an urban setting in film history, and within the turn of the 20th century and 20 years post-New Queer Wave I have noticed more films with queer characters and major queer narratives with settings in non-urban locations. With the influence of the New Queer Wave in the early 1990s in conjunction with the murderous events of Matthew Shepard and Teena Brandon, queer narratives began to take a turn toward rural representations. Present campaigns, such as It Gets Better and The Trevor Project, also influence visibility of the rural versus the urban through both campaigns using social media to post
political messages, videos, and news on equality issues and queer teen suicides in both rural and urban landscapes.

A major breakthrough for filmic rural queer representation was *Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005) that was distributed by Focus Features, an independent film distribution company, and was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won three. The Academy Awards is a vehicle for major exposure of a film and its content, especially a queer film that doesn’t reach rural areas during its release. However, within the fleet of queer films there has been minor positive representation of rural queers living successfully within a rural or small town environment. An overlying problem with queer characters in most rural filmic representations is the queer usually suffers throughout the film or dies somewhere within the narrative unlike the urban queer who is permitted to have a fabulous lifestyle.

*Edge of Seventeen* (David Moreton, 1998) is a story about a gay male teen coming out in the early 1980s in Sandusky, Ohio—he finds himself and comes to grips with his sexuality through the help of his lesbian boss and the friends he acquires at a gay bar—in the end he wants to migrate to New York City as an escape because he could not prosper, obtain his goals, or enjoy queer life in Sandusky, Ohio. Other queer rural/small town representations of queer characters include *Boys Don’t Cry* (Kimberly Peirce, 1999), *Latter Days* (C. Jay Cox, 2003), and *Save Me* (Robert Cary, 2007). The rural characters in all of the above mentioned films die, are subjected to queer reversal techniques, or attempt suicide. Teena Brandon (Hilary Swank, Oscar Winner for Best Actress 2000) in *Boys Don’t Cry* (based on a true story) is raped twice and is murdered in a small Nebraska town because he is a female to male transgender; Elder Aaron Davis (Steve Sandvoss) in *Latter Days* is subjected to shock treatment, attempts suicide, and migrates to Los Angeles in the end; and Mark (Chad Allen) is subjected to a Christian reversal
camp and witnesses a suicide attempt from another queer at the camp in *Save Me* where he finds his true love.

In *The Sensei*, McClain has a turbulent life. He attempts suicide, is physically and mentally attacked, is out-casted by his fellow rural neighbors, and must become a warrior to defend himself. Only after McClain becomes a warrior is he accepted within his rural community. McClain becomes a heroic figure in his small town where he finishes high school and later migrates to Denver, Colorado. There is a queer fear of maintaining life in rural areas among filmic rural queers—they all escape to an urban landscape to live a safer, better life. Rural queers happily exist but in film they are rarely happy, comfortable within the town they live in, or are forced to an urban landscape that upholds the myth of gay urban migration—the need to escape from boredom, violence, or death.

**Queer Migration**

The need for rural queers to migrate to an urban landscape of anonymity and freedom may have begun with the free labor system in the early 1900s. In summary, as John De’Emilio suggests in “Capitalism and Gay Identity” (originally a lecture from 1979-1980), the free labor system had a part in the destruction of the nuclear family that was essential during pre-capitalism. The freedom to veer away from the family unit allowed men and women to explore their “real” or “other” sexual desires without depending on the nuclear family to run a household or farm to survive financially. Single men and women began to migrate to urban areas, leaving heteronormative ideology on the farm (467-476). Andrew Gorman-Murray also argues a rural-urban binary in “Rethinking queer migration through the body”:

> The relocation of homoeroticism into these quasi-ethnic, nucleated, sexually constituted communities is to some extent a consequence of the transfers of
population brought about by industrialization. As laborers migrated to work in cities, there were increased opportunities for voluntary communities to form. Homosexually inclined women and men, who would have been vulnerable and isolated in most pre-industrial villages, began to congregate in small corners of the big cities. (107)

The migration of queers to urban areas was not to escape the small town due to fear of violence but to become laborers and financially stable without the farm. The escape was to make a different life, queer or not, and this urban migration allowed people to leave the ideas of heteronormativity and the nuclear family apparent within the rural landscape of America. While not subjected to the heteronormative lifestyle, migration led to individual freedom to explore their sexualities instead of being forced into the typical heterosexual marriage in rural areas. To this day, urban areas are epicenters for queer congregation, queer exploration, and queer expression because this is where it is noted as being the most acceptable area to do so. The question is, do rural myths still uphold their definitions today? Can a queer safely represent their queerness in a rural area without being subjected to violence or discrimination?

Personal taste is a major factor between a rural and an urban queer. Rural culture signifies towns where most of the population is close-knit, friendly, and lacks anonymity. Living within a microscopic rural community calls for the ability to form a cohesive bond with the rural community. On the other hand, urban culture gives a citizen the ability to live a somewhat anonymous lifestyle, along with the ability to pick and choose the community the citizen feels is the most comfortable to be surrounded within. In a rural community one has very little choice who to be social with unless one chooses to be anti-social. Urban communities have a variety of areas, districts, and neighborhoods to choose from when creating a habitat. To be openly gay in a
rural or urban community is a choice, however, citizens in a rural community may begin to
grow curious when particular members are not quite living the heteronormative lifestyle. An
urban community may hold the same characteristics but the urban community also has a stigma
that it is acceptable to be open and gay and also holds a generalization that people in these
communities just do not care and typically mind their own business. Basically, it is the choice of
the queer whether the rural or urban lifestyle suits their specific needs as a person.

Michael Kennedy (2011) and Emily Kazyak (2010) researched and wrote two important
studies that demonstrate how rural dwellers deal with their queerness and how they lead their
queer lifestyles within the communities they inhabit. Kennedy’s study looks at native and
transplant rural men who have sex with men. The study produced conclusions that queer rural
men fight against being labeled as queer in any way, thus, hiding their true sexuality for the sake
of not being judged, taunted, or talked about (1058). Rural natives tended to fear religious
ideology about queerness and feared losing community support if rural neighbors were to find
out about their sexual activities. There was a need for these men to blend into their community
and avoid anything that would label them as an outsider (1066-1072). Another attribute of
Kennedy’s study was how native rural queer men romanticized the city as a place of safety,
hope, and acceptance but also viewed the city as too overwhelming, so these men used the
Internet for a substitution of their city “fix” to become a part of a queer community (1072-1075).
Kennedy also interviewed queer male rural transplant dwellers who found the rural landscape to
be a retreat from the urban landscape; they felt more isolated in the city and more connected in
their transplanted rural landscape (1079).

Kazyak’s sociological findings were slightly different from Kennedy’s evaluation of
queer rural dwellers. First, Kazyak interviewed a mix of lesbians and gay men in rural areas and
most of her subjects were natives of rural areas who either experienced urban life and returned to the rural landscape or who never had left the rural landscape (564). Kazyak’s work relies on how the queer body of subjects respected small town life and encouraged acceptance of queer life from their neighbors and how her queer rural subjects upheld three myths of rural identity: (1) being known as a good person, (2) having ties to rural community, and (3) maintaining the close-knit nature of rural life (565-572). Within these three myths queer rural dwellers desired queer identity acceptance from their rural neighbors, desired to relate to these neighbors, and felt they were less accessible to becoming confronted about their sexuality due to a lack of anonymity because of the close-knit nature of rural communities (572-574). The queer rural dwellers felt safer than in an urban landscape because friends and family surrounded them, unlike in an urban landscape where they are isolated (575). In all, the queer identities Kazyak interviewed felt that their lifestyles alone were a form of activism and visibility to educate their heteronormative neighbors through exposure (578).

It is apparent that it is an assumption that positive queer life does not exist in the rural landscape as compared to the urban acceptance of queerness. It is fair to reject the notion that queers must migrate to an urban landscape to achieve a carefree, open queer lifestyle. However, it is also fair to note that it is up to the queer if rural or urban life fits their personality, lifestyle, and ideology when deciding where to settle down. There has always been an assumption that small town queers would be better off in the city and this is just a myth due to how queer communities formed, according to D’Emilio and Gorman-Murray.

**Rural Myths**

Conal Furay (1983) claims that rural ideology is estranged from the intellectual and the rural mind is simple, practical, and suspicious; it lacks sophistication and maintains an accusative
nature in his essay, “The Small Town Mind” (51). The stereotype of the gay male is completely opposite of Furay’s description of the rural mind. In the documentary, *Color Me Lavender* (Mark Rappaport, 1997), a list of stereotypes on how mass-culture began stereotyping the homosexual male are listed as “coded homosexual traits,” according to Dan Butler (the narrator). These traits are still used against gay men today:

1. First Rate Snob
2. Sophisticated
3. Self-absorbed
4. Shameless Gossip
5. Fashionable
6. Devoted to the Arts
7. Witty to the Fault

Most of these images are apparent in Comedy and Western films of the 1930s and the 1950s; terms coined in *Color Me Lavender* of the effeminate male are “Fag-Gags” and “WASPish Prissiness.” Just as *Color Me Lavender* attempts to mold the gay male stereotype using heterosexual movements and situations in film history, Richard Dyer explains how queers have resentment towards the attempted portrayal of the queer in film in his 1984 essay, “Stereotyping.” He supplies an updated list of queer stereotypes in film: “the butch dyke and the camp queen, the lesbian vampire and the sadistic queer, the predatory schoolmistress and the neurotic faggot…” (323). The desire to create realistic characters for film is not the objective of his essay—He argues that one must accept the value of the definition and function of the stereotype and “what the alternatives to it are” (323). Stereotypes create problems for gay
politics because some members of the queer community do not act the appropriate gender role, however. Dyer proposes how to suppress the queer stereotype:

What we should be attacking in stereotypes is the attempt of heterosexual society to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the “ideal” of heterosexuality (that is, taken to be the norm of being human), and to pass this definition off as necessary and natural. …[T]he task is to develop our own alternative and challenging definitions of ourselves. (357)

Inosanto created a rural gay male character in The Sensei who defies the stereotypes of the queer described in both Color Me Lavender and Dyer’s “Stereotype” rant: McClain Evans—a quiet, gentle, courageous but lost, lonely young teenage male in rural surroundings. This character archetype who endures a journey in an attempt to accept his homosexuality has appeared in several other moving images, such as Ennis Del Mar (Heath Ledger) in Brokeback Mountain and Mark (Chad Allen) in Save Me.

In a small town there rarely is anonymity unlike the urban landscape where an individual is able to create his/her own circle of friends with various backgrounds, roots, and ideologies. The small town mind “can scarcely be called moribund” (Furay, 42). The small town does contain characteristics of vigor, vitality, and intellectualism—this intellectualism, however, maintains information of what and who surrounds the rural inhabitant rather than elitist activities of the urban landscape (Broadway plays, art museums, and fine dining)—rural folks are more simple in the way of appreciating the more simple things in life (flower-filled meadows, starry night skies, and isolated homes).

Scott Herring, author of Another Country (2010), approaches an analysis of the rural queer heavily relying on fashion and representations of queers in binary opposition of urban
versus rural. He fails to mention much about rural queer struggles, rural programs to help gay youth, or HIV/AIDS resources for rural queer communities. Herring definitely takes an anti-urban approach that is biased toward urban queer communities. Herring states:

Complicating geophobic claims that ruralized spaces are always and only hotbeds of hostility, cultural and socioeconomic poverty, religious fundamentalism, homophobia, racism, urbanoia, and social conservatism, their works question knee-jerk assumptions that the “rural” is a hate-filled space for queers as they archive the complex desires that contribute to any non-metropolitan identification.

(9)

There are safe rural communities where queer life may prosper and grow; however, the media projects a much different image of how queer life is in rural areas which still maintains a truthfulness of fear and violence for the queer in rural areas. This is why there are films produced about Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard. These are true stories that have created a culture of fear for queers in rural areas. There is still an assumption that these two fatalities are rationalized in the way that Teena and Shepard were merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. As Bud W. Jerke states in his 2011 piece titled, “Queer Ruralism”:

Queer rural stereotypes are animated in part by specific episodes of hate and intolerance in rural areas, such as the 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming, and the 1993 rape and murder of Brandon Teena, a transgender teenager, in a small Nebraska town. These regrettable events give credence to both rural and queer stereotypes by portraying rural as backwards and intolerant and rural queers as victims. The message is simple: rural queers ought
to remain in the closet or escape to the city lest they too become victims of rural bigotry. (270)

So, a queer who feels the need to migrate to an urban area may yearn for the elitist activities rather than the simplistic activities of rural life or may suffer from the culture of fear that is evoked by the deaths of Teena and Shepard—yet another element may be included which is the well-known fact that many teens and young adults are still bullied about their sexualities and are seen as invisible in the rural landscape of heteronormativity, once again, relying on the thought that rural queers are merely in the wrong geographical location. Judith Halberstam (2005), author of *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, states, “many urban [queers] responded to the murder of Brandon [Teena] with a ‘what do you expect’ attitude, as if brutality was an inevitable consequence” (43) of trying to maintain a female to male identity in a secretive manner. Teena should have simply relocated to an urban landscape with no money, job, education, or help from family or friends. Teena should have magically appeared in New York City based on hope that the city would accept him, give him a job, and give him shelter. The attitude of the above quote is an elitist solution to a serious problem and is not valid. What needs to be recognized is the fact that there are queers everywhere. Being subjected to bullying and hate happens in any geographic location.

Large urban queer communities may draw a rural queer into urban migration. It is about an individual’s taste in activities and social groups and not always their sexual preference; however, the media suggests that it is typically the norm to migrate to an urban landscape to be a productive, positive, and content queer who is safe from harm. The media tells queers that the city is where they belong because life in rural areas is only for the heteronormative and the nuclear family. If rural queers do not migrate to an urban area, “rural queers are rendered
invisible because popular stereotypes perceive queer people as solely urban” (Jerke, 260). This perception is upheld in many media texts about queer life. For example, in the shooting script, MILK by Dustin Lance Black, this assumption is upheld when Harvey Milk (Sean Penn) speaks to an anonymous caller who is a young gay boy from Minnesota whose parents want to send him to a hospital to cure his homosexuality. Milk urges the young boy to leave by stating:

Get on a bus. Go to the next biggest city. New York, San Francisco, LA, or even Minneapolis. It doesn’t matter. Just leave. You won’t be alone. There are people out here just like you who will welcome you and love you. You’re not sick.

You’re not wrong. God does not hate you. Just leave. (35-36)

Considering MILK takes place during the 1970s where gay visibility was becoming accepted mostly in urban areas, dialogue as such promotes urban gay migration as the only safe haven for queer rural dwellers. It may not be understood by some audience members that though the film is a reimagined past of the 1970s and released in 2008, this idea of queer urban migration is still a necessity of present queers in rural communities. The dialogue relies on the myth that rural heteronormative dwellers are hostile and intolerant toward queer people as Kazyak states about the ‘oppressed rural gay’: “[rural gays] must flee to the city to come out, find a queer community, and become liberated [to avoid]…the rural heterosexual who is homophobic” (562). In the end, the young gay boy flees and becomes safely at home in Los Angeles, yet another example of necessary queer migration.

In Kevin Hetherington’s (2000) essay “Blank Figures in the Countryside,” he states that small town communities are close-knit and have issues with accepting an outsider or a new member of the community, referring to this outsider as the “folk devil”:
[T]he media turn particular groups whose activities they see as delinquent or deviant into folk devils or scapegoats in order to highlight and amplify anxieties about deviant behavior in society as a whole. This leads to the creation of what is called a moral panic. Once a moral panic has been created and focused around a particular folk devil, it becomes much easier for the government of the day to introduce legislation to deal with the ‘cause’ of the panic and to assuage outraged public opinion. (247)

The folk devil, moral panic, and anxiety of social situations in Heatherington’s description above is used in many rural queer character archetypes in film, either it be a film based on real-life events, a biopic, or a fictional representation of the rural queer. The main queer character is the folk devil at some point within the storyline. When there is a moral lesson learned in the storyline the queer character steps out of the folk devil archetype and the new antagonistic folk devil becomes those who were suffering the moral panic. Earlier, I mentioned a series of films that relied heavily on placing rural queers into a culture of fear by making their surroundings intolerable and threatening. However, these rural queers are only threatening within the rural landscape. When they are placed within the urban landscape, they leave this culture of fear and intolerance and become more comfortable with themselves (if they survive the rural landscape at all).

**The Rural Queer**

Inosanto created a teenage queer character (McClain) who comes of age and realization during the mid-1980s within a rural landscape. McClain must battle hate daily while dealing with his homosexuality and the AIDS crisis. To create a foundation of rurality, *The Sensei* was filmed mostly in Sterling, Colorado, a small town with a population of almost 15,000 and 128 miles
outside of Denver, Colorado. On film and through the filmic reality that Inosanto wants to project, she creates a semi-fictional town of Summerville, Colorado that radiates the epitome of isolation, much like how the audience witnesses McClain’s physical movements in the introductory scenes. When creating a reimagined past where the time and place is key to the overall narrative, it is important to project these images through filming location, costuming, set design, and props.

As McClain leaves his high school a montage of rural landscapes are used within the introductory scenes to project an image of small town life: a slow moving train passing farm silos and a water tower, a weathered and unkept warehouse, and a barber shop. McClain passes a group of young ladies whispering and gossiping about McClain with glares of disgust in their eyes as he passes a local newspaper machine. The camera zooms onto the displayed newspaper: *The Sterling Star Advocate* dated Wednesday, March 14, 1985 has a major headline that reads, “Growing AIDS Fear,” with a minor headline that reads, “The Gay Plague.” McClain reaches his destination—the Nakano Karate Academy. Inside there are several young men practicing karate moves on one another. McClain is approached by Gary (Michael Hake) and McClain offers his hand to greet Gary—Gary refuses McClain’s friendly gesture by stating that his hands are too sweaty. This action begins to set up how this rural community generally fears queerness and how they attach the gay male to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. McClain merely wants to check on his admissions application for the karate school—Gary skeptically, sternly, and adamantly tells McClain that the application cannot be found. Gary dismisses McClain with no intention of accepting his application—even if McClain were to fill out another application.

Inosanto uses techniques that give the audience clues to piece together McClain’s stability and reputation in this small town. These clues also become the foundation of three main
themes the film relies on: homosexuality, AIDS, and bullying (the film also relies on a
message about female warriors and the Eurasian race which will not be discussed in my in-depth
study). The audience is able to view the town during McClain’s short walk from school to the
karate school. McClain encounters several of the town’s people who deliberately avoid him
including Gary at the karate school. Gary’s hands were not too sweaty to greet McClain, Gary is
afraid to touch him. There are two discriminatory acts projected to the audience: the town’s
people do not like McClain because he is gay and the town’s people are assuming that because
McClain is gay that he is carrying the AIDS virus.

With Inosanto’s non-linear narrative writing style, it is important to place cues in the
beginning scenes of the film to give the audience a time and place to relate to: rural America
during the peak of the 1980s AIDS crisis. The narrative is told from McClain’s point-of-view
(POV) in 1993 using voice over and flashback techniques. McClain is telling a minister (Keith
David) how and why he became a warrior because McClain had just fought off three skinheads
(Shane Weingardt, Mark Anthony Griffin, and Ryan J. Parker) to protect the minister and his
daughter (Melissa Taylor) from a robbery and a potential rape.

The town church is the staple of bringing the fictional community together where the
protagonists and antagonists civilly appear. Other images used to project rurality within the film
are dirt roads, isolated bars, trailer parks, farmhouses, and barns. Inosanto describes the town as
“bleak” in her script (Inosanto, Scene 7)—meaning dreary, lacking charm, and inhospitable—
disregarding the stereotype of small town charm.

Rural America is stereotypically known as having populations that are closed-minded,
largely white, uneducated, and religious. It is assumed that non-white people and queers should
migrate to larger cities to fit in because they are not going to be happy or comfortable living in
rural areas. Halberstam describes this assumption as a fear that produces a culture of hate in rural areas:

Fear of the government, fear of the United Nations, and fear of Jews, blacks, and queers mark white rural masculinities in particular ways that can easily produce cultures of hate. In small towns where few people of color live, difference may be marked and remarked in relation to gender variance rather than racial diversity.

(30)

It is also assumed that if a queer lives in a rural area that he/she should keep his/her sexuality hidden—it is too dangerous to expose queerness to a rural community. It is assumed dangerous because of the notion and myth that uphold queer migration.

Furay writes about the qualities of rural living and does not mention violent behavior or hate—the most comparable is gossip; gossip destroys the validity of any truth and this destruction creates assumptions and assumptions turn into misunderstandings which very well may turn into hate or a misunderstanding of a particular lifestyle, sexuality, gender, or race. Furay mentions the cohesiveness of small town folks where everyone knows everyone and in binary opposition a city dweller does not have this type of social life living in larger metropolitan/urban areas and lives more anonymously:

The townsmen [rural dwellers] knew more people than did his city cousin; he knew more character types along with their variations of intellect, temperament and attainments; he knew them more intimately and in a greater variety of situations…the city was saturated with violence and crime; it was victimized by unscrupulous labor leaders with collectivistic attitudes; it was unwholesome for children; it bred loneliness and immorality; it was excessively competitive; its
population were suspect, being unduly numerous in olive-skinned newcomers.

(45-47)

The above statement is biased toward rural dwelling because it is made with a heteronormative view on living. Mythical images of the city and the country are highly mediated. Rural towns are seen as simplistic, friendly, and quaint and urban cities are seen as complex, unfriendly, and violent. Sheila Webb states in her essay, “A Pictorial Myth in the Pages of Life: Small-Town America as the Ideal Place,” that these “shared assumptions” about small town life are mediated and assumed due to what Americans see on television and the news (39). Rural life is simple and comfortable if one simply fits into the rural community. McClain does not fit into his rural community in The Sensei. The residents of Summerville reject him—or is it the fear of homosexuality and how it is connected to the AIDS crisis in the mid-1980s that escalates fear and hate in Summerville? Why does McClain not fit in and why does he have enemies?

Along with the introductory shot of the newspaper mentioned above, it is through the minister’s sermon that this fear is produced in an introductory scene where all the townspeople in Summerville attend church on Easter Sunday. Pastor George (Michael Auteri) begins his sermon as McClain enters the church with his mother, Annie (Gina Skalzi):

There has been a great wind of change around us. The Bible tells that in the end times we will see war, crime and disease. People fornicating and participating in lewd acts like homosexuality. People need to turn their lives around before it’s too late. Like the days of Sodom and Gomorrah, God has a way of making himself known. We are his children. Like a Father who loves his child, He will punish that child that does not bide by his word. You hear of AIDS in the papers, and on TV.
I believe AIDS is not just an accident, but God’s way of punishing those for their sins. It is a call for people to wake up… (Inosanto, Scene 28)

The myths evoked about gay men and AIDS creates a moral panic amongst the townspeople. This panic creates a hysterical McClain who is an innocent queer teenager in a rural town. Hate develops toward McClain because the townspeople believe that gay men are being punished for their sexuality through disease, thus, McClain becomes a target within this safe and stable community and his fears develop that reject the myth of rurality as peaceful and safe. McClain is dissociated with the townspeople and is seen as what Kevin Hetherington describes as the “folk devil.”

Inosanto’s introductory scenes of McClain’s journey from school to a karate school gives specific cues that reject myths of rural simplicity and upholds the reasoning a young gay person believes queer migration is a necessity. In McClain’s case, queer migration is not something necessary for he does learn to protect himself within the rural community and becomes accepted as a neighbor, which upholds what Kazyak’s states about rural living: McClain becomes known as a good person, forms ties to rural his community, and maintains the close-knit nature of rural life.
CHAPTER THREE: FEAR OF AIDS

This chapter focuses on how AIDS is a major storyline Inosanto implemented because people still must understand the disease. People have forgotten the untold tragic stories of the 1980s AIDS plague. Logically, some people understand that AIDS is no longer a gay male disease and that gay men are not responsible for bringing AIDS into human circulation; some people view AIDS as a gay male disease and still blame the gay male for its human circulation; and some people are so affected by the gay stigmatization of AIDS that they fear getting tested for AIDS as a heterosexual person because they cannot bare to be linked to the feeling of being disqualified as a human because they have a “gay” disease. It is common that people understand that AIDS was tied to the gay male community in the 1980s and 1990s, however, it is very rare that the common person is aware that AIDS was once named the Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) in the early 1980s. As time has helped people understand that AIDS is not solely a gay male disease, time has also forgotten many people who received a death sentence from the disease. Another issue with AIDS is the assumption that it only occurs in large urban areas and that rural areas are too confined, protected, and trusted that AIDS is practically nonexistent in the rural landscape. This chapter is devoted to how AIDS being labeled a gay disease in the 1980s has created unique fears in the queer communities and heterosexual communities, including past and present rural assumptions about homosexuality and AIDS.

As AIDS came into known existence in the 1980s, it was urban areas that received the most attention because this was where queers had migrated. Rural areas held the closeted queers, the sexless queers, or simply did not have queers so without queers there couldn’t be AIDS. This is a rather hypothetical statement; however, it is a fact that queers have been assumed to migrate to urban areas, leaving the rural behind—specifically in the early stages of the AIDS epidemic. It
is even stated by Mary L. Gray, author of *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (2009), that activist-scholars fled to urban areas to respond to the AIDS crisis:

…the need to respond to the tragedies of the AIDS pandemic through much of the late 1980s and 1990s further drove anthropologist and social workers to the urban epicenters of the AIDS crisis. These activist-scholars used their research to challenge the popular representations of HIV/AIDS as a “gay disease” while unpacking the ways institutionalized forms of discrimination and oppression in our national health care and public health systems intersected to accelerate the disease’s spread among gay- and bisexual-identifying men and men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay or bisexual. (9)

Granted, those scholars-activists who did flee to urban areas have paved the way for understanding that AIDS is not merely a gay disease and that it is not targeted solely as an urban disease but as a disease that occurs in rural communities as well. There are assumptions, however, that those with AIDS in rural communities brought the disease back with them from urban areas when victims of the disease had returned home to their rural communities to die surrounded by their family. In *AIDS in Rural Areas: Challenges to Providing Care* printed in 1988 by the National Association of Social Workers, Inc., Kathleen Rounds states there were many fears associated with AIDS in rural areas that resulted in a lack of treatment of AIDS, created a myth that AIDS victims were being punished by some God, and limited access to social services for victims of AIDS. These assumptions about AIDS in rural areas are tied to the gay male, who was seen in the media as the sole carrier of the disease. Rounds states, “…when a gay person who left a rural community is diagnosed with AIDS and returns home to be with his
family, the community and family must confront their feelings about homosexuality as they deal with their fears about AIDS” (257). There is another assumption that bisexual people are responsible for bringing AIDS into heterosexual lifestyles. In the psychological journal article, “An Update and Reflections on Fear of and Discrimination Against Bisexuals, Homosexuals, and Individuals with AIDS” (2011), Lester Wright, Jr., Anthony G. Bonita, and Patrick S. Mulick state:

The other striking [assumption] was that bisexual individuals were responsible for the AIDS virus spreading to the heterosexual community. It was suspected early on that bisexual individuals were engaging in sexual behavior with gay, lesbian and other bisexual individuals infected with HIV and then engaging in unprotected sexual behavior with their straight partners. What facilitated this belief about the spread of AIDS was another belief about bisexual individuals: that they are nonmonogamous. (459)

Inosanto represents this uneducated, 1980s fear of AIDS brilliantly within the narrative structure of *The Sensei*. The AIDS storyline involves a carrier of AIDS returning to family in a rural area, religious beliefs about AIDS being a punishment to gay men, and a small town community who does not quite understand AIDS and responds in fear—the unique difference in Inosanto’s narrative is the person with AIDS is a heterosexual female, thus destigmatizing the gay male in a 1980s storyline as a political statement that AIDS has always been way beyond a homosexual disease.

Due to the lack of representation of AIDS in rural areas, some to most residents in rural areas are behind in progressive thought on AIDS, homosexuality, and the disconnect between the two. It is the experience of absorbing culture that the rural resident lacks when it comes to queers
and AIDS; though the cultural divide is slowly closing it has been researched that this lack of exposure to rural residents does affect how this cultural divide exists:

A multivariate research approach established that individuals who had personal contact with someone who is homosexual or someone who is living with HIV/AIDS showed lower levels of homophobia and fear of AIDS [Walch et al., 2010]. This finding supports the contact hypothesis [Allport, 1954] that suggests that people from differing groups will show decreased negativity if they are exposed to and interact with one another. (Wright et al., 460)

Due to the many variables from the 1980s and 1990s, residents in rural areas were not exposed to AIDS in a face-to-face manner as those in urban areas. There was not a plethora of AIDS education in rural areas during these two decades, and homosexuality was still swept under the rug in most rural areas until the positive images of queerness reached network television and Internet search engine results toward the turn of the 20th century. Rural areas now see evil, hear evil, and speak evil because TV and the Internet told them they could.

It is necessary to break down The Sensei scene by scene to understand how Inosanto views her reimagined past, empathizing toward small town gay males who were subjected to AIDS discrimination during the 1980s and 1990s. In “AIDS and New Queer Cinema,” Monica B. Pearl explains how the AIDS epidemic is closely related to New Queer Cinema (NQC); however, this relationship does not stigmatize the gay male as being a grotesque figure from the AIDS epidemic. Pearl states, “New Queer Cinema is less interested in the story—in something that renders the virus coherent—than in something that authentically represents the experience of living with the virus” (33) and surviving. Though Karen dies from AIDS in the end and McClain is a gay male left living in The Sensei, Karen’s death pays homage to gay men dying of AIDS
who were wrongfully treated in their small towns, dying in their childhood beds thinking that this was a punishment from some God. Roger Hallas, author of *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image* (2009) describes how gay men have been demonized in the media due their connection with AIDS:

> Despite their systematic marginalization by media institutions and their representational practices, gay cultural producers have consistently turned to the material archive of popular culture in search of an affective and aesthetic vocabulary for articulating and sharing lived experience. Their attitude is, however, often inscribed by ambivalence about the possible toxicity of the culture they appropriate. Gay skepticism toward popular culture increased during the first decade of the AIDS epidemic when the dominant media, particularly network television and the popular press, consistently pathologized and demonized gay men. But alongside works explicitly contesting the dominant representation of AIDS...one may also find a significant number of experimental films and videos that approach the material archive of popular culture as a rich source of affectively charged images. (186)

The queer body is a struggling body. *The Sensei* gives the queer body a place to belong in a rural culture that is unforgiving and judgmental toward deviant sexual acts, sodomy for example, and the repercussions from those acts in the end—for it was not deviant sexual acts that caused Karen to get AIDS. It is assumed by the audience’s imagination that Karen became infected with HIV through sexual acts promoted by religion as heterosexual sex in the manner of procreation, though no child was produced. AIDS is a well-known disease in the present-day—it is not curable but it is now treatable and individuals who live with this disease now look forward to a
longer, more fulfilling life—“[t]he fear of HIV/AIDS is still present today, but it seems to have less association with gays and lesbians than it did in the 1980s” (Wright et al., 460). It is still important to destigmatize the gay male from AIDS because in order to reach any type of sexual identity equality, the stigmatization of AIDS against gay men inhibits or slows down the fight/progress of gender and sexual equality. Gay men have been lumped into having a lack of ethics due to this stigmatization, basically being compared to deviant sex offenders, sex addicts, street hookers, and intravenous drug users. Perfectly moral and ethical gay men have been grouped with those groups of unfortunate people who have resorted to deviant abnormal behavior to survive and/or support habitual addictive behavior. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered groups have already fought for the right to not be considered abnormal, hence, the discontinuance of listing homosexuality on the American Psychological Association’s list of abnormal mental illnesses in 1973.

The first assumption of AIDS that is evoked on the screen in The Sensei is when McClain is walking through town after school. During scene 7 at the beginning of the film, there is a close-up of a newspaper dated in 1985 with a bold headline stating: “GROWING AIDS FEAR: THE GAY PLAGUE.” This symbol is used to clue in the audience that AIDS will be a large part of the narrative and the clue is misleading in the fact that it is not a gay man that will hold the disease.

In scene 10, McClain enters a martial arts school to check on several applications that he has submitted. Cues are used in the interaction of the martial arts teacher and McClain to signify that McClain is not a wanted student at the dojo. The ultimate signifier that the townspeople fear McClain either because of a fear of AIDS or a fear of homosexuality is represented when the dojo instructor refuses McClain’s handshake as a friendly, welcoming gesture. This lack of
handshake signifies hate, fear, and discomfort, yet the audience does not quite know exactly why this interaction is so uncomfortable for both characters.

In a pivotal scene (scene 28) in the small town’s church, it is Easter Sunday; Karen sees McClain for the first time and witnesses the town’s disdain and the upheld notion that queers are rendered invisible in rural areas. Previous to this scene, Karen has just come back to her hometown after being gone for a long period of time. Unknown to the real-time audience and any film-time character, Karen has returned home to die from AIDS. At the church the Beard brothers introduce their hatred toward McClain, and the townspeople’s lack of knowledge about homosexuality and AIDS guides the uncomfortable scene. The entire scene reflects the assumption that gay men harbor HIV. McClain is treated as an other, and “[i]n most rural communities, otherness includes being gay. To avoid stigma, rural gays must assume low visibility, avoid publicly declaring their sexual orientation” (Rounds, 257). McClain did not follow this gay credo and is relentlessly judged and harassed in the better half of the film. Furthermore, the pastor of the church begins a sermon that provokes hate and misunderstanding toward homosexuality and AIDS by using phrases like: “…lewd acts of homosexuality…” and “I believe that AIDS is not just an accident, but God’s way of punishing those for their sins,” while the Beard brothers scowl at McClain. The pastor’s speech is upheld with the 1980s notion that “[g]ay persons with AIDS who return to rural at a time of particular vulnerability to self-blame often confront the belief of many in the community that ‘AIDS is God’s punishment for your sins’” (Rounds, 259); Inosanto purposely defies this notion through her creation of Karen—a beautiful, strong, athletic, smart, heterosexual female holding the AIDS virus within.

AIDS is not mentioned again until much later in the film during scene 71. During the gap of AIDS narrative, McClain is severely beaten, hospitalized, and undergoes training with Karen
to learn how to protect himself. McClain is a student and Karen is the Sensei and it is unknown to the audience and the film’s reality that Karen is HIV positive; Karen is the only character who knows at this point in film reality. AIDS is brought back up after Karen’s brother (Simon) finds out that Karen has been training McClain. Simon is worried about the family dojo business and their brother’s (Peter) work at the church youth ministry. Simon’s dialogue reflects anger that is misdirected with assumed stereotypes of the 1980s about gay men and AIDS: “He’s gay! This is a small town Karen!” … “This could hurt your youth ministry at the church [Peter],” and Simon blames any type of wrong doing on Karen’s part because of “the AIDS thing that’s going on out there.” At this point in the film’s reality, Karen has no choice but to leave the conversation. She has been questioned by Simon about her return and exits the scene crying.

The inciting incident that forces Karen to tell her family and McClain about her HIV status is mentioned in the previous chapter. It occurs during scene 81 after Karen rescues McClain from a violent attack. Karen fears that she will infect McClain because they are both bleeding after the battle. McClain becomes confused because he assumes that Karen is afraid of him. It is at the hospital when Karen decides to tell McClain and her family. At this point in the film, the storyline relies heavily on an AIDS motif ultimately leading up to Karen’s death.

Karen’s family reacts with passionate sadness and McClain begins to understand that he will soon lose his Sensei and how powerful and influential everything she has taught him actually is. Karen did not just teach McClain to defend himself, she taught him that assumption lead to very bad decisions and assumptions will destroy another person’s honest world. Not only are lessons of assumptions taught to the characters in the film, this is reflected into the audience watching the film—a moral lesson is taught and AIDS was the vehicle used to represent how people ruin honest humans by relying on half-truths, myths, and assumptive gossip to define
them—and gossip is a key trait of small town life as mentioned in Chapter Two, *Fear of the Town*.

A series of flash back scenes are used for Karen to tell her story about Mark dying from AIDS and her journey that brought her back home to die in peace with her family. Inosanto wrote the character, Mark, to be homophobic and masculine so she can further destroy the assumption that AIDS is only a gay man’s disease. In scene 92, Mark has come to the conclusion that he must tell his fiancée, Karen, that he has just been diagnosed with AIDS. Mark begins by confirming his masculinity, “I swear I’m no fag…you gotta know this…I’m no homo…” After Mark rampages throughout the locker room, punching lockers, destroying the room every way possible, he confesses, “The tests show I got AIDS Karen.” It is never stated in the film or the script how Mark was infected with AIDS. It is presented to be an occupational mishap. He may have gotten it from a blood transfusion or through the transfer of blood from his career as a boxer.

After the town becomes aware that Karen holds the HIV virus and is dying of AIDS, Karen’s family becomes a target of hate. The family dojo becomes vandalized, Peter loses his youth ministry, and the family is threatened to leave the town. Through a series of trials and tribulations the dojo is remodeled and the townspeople still remain divided; however, Simon states in scene 121, “We lost some people,” and the patriarch of the family states, “and ironically we have gained some people.” In the end of *The Sensei*, Karen passes away from AIDS after being awarded her black belt, McClain becomes accepted by most of the townspeople, and the Beard brothers continue life behind bars.

Inosanto includes scenes that represent the effects AIDS in the 1980s had on funeral, burial and medical treatment in rural areas. These sub-narratives reflect the AIDS cultural divide
of the 1980s. It was difficult for victims of AIDS to find and receive proper treatment in rural areas and during the beginning of the AIDS plague in the 1980s the lack of understanding about the disease made it very difficult to make burial arrangements for the deceased AIDS victim. Inosanto included scenes where it was difficult for her to find proper burial arrangements for Mark in Denver, Colorado and scenes where Karen’s family resorted to marijuana to help Karen relieve the suffering of her pain from dying of AIDS because of the lack of treatments in rural areas in the 1980s.

In 1988, Rounds stated the geography of an isolated rural area “affects care of persons with AIDS, limits access to social and health services for most rural residents, [and]…some community residents believed that their risk of infection was increased by receiving care from individuals or agencies that provided care to persons with AIDS” (257, 259). In 2011, Bud W. Jerke states in the *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* that, “[a]spects of rural life that make HIV/AIDS uniquely challenging in rural areas include: geographic isolation, few specialists, lack of medical support services, concerns about confidentiality, stigma, and poor economic conditions” (308). Two academic articles, written by two scholars, with 23 years difference in publication dates state the exact same conclusions on AIDS in rural areas. AIDS is still a problem and homophobia is not necessarily decreasing according to a quote from 2008 included in Lester W. Wright, Jr.’s (et al.) psychological study update in 2011:

…current research samples have shown an increase in homophobia when compared to 20 years ago [Long & Millsap, 2008], and linkage studies have shown that those who are out of the closet as GLBT, who are open about their sexuality and who are connected to GLBT groups or organizations increase their
risk for being targets of antigay discrimination such as physical assault and property damage [Waldner & Berg, 2008]. (463)

We have come a long way from the 1980s but the fact of the matter is there are still cultural misunderstandings about homosexuality and AIDS apparent in the U.S. today. It is common for people to realize AIDS and homosexuality exist but it is most important for people to understand the difference between AIDS and homosexuality, disconnect it from any given sexuality, and accept it as a blood borne exchange between two people regardless of sexuality, age, race, and habitual behavior.

In conclusion, the connection of AIDS to the queer male body has created an assumption about AIDS in general that is very dangerous to the human existence. AIDS is not discussed or represented in mediated form as often as it was in the 1990s and earlier part of the 2000s. There rarely are representations of AIDS on popular network television shows and mainstream distributed films. Consumers of media must seek out these representations rather than being easily subjected to them. It is not my intention to state that the gay male should be reconnected with AIDS; it is my intent to state that more mediated representations of AIDS in a positive manner should be implemented into popular media forms. Educational issues on avoiding and protecting oneself from the disease, development of the ideas that AIDS is now a livable disease but still a difficult and expensive disease to live with, more storylines with beautiful male and female heterosexual partners who live with the disease together in harmony showing the struggles they encounter, and a representation of queer rural life because it does indeed exist. In all, there should not be a purposeful avoidance of creating mediated images of queer men struggling and dealing with AIDS in a positive manner, but only representing these men in prison, the discothèque, and as lonely sexless creatures could change.
CONCLUSION: FEAR OF THE Locker ROOM

Locker rooms are scary and this is where the themes previously discussed become a personal agenda. Such places as the locker room, high school hallways, and the school bus can be as frightening as coming out of the closet to people who actually love you, avoiding the AIDS epidemic, and being scared to be who you are where you live—the overall theme that wraps up The Sensei is discussing the bullying issues that are slowly killing off our American youth. I chose to use The Sensei to discuss issues in queer culture based on one major scene: the locker room scene where McClain is severely beaten after gym class and then dragged into the gym showers to be sodomized with a wooden stick. When I first witnessed that scene, I related to it immediately. I felt that same pain that was being projected onto the screen, although I was not physically beaten—I decoded the severe beating into how it felt coming of age in a town filled with hateful words being thrown at me every day during school and later in my young adult life at work. It was exhausting.

Concluding Goals

Inosanto included themes on cultural landscapes, AIDS, and bullying in The Sensei and I have a great deal of intellectual investment involved with each of these issues. These are three issues that are directly related to my queer life. I’ve always tried to escape to an urban landscape out of the assumption that it would be a happier place to be. I’ve always connected AIDS to the queer male because of how I was raised and what I witnessed coming of age in the 1980s into the early 1990s. I honestly cannot tell you where I have not witnessed or experienced some type of bullying in my life—even queers bully queers.

I had various thought-evoking goals for each chapter I implemented resulting from my research. First, my goal was to describe how hybrid film genres evolve and how using techniques
that involve pastiche and history forms an imaginary, non-fantastical socio-political past. This is formed by the means of already having gained knowledge of important past historical events regardless of the decade and implementing these events into a fictional narrative that pays homage to important events (or tragedies) and at the same time includes a character-driven narrative that is overlooked within those particular past events.

Second, I thought it was important to discuss the assumptions of queer migration and forming an unbiased understanding that migration is for the good of the person and the choice of the person regardless of sexuality. It was also important to discuss the fact that it is assumed that queers should leave small towns and migrate to more “accepting” and “liberal” urban landscapes. It must be known that queers do exist in harmony and happiness in rural landscapes and this knowledge of fact is a vehicle for rural areas to implement more local support networks for sexual identity issues within their public school systems and local government-funded programs. Merely assuming if someone is queer in a rural area the queer should not stay there is discriminatory and not natural. Queer migration is an assumption that is evoked by the media—it is rare that a produced media text will demonstrate a positive queer image in a rural location because it is assumed that only violent, fearful things happen to queers in rural areas. I hope that in the future there will be more positive portrayals of rural queers who are healthy, viable, intelligent, and non-threatened members of small town communities without the need to fear for their safety or hide from their true sexuality. I feel that Inosanto did an excellent job on showing both sides of rural fear and acceptance, though McClain was only accepted after he could physically defend himself—but marital arts is a balance of physical strength and mental strength and McClain achieved both goals—to protect himself from hate and self-hate.
Third, it is always important to discuss AIDS. The goals in discussing representation of AIDS was to destigmatize the gay male from the disease. It is important for two gay men to discuss AIDS and HIV openly with one another while in an intimate relationship just as it is important for a heterosexual couple to do the same. It is necessary to point out that AIDS is still an invisible issue in some rural communities. One will find AIDS resource centers in most urban landscapes but it is a rare institution to find in rural towns or larger rural counties. AIDS does spread and exist in rural towns and if there is an assumption that this disease does not occur as easily in a rural area then it will begin to occur more rapidly and dangerously. Inosanto worked this issue in very well into her narrative structure by making it the overall inciting incident in The Sensei—an incident that makes the viewer second guess a developed main character’s ideology for a profound end result—an athletic heterosexual female body disguised with AIDS.

Lastly, Inosanto implemented bullying into her storyline to evoke thought on all fears about sexuality, difference, and AIDS. Those who bully others are typically the type who have an internal loathing, a streak of hate in their bloodline, where displaced anger and violence is the end result. Bullying has become an umbrella term for harmful discrimination and inequality within the last few years with several prominent campaigns becoming a huge success with online trending and viral statuses on YouTube and Facebook. Resources are available to millions of young people and adults who have been victimized through bullying by completing an online search. Perhaps watching an “It Gets Better” (www.itgetsbetter.org) video by a celebrity or a general citizen will help a young girl deal with her weight issues or a young boy can relate to his troubles about having effeminate qualities. There are other resources for educators and community leaders to use to develop programs that specifically deal with bullying in the public sector of education and workplace environments. The Trevor Project (www.thetrevorproject.org)
The documentary film, *Bully* (Lee Hirsch, 2011), has an accompanying workbook to implement lesson plans on bullying and intolerance into the classroom available on their website (www.thebullyproject.com). My personal passion to combat bullying appeared on a CNN iReport blog on October 20, 2010 titled, “Taking a stand for gay teens in the #BeAHeroChallenge” where I was interviewed by Daphne Sashin about how I took a stand in the classroom against bullying by lecturing about the heroic acts of Harvey Milk instead of discussing the scheduled topics of Super Man or Harry Potter as heroes.

**Rural Hysteria**

The underlying theme throughout the previous chapters results in *rural hysteria*. *Rural hysteria* is a term I personally coined to describe the several issues that small town queers deal with in their everyday lives. Rural hysteria may occur in the attitudes of young queers due to bullying, assumptions about queer migration, and feelings of isolation. In this age of technology there is a plethora of information for young people who question their sexual identity online; however, becoming a digital queer citizen lacks the human need for face-to-face interaction, love, sexual contact, and other intimacies. Online communication through forums targeted to queer members of society also epitomizes the urban landscape. Most fruitful queer social sites have an urban-based audience being mostly populated with queer identities in larger urban areas. This results in a form of rural hysteria where a young queer person’s ultimate goal in their young life is to leave the small town. This goal overshadows normal youth goals—excelling in school, participating in athletics, preparing for college, and attendance in various social events that cater to the heteronormative, such as prom, homecoming dances, dating, and courting. This may lead
the young queer to only fantasize about escapism and may lead to performing only as a digital citizen online—creating such terms as digital courting, digital dating, and digital fucking. In turn, this may result in a young queer becoming less attached to reality and mostly attached to the digital world—the second life—and cause issues in their adult lives.

We live in a day and age where serodiscordant couples exists, where nonurban queer life takes place online and face-to-face harmoniously, and where bullying has finally been addressed as a national U.S. problem in our education and workplace institutions. It was my goal to further make these issues known and archived in my academic career. Onward.
WORKS CITED


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