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Seeing is Believing: Observing Trans Spirituality Through The Smith-Waite Tarot

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Seeing is Believing:

Observing Trans Spirituality
Through The Smith-Waite Tarot

Phoebe Santalla





KNIGHT of PENTACLES

DEATH.

VIII

STRENGTH.

THE MAGICIAN.

PAGE of CUPS.

JUDGEMENT

THE LOVERS.

THE WORLD.

ACE of WANDS.

THE CH...

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XI

JU

WANDS.

VII

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Seeing is Believing:

Observing Trans Spirituality Through The Smith-Waite Tarot

by Phoebe Santalla

In 1909 the Rider Company published the Smith-Waite Tarot deck which featured 78 illustrations by Pamela Colman Smith. With heavy use of appropriated, and often ambiguous, symbology, the Smith-Waite deck became a meditation tool for realizing personal alternate realities. By observing the history of the deck, understanding Smith's approach to her illustrations, and retracing the counterculture occult explosion in the 1970's, this essay argues that the Smith-Waite deck is an object that reflects the queered body and self. The modern trans-contentious western political climate creates an environment that obscures the fact that transgender people exist beyond the medicalization of their bodies. To combat this, there is a need to develop ways to visualize and imagine transness without requiring direct witness of the trans body. Rather than solely focusing on observing transgender existence as a tangible form in visual culture, occult symbology can be used to imagine the interior experience of the transgender soul. The symbology contained within the illustrations of the Smith-Waite Tarot provide a framework to create a visual language of trans spiritual culture. These tarot cards were created and are still used as tools to imagine alternative worlds. Noting the ambiguity and oversaturation of symbology on the cards, a method of visual analysis can be proposed for imagining the trans emotional and spiritual self. By establishing the presence of the transgender soul in visual culture, a mode of protection from erasure is offered to genderqueer people.

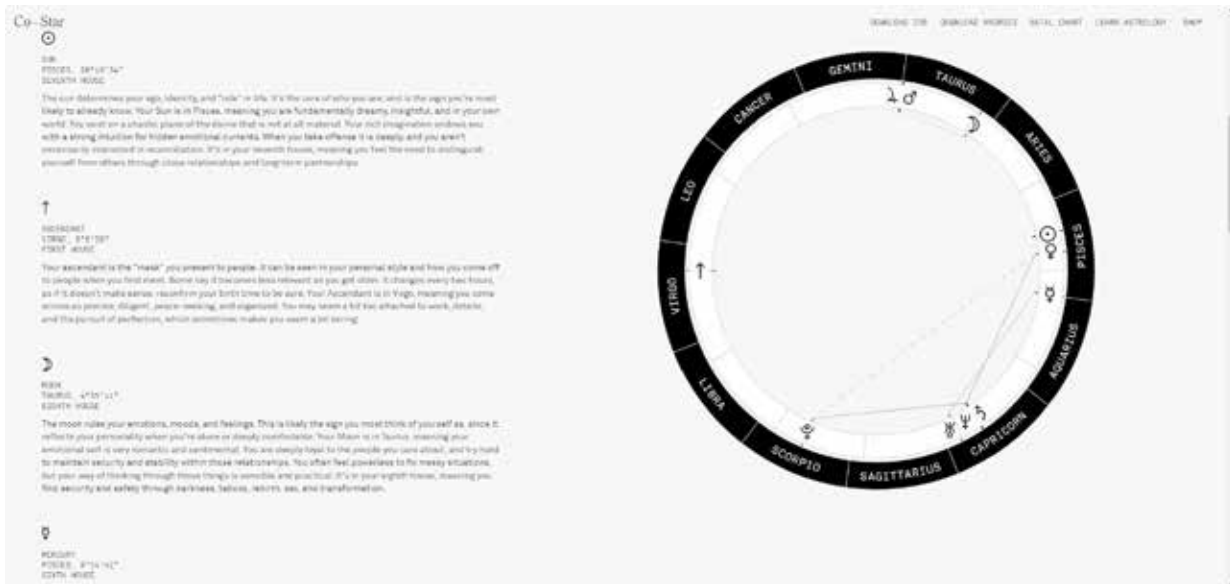
Queered Spirituality

During my youth, I was a devout Christian. Religion and faith (and the turmoil created by existing as a yet-to-be-out transgender woman in this space) were staples of my character. As time went on, I had a loss of faith in the church as an institution, but I held on to my spirituality.

As I began to take apart and rebuild my gender identity, I had a return to faith, but this time I specifically looked for ways to connect with my spirit outside of Christian teachings. I needed a way to imagine my becoming, but I had no model for what my newly discovered trans life could look like. There was no social model to show me *how* to exist. Tarot became the tool that I used to ponder myself and my place in the world.

A simple deck of cards that offered a faux-outsider perspective helped me explore what it means to be genderqueer, and what it looks like to show up as genderqueer in society and begin to construct a new inclusive idea of morality. I say "faux-outsider" because the tarot cards are just objects, the interpretations and feelings from looking at the images were my reactions and thoughts. The rigid models of gender I had witnessed before my exploration of gender were barriers to conjuring up ideas of who I could become. Tarot acted as a third-party perspective, offering prompts to explore my identity. The tarot is a passive object that I used to disorient and reorient myself.

I believe deconstructing gender (and any bias for that matter) is a personal spiritual act. The process requires



Above: Charting out the placement of the planets at your time of birth supposedly reveals depths of someone’s personality that only the universe knows. Each planetary position aligns to a circular chart divided into twelve sections called houses, and each house is assigned a part of a person’s life. For example, the first house deals with the self, the fourth with the home, and the seventh with your relationships. It’s a complex way to justify making knee-jerk judgements about people who are Geminis.

Screenshot of the Co – Star Website, “Co – Star: Hyper–Personalized, Real-Time Horoscopes,” Co – Star Astrology, accessed March 18, 2024

one to humble oneself to a greater experience of truth beyond what one knows. Part of this disassembly involves a certain faith that even when the learning is difficult, the hardship serves a higher personal and social good. It asks one to lay down their defenses and choose care and growth instead.

In my personal observations, the experience of being transgender carries a profound spiritual dimension.

It is hard to interact with twenty-first-century trans culture without acknowledging the intertwining pseudo-spiritual practices and New Age belief influences like meditation, astrology, and yoga. If one were to ask a queer person their “Big 3,” they will, at the very least, understand what is being asked of them, but may be able to provide their entire birth chart.¹ This illustrates

that to be transgender is to pursue a fulfilled emotional-spiritual self (a “soul” it could be called) along with a physical appearance that reflects this internal state. The body as an inhabited object points to a secret knowledge of self. One could argue that the transgender body is an esoteric form. Meaning, the trans body points towards the hidden truth of the trans soul.

I must admit that as a genderqueer trans-feminine person, part of my process for researching this paper included the ritual of shuffling the very deck of tarot cards that I’m about to analyze. It is a meditative process that begins with shuffling and reflecting on my goals for the day, wondering what snags I may get caught on, and contemplating where I should keep my mind focused. I then pull three cards from the face-down deck and reveal them side by side to see what insights I can obtain from the illustrated symbols in front of me. It’s a quiet and thoughtful process that, if I’m honest with myself, has much less to do with the cards than it does with me trying to find some inner peace in a world that I feel like is collapsing. It is my form of meditation. It’s my form of prayer.

The facsimile of the Smith-Waite deck is hardly a magical thing. There are no hints of future fortunes, no

1 “Big 3” refers to three main reference points of a person’s astrological signs. Beyond what most people know as their “zodiac sign” exists a chart that plots out where every planet was in the sky at the moment of one’s birth. The big three define the major aspects of a person’s personality and refer to the placement of the sun, the moon, and the astrological sign that was rising on the eastern horizon at your time of birth. While you can buy into the significance of this or not, it is a well-known practice among us queer folk.



Above:

This morning's spread of cards: the four of cups, The Devil, and The Page of Pentacles. According to the first card I need to be aware of my emotional health and what I'm finding draining. The Devil tells me to watch out for the things I find oppressive and the manipulative forces in the world, and the page asks me to let myself be fascinated with how things become tangible. Is it magic that the random draw accurately reflects what I'm trying to accomplish in this essay? Am I projecting? Either way, I don't think it matters, they have me meditating about the craft of this argument.

Pamela Colman Smith, Cards from the Smith-Waite Tarot, 1909, 2.75 in x 4.75 in, Photo of a facsimile of the original Waite Smith tarot deck from the author's private collection.

**Above:**

If there is any sort of mystical property that I had to assign to this stack of cards, I would say it's possibility. It may be far fetched to think that in the time it took me to shuffle these cards and place them facedown that they've become anything other than the tarot cards I was looking at, but I've done the work to disassemble my own concept of self enough times to understand that everything is a little less permanent than we all would like to think.

Pamela Colman Smith, *Cards from the Waite Smith Tarot*, 1909, 2.75 x 4.75 in, Photo of a facsimile of the original Waite Smith tarot deck from the author's private collection.

connections to supernatural powers, and no forces of divination, or soothsaying here. They are just 78 printed illustrations mass-produced on playing card stock. Sitting face down on the table they could just as easily be a deck of oversized playing cards. The only part visible of the cards is the repeating, tan, crackle-like pattern on the back peeking out around the misaligned edges. The anonymity of a deck of face-down cards creates some mystery. There is a tension between the known and unknown created by an undrawn card; a Schrodinger's Cat of possibilities is contained in its hidden faces. Is this even a tarot deck? How do I know until it affirms itself to me?

I wonder if this is what initially drew me to looking at the tarot. As a trans-feminine genderqueer person

who, from a certain distance, "passes"² for a cisgender woman, I feel a sense of kinship with the deck's anonymity. The potential to be both interpreted and misinterpreted at the same time is familiar to my experience. Being visually assessed, judged at a glance, and then deemed worthy or not, is a daily routine to me. The complex nuances of my gender mirror the simple façade provided by the body of tarot cards. Before I inform someone, they are only able to make assumptions about who I am and how I identify.

Unlike sexuality, gender identity happens in a public space. One's gender is a private truth that exists with them internally, but also a public spectacle that externally exists in a social space. Gender is a performance that bridges (or intentionally obscures) the gap between internal and external. As human beings our bodies move through the tangible world, interacting with other bodies and objects. Visualizing and interpreting the symbolism of the body-object³ is just as important to gender as it is to tarot.

Until one pulls apart and witnesses the deck card by card, the contents can only be speculated. This action

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- 2 "Passing" as a trans person means that you get interpreted by those who don't know you are cisgender. For example, I pass visually as a cisgender woman the majority of the time, but my speaking voice is a little too deep. This usually makes people's interpretations of me move from androgynously feminine to flamboyantly masculine. At the point they stop reading me as a cisgender woman, I stop "passing". This is not an experience exclusive to trans identities; biracial people and other lighter-skinned ethnicities can experience this when they can be interpreted as white. Passing is a self-destructive goal that requires you to hide your identity, but it does offer security in a lot of cases. It's both a thing that exists because of how we've built a white cisgender-based society and a very destructive ideal that I've seen cause mental distress and negatively impact people's self-worth.
 - 3 By "body-object" I mean the physical vessel of a thing that exists in the world and carries an idea or meaning to be communicated. At points throughout this essay, I want to reflect on the body in comparison to the object of tarot cards. This comparison is to recognize the physicality of having a form, whether that is a human body or a deck of cards, it is not to diminish the significance of personhood. The last thing that I want to do is objectify trans bodies. My goal is to show the significance of how the relationship between the intangibility of consciousness/ideas and the tangibility of the body/object can mirror the experiences of transgender people. I am reflecting and expanding on W.J.T. Mitchell's "pictorial turn" by pointing at the significance of his thoughts about idea-things.

of discovery through disassembly, separating the cards by drawing and deciphering the symbols on them, is a personal transformative act. The only way to access the cards' illustrations is to move them through a transition state. The cards need to be pulled, flipped, and rearranged to expose their hidden identities. It's possible to know what the Smith-Waite deck *should* contain according to what one knows about the tarot deck. It is just "[a] pack of 78 cards full of symbols."⁴ However, until the desire to draw the cards is acted out and one transforms the orientation of the object, they remain undiscovered and unseen.

"Whatever knowledge, whatever secrets, whatever wisdom the tarot holds, we give to it... And that's a kind of magic indeed."⁵ The physical object of tarot cards becomes a symbolic extension of one's body and mind. Although this sounds like it's bordering the metaphysical, it is in truth about the very mundane process of interpreting images into ideas. The action of drawing a tarot card begins with a desire and will to move the cards in one's mind. The will moves one's body to interact with the "body" of the cards, and an image, once hidden, is revealed as a card is flipped over. The symbols and illustrations on the cards are witnessed, then their meanings are interpreted in one's mind. It's a circular experience of external performance and internal discovery.

The modern use of tarot asks people to look at the cards as mirrors of the self, the 78 cards are 78 reflections of concepts contained in a single person. If I am to entertain W. J. T. Mitchell's "What Do Pictures *Really* Want", and ask what these illustrated cards desire, I would argue that because of their open-ended and personally symbolic nature, tarot cards turn this question back around toward the viewer.⁶ Pamela Colman Smith's

illustrations in the Smith-Waite Tarot want to be seen beyond their image. The deck desires to have its symbolism interpreted into meaning by their audience. Unlike many of the tarot decks before it, the Smith-Waite has illustrated scenes for each card rather than the "pips" featured on most playing cards.⁷ This accomplishes a counter-intuitive level of ambiguity.

The cards are illustrated blank canvases specifically designed to be open-ended. They turn the question of "What does this picture want?" inside out and in return ask, "What does the viewer want this picture to want?". Rachel Pollack attributes the inverting of this question to a "blankness" that is featured, and sometimes considered a weakness, in the faces of Smith's art. Pollack describes that "multiple points of view [are] possible due to the lack of clear emotion in the face..."⁸ The meaning of the image is the interpreted feeling of the card's ambiguity by the viewer.

4 Mary K. Greer, Rachel Pollack, and Robert A. Gilbert, *The Tarot of A. E. Waite and P. Colman Smith*, ed. Johannes Fiebig (Cologne: Taschen, 2023), 13. The exact division of these 78 cards is as follows: 22 major arcana cards, 4 suits of 14 cards divided into wands, pentacles, swords, and cups. Each suit has ten numerical cards and four court cards composed of page, knight, queen, and king. This is not the only structure to tarot decks, but variations using the Smith-Waite deck are far and above the most common.

5 Charlie Claire Burgess, "No Ordinary Deck: What It Is, What It's Not., and What's In It," in *Radical Tarot*, 1st ed. (Carlsbad, California: Hay House, 2023), 16.

6 W. J. T. Mitchell, "What Do Pictures 'Really' Want," *October* 77 (1996): 71–82, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778960>.

7 Pips are the name given to the repeating symbols used to graphically show the quantity of a given card. For example, the six of diamonds on a standard set of Bicycle playing cards have six red diamond "pips" in the middle of the card. Several tarot decks have this same graphic language where a card like the five of wands is represented by five "pips" of a single wand graphic featured in the center of the card.

8 Rachel Pollack, "The Magic Mirrors: Hidden Wonders of the World's Most Popular Tarot," in *The Tarot of A. E. Waite and P. Colman Smith*, ed. Johannes Fiebig (Cologne: Taschen, 2023), 47. Pollack explores the "blankness" in Smith's illustrated faces by comparing The High Priestess and The Magician. She argues that while both illustrations present strong figures, there is a certain ambiguity as to what they could be thinking. The ambiguity leaves room for multiple points of view.

All cards hold moments of growth and revelation, leading you to not only discover yourself, but look beyond – to the world around you and how you fit in. All major arcana cards, or the 22 most recognizable named ones, represent a stage of the journey. At the start of his journey, the Fool encounters the Magician and High Priestess, the two forces that make up the world. The Magician is the more “masculine” power that stands for conscious awareness. The High Priestess is the more “feminine” power that represents the mysterious unconscious, or our unrealized potential. Both are necessary to achieve balance, to create a whole person, a full journey.

—Aarohi Sheth, 2023

The Embattled Trans Spirit

I have a consistent fear of the loss of the transgender spirit. By “spirit” I mean the internal complex experiences and contradictions of being a human beyond the body. All people have the capacity for emotions, interpretations, and thoughts on who they are and how they engage with the world. Individuals have a concept of themselves that they know more intimately than anyone else ever could. The body is certainly important and offers a way to contain our internal truths. However, to get stuck on the physical form of an individual and disregard the imagination of self beyond the object of the body, is a disservice to the complexity of what it means to be human. The body and mind exist cooperatively, but they are distinct parts of one’s whole being.

It is easy in this trans-contentious Western political climate to forget that transgender people exist beyond the medicalization of their bodies.⁹ Conservative legislators are hyperfocused on eliminating representations of transgender people, made evident by the wave of laws banning genderqueer books and the push to eliminate gender-affirming healthcare. Unfortunately, this attack on trans bodies has dominated the public conversation of genderqueerness and the rhetoric defending against it often pushes the nuance of the trans experience aside. On one hand, there is a conservative push to visually

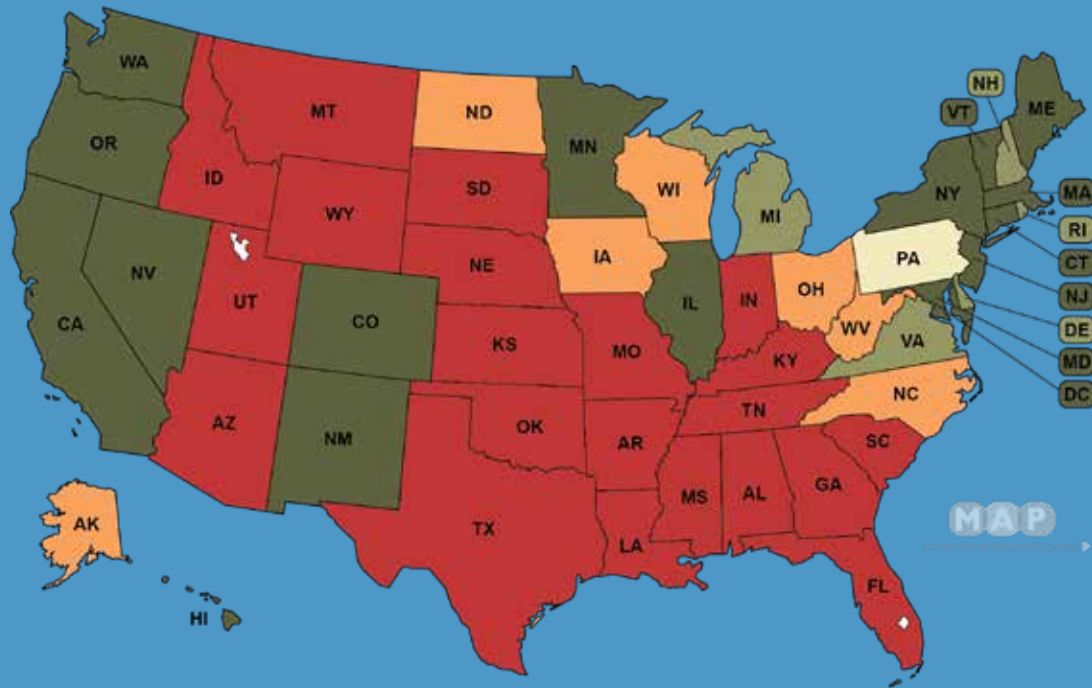
eliminate trans people from the American sightline, and on the other hand, there is a misguided neo-liberal quasi-eugenics informed pursuit of transgender people *requiring* medicalization to exist.

I worry that in the effort to defend the right to gender-affirming medical care, trans people will be forced to assimilate into a Western-cisgender-white imagined way of being. I worry that to get the recognition and care that transgender people need, the narrative of being “born in the wrong body” and being the “opposite gender before even knowing how to speak” will be forced onto every trans person’s narrative. I fear for the loss of nuance of transgender experiences. Those who don’t neatly fit into this narrative trope will be further excommunicated from the community of trans people who align with gender binary ideals.¹⁰

To be transgender is to navigate an internally private experience of self while negotiating the public reception of one’s bodily presentation. The body and how a person presents it to the world begins with the imagination. The choice of what clothing to wear, the style

9 “Movement Advancement Project | Snapshot: LGBTQ Equality by State,” The Movement Advancement Project, accessed March 19, 2024, <https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps>.

10 Laura Horak, “Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (November 1, 2014): 572–85, <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815255>. In her essay Horak observes the trend of the “talking head” style vlog produced by transgender content creators. These often act as timelines to record people’s body development over time while taking hormone replacement therapy. While they are acts of community care and education, they can also reinforce ideals set forth by white cisgender beauty standards.



Above:

This map created by The Mapping Advancement Project specifically looks at legislation around transgender people's basic rights. It covers things like bathroom access, bans on medical care, insurance exclusions, etc. The red is an overall negative score, meaning the state has more prohibitions on gender identity than safeguards. The darker the green the better. It's both soul crushing and, I can confirm as a trans person, deeply predictable.

"Equality Maps: Snapshot: LGBTQ Equality By State." The Movement Advancement Project, accessed March 19, 2024.

Right:

An image of prominent conservative anti-LGBT representative, Marjorie Taylor Greene. The text that accompanies this image reads, "@libsoftiktok knows the truth!"

Photograph taken by Office of Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, March 23, 2023, Twitter. Accessed April 29, 2024.



of haircut, what make-up to don, or any other physical display of self begins with imagining what the internal idea of oneself looks like. Social, religious, cultural, and a myriad of other intersecting factors go into the choice of one's appearance, but ultimately the process of how one *can* appear is an imagination of self. Gender presentation begins as a hidden authentic concept of self that is either revealed or obscured, depending on how it is displayed, much like a tarot card yet to be flipped over to display its illustration.

I must reiterate that the trans body is a queered esoteric body-object that contains the hidden knowledge of the transgender soul. The trans soul is a hidden spiritual identity of a person contained in the socially constructed form of the tangible.

In, *Western Esotericism*, (2010) Antoine Faivre claims that esotericism can be divided into five definitions: A loose grouping of anything relating to new religions, metaphysics, or the occult; teachings that are deliberately hidden secrets; the study of hidden meanings in the symbology of nature; the hidden knowledge of the divine in religious objects; and/or the quest for the knowledge of an ancient tradition the predates all religion.¹¹ While all of these definitions have their implications, there's a consistent throughline in the five of them. Esotericism looks for hidden knowledge to be found in objects and symbols. Therefore, hidden spiritual truths can be found in visual objects.

The tarot had occult magical properties projected onto it via esotericism.¹² The once trick-based card game was assigned mystical meanings, and suddenly around the seventeenth century, the tarot morphed from being a deck of playing cards into a fortune-telling divination tool. It is no secret, then, that the tarot is not magical, but instead, metaphysical meaning was given to it by how people interpreted its symbology. The intention of the original use of the deck, the intention of the artist's symbological meanings in their illustrations, and the interpretation by the viewer of the cards hold equal communal significance. By taking note of this complicated history and looking at the current practices of tarot as a means for spiritual guidance in queer and, specifically trans communities, it's reasonable to assert that the Smith-Waite tarot deck is a piece of trans visual culture. How do these cards reflect transgender spirituality? Why has tarot become a staple of queer culture?

11 Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History*, SUNY Series in Western Esoteric Traditions (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), <https://libproxy.wustl.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000-na&AN=343797&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

12 Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani, eds., *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018). It's important to note that I'm going to be using the terms occult and esoteric as two separate concepts. They are often conflated and, as we see in Faivre's definition, esotericism can be used as the umbrella term that contains the word occult. I'm going to treat the occult throughout this paper like Bauduin et al. treat it in the introduction to their book. "In this volume, we accept [Alex] Owen's definition of the occult as an alternative form of spirituality that both rejected the dogmatism of institutional religion and the ideals of rationality and reason at the very heart of the Enlightenment project, in combination with the understanding of occultism as a *modern* phenomenon." (Bauduin et al. 2018, 3)



Before the Tarot Was Magic

To further iterate the complete lack of supernatural powers in the tarot it is important to note that the lineage of tarot cards can be traced back to playing cards from the mid-1400s. The fortune-telling powers of the cards were later assigned by French esoterics in the 17th Century. The imagery of this trump card entitled Fortitude obviously influences the lion-wrestling woman featured on the Strength card found in the Major Arcana of the Waite Smith Tarot produced nearly 464 years later.

Tim Husband, Curator for the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, writes “Tarot is a game of trick-taking, as the many trump cards clearly indicate, and even though there are many variations (mostly minor), the rules of the game likely have not changed significantly since the 15th century.” He goes on to point out that trump style playing card games can be traced back even further to around the 1420s in Germany. We have a fair amount of knowledge about these cards because three decks have survived since the 15th century. The Visconti Tarot, supposedly commissioned by the last Duke of Milan, is a deck of gilded and hand-painted cards currently housed in Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library. I also want to point out that we “made up” the gender system we all live by and it seems incredibly appropriate to pit it against these “made up” magical cards.¹

Behind:

Bonifacio Bembo, Fortitude from The Visconti Tarot, 1445, hand colored; embossing, 189 x 90 mm, Courtesy of the Cary Collection of Playing Cards in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, New Haven, CT.

¹ Tim Husband, “Before Fortune-Telling: The History and Structure of Tarot Cards,” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed January 25, 2024, <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/in-season/2016/tarot>.

The Smith-Waite Tarot as Trans Spiritual Culture

We made it all up!
—Charlie Claire Burgess¹³

During the summer of 2023, I took a four-week online course led by Charlie Claire Burgess called “Making Your Own Unique Tarot”. One fact that Burgess made abundantly clear to us was that the mystical powers in the symbology of the tarot were completely fabricated. It may seem counterproductive to approach an object that is a staple of occultism as devoid of magic, but this is a quintessential point to the Smith-Waite Tarot card’s history and cultural longevity.

In 1909, Arthur Waite, an English scholar and writer of the esoteric and the occult, collaborated with illustrator Pamela Colman Smith to create a deck of cards based on the traditions and rituals associated with the tarot. Smith called the illustration of the deck “a big job for very little cash.”¹⁴ Waite’s name was only applied to *The Key to The Tarot* (1910), a philosophical guidebook that held instructions on how to use and interpret the cards. Originally, the Rider Company that published the deck didn’t credit Waite’s contributions to the deck at all. Additionally, one can reasonably speculate that Waite held no rights or received any royalties from the sales of the tarot cards. While both artist and writer poured time and energy into the project of making this deck, it was hardly a defining moment in either of their careers. Financially speaking, one could argue that it was a failure for them, as it was only printed in relatively small runs with little economic gain for either Waite or Smith.

How, then, did the tarot become a widespread cultural phenomenon, with the Smith-Waite deck selling millions of copies, and inspiring thousands of illustrators to try their hand at crafting tarot cards? I believe three factors contributed to this outcome: the disposition of the occult in the early twentieth century, Smith’s unique spiritual artistic process, and the radicalized resurgence

of the cards in the early 1970s.

The term “occult” reached widespread popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. It was often deployed as an adjective to describe ancient sciences that involved any sort of mysterious or secret nature.¹⁵ Occultism became entangled with Esotericism, and partly because of this has a muddled definition. However, at its root, the term “occult” points toward a hidden reality beyond our conscious senses that is accessible via secret powers. As it became popularized the occult contained levels of rejection of institutional religion¹⁶, the philosophies of rationalism, and many of the beliefs of the Age of Enlightenment. The occult is a predecessor of the anti-institutional philosophies of the counterculture movement. With its “counter” oriented definition and reappropriation by feminist, queer, and counterculture movements in the 1960-70’s, the occult has come to stand against the quantifiable and mechanically rational philosophy of capitalism.

Occultism always points towards something more than what is accepted as reality. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sarah Ahmed describes the importance of using objects that disorient us as ways to explore new directions and hope in the face of a society that demands us to orient towards a cis-normative way of being.¹⁷ As an occult object, the tarot is a deck of cards used to disorient us so that we may explore possibilities outside of the norms of society. At its core, it’s an object of queering. In this regard, occultism and queer visual culture studies mirror one another.



13 Charlie Claire Burgess, “Making Your Own Unique Tarot: Inspiration to Production” (Online Workshop, Seagrape Apothecary, Portland, OR, August 5, 2023), <https://classrecordings.seagrapeapothecary.com/courses/makingyourownuniquetarot>.

14 Greer, Pollack, and Gilbert, *The Tarot of A. E. Waite and P. Colman Smith*. This line is quoted from a letter Smith wrote in 1909.

15 Bauduin, Ferentinou, and Zamani, *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics*.

16 However, the imagery often pulled symbology and other visual tropes from these religions. Sometimes this was a subversion of the church, and other times it reinforced visual narratives. In a contradicting way, some occult visuals and ideas could not have existed if it weren’t for organized religion.

17 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).



A Brief History of the Smith-Waite

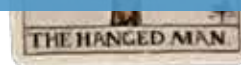
Originally produced in late 1909 and simply referred to as The Tarot, Waite and Smith's deck was composed of 78 chromolithographic prints on playing card stock. The first printed decks were presented at an arts and crafts fair in an extremely small run, but the deck many refer to today as the original Smith-Waite or the "A" deck was released in April of 1910.

To say the deck was an instant success would be catastrophically inaccurate. The Smith-Waite Tarot rarely escaped the gravity of niche occult groups even as it was reprinted well into the 1930s. Smith was initially credited in some of the publisher's advertising materials, and it was her name that was associated with the deck itself.

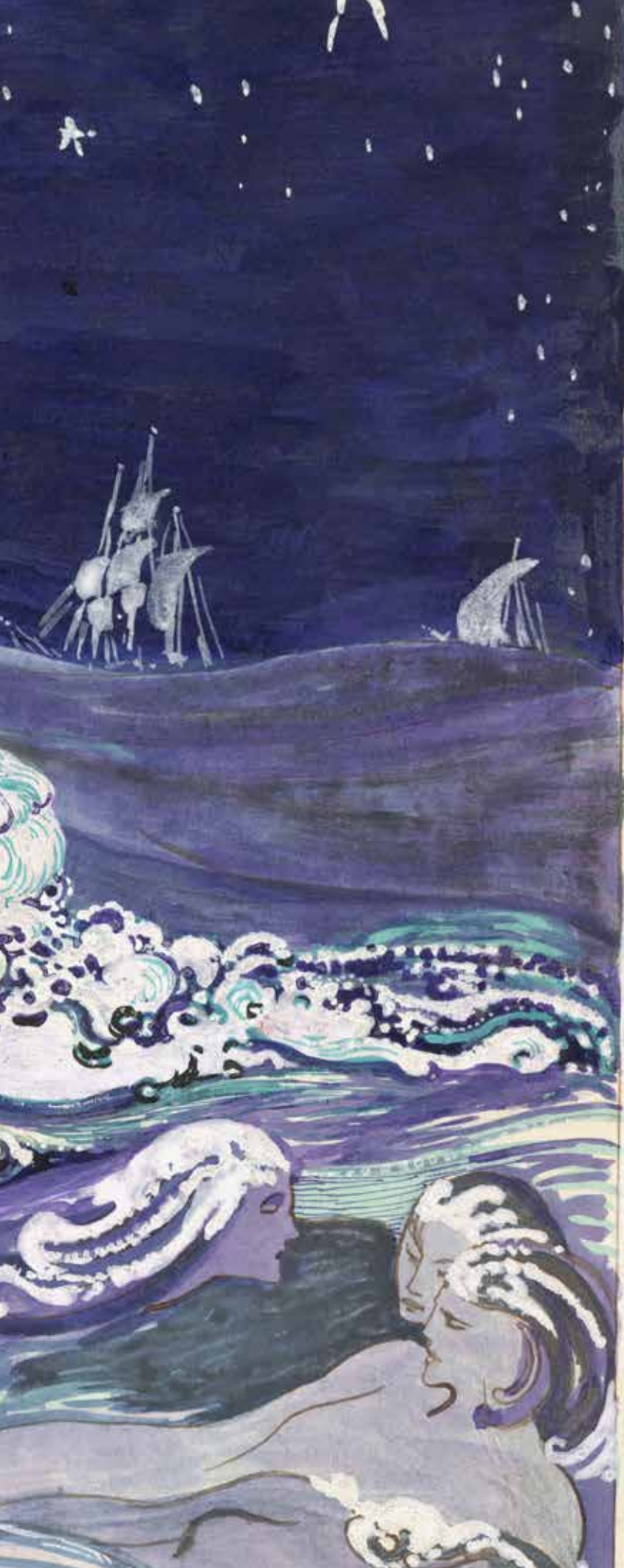
It wasn't until much later that a businessman trying to secure printing rights in the 1960s credited and coined the name The Rider Waite Tarot and temporarily erased her contributions into obscurity.

Behind:

Pamela Colman Smith, *The Smith-Waite Tarot*, 1909, 2.75 in x 4.75 in, Photo of a facsimile of the original Waite Smith tarot deck from the author's private collection.







Above:

Although not clearly recorded, some have speculated that Smith was biracial. If true, the intersections of her identity would have given her an experience of navigating multiple worlds.

Photograph of Pamela Colman Smith, 1912, featured in the October issue of *The Craftsman*

Left:

Smith's art often included paintings of fae-like figures that blend with their environment.

Pamela Colman Smith, *Sea Creatures*, ca. 1907, watercolor on paper, Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, New Haven, CT.

The Queer Process of Pamela Colman Smith

Compared to her early twentieth-century contemporaries like Beatrix Potter or Maxfield Parrish, Pamela Colman Smith was a peculiar sort. Smith had synesthesia that manifested as visual scenes playing out around her when she heard music. She created art to express and interpret these scenes. She was an adept artist with a strong drive to create, but her relationship to her craft was a barrier to success as a student. When she concentrated on her synesthesia scenes, she lost her ability to see them. Because of this, her artmaking became an act of emptying her mind and drawing unconsciously. Some members of esoteric societies believed that this was a manifestation of her latent psychic powers. Beyond any argument about the plausibility of Smith's supernatural psychic ability, her dream-like method of artmaking can be witnessed in the ethereal visual language of her illustrations. She was a vessel of expression for her interior experiences. Although Smith's unusual approach to art left some to say that she was unteachable, her peers and professors sang her praises.

Smith, in many ways, failed at being an art student and at prescribing to social norms, while simultaneously succeeding as a renowned artist by queering the process of how one makes art.¹⁸ In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam argues that “failing... may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”¹⁹ Failing at performing according to established norms, in Smith's case failing at learning the right way to make art and finding a new form of success as a result, is a queer act. Her artistic process was queer.

When justifying the queer nature of Smith's art, it is important to take into account a few details from her personal life. As a suffragette, she produced work that focused on gender liberation and showed women in independent and active roles by the time the movement took shape in England. Additionally, she never married and was known to associate and live with prominent lesbian contemporaries. According to Katie White in her Artnet essay, “[Smith] lived for many years with

Nora Lake, her companion and business partner, with whom she may have shared a romantic relationship.”²⁰ While there's no specific mention of her sexual orientation, Smith certainly adopted a queer approach to the gender performance of womanhood in the early 1900s. These aspects of her personal life support the idea that the Smith-Waite deck was and is, used as a tool for imagining a symbolic queered counter-society, including an alternatively gendered existence.

Tarot Culture Revolution

Before the fascination with esotericism in the 1970s, the surrealists were enamored with the occult as a political rejection of the status quo. Many female artists of this movement used esoteric tropes to explore identity issues, their relationship to their femininity, and the body.²¹ In her essay, “Harbingers of the New Age”, Susan Aberth asserts that Sylvia Fein, Gertrude Abercrombie, Gerrie Gutmann, and Juanita Guccione, “were women artists working in the US who shared both an affinity for surrealist imagery *and* a marked interest in tropes of occultism, magic and the irrational.”²²

20 Katie White, “Pamela Colman Smith Was the Artist and Occultist Who Designed the Iconic Tarot Deck. Why Has No One Ever Heard Her Name?”, Artnet News, August 26, 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/pamela-colman-smith-rider-waite-tarot-2163627>.

21 Bauduin, Ferentinou, and Zamani, *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics*.

22 Susan Aberth, “Harbingers of the New Age: Surrealism, Women And the Occult in the United States,” in *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics*, ed. Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 240. Aberth studies these four women because they never formed a community or exhibited in the same spaces, but they all independently explored feminist themes through their designed occult symbology. Aberth also takes a critical eye to America's return to patriarchal conservatism after the Second World War and cites an essay by Ilene Susan Fort that affirms surrealism and the occult offered women a means of liberation, empowerment, self-discovery, and self-healing.

Right:

Gertrude Abercrombie, *White Cat*, ca. 1935–1938, oil on canvas, 36 x 30 1/8 in., Courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

18 Sharmistha Ray, “Reviving a Forgotten Artist of the Occult,” Hyperallergic, March 23, 2019, <http://hyperallergic.com/490918/pamela-colman-smith-pratt-institute-libraries/>.

19 Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).





It's possible that in the wake of the Second World War, creatives were looking for a way to envision a reality outside of the world they were experiencing. André Breton collaborated with several other surrealists to make a deck of tarot cards known as the *Jeu de Marseille*. They produced the cards while waiting to be given safe passage out of a German-occupied France. There is some uncertainty about whether they were intended to be playing cards or cards of divination, nevertheless, they were made to escape the realities at hand.²³

In his book *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (1976), Mircea Eliade refers to the sudden widespread interest in the occult in the mid-1970s as the “occult explosion.” Although at times his writing seems dismissive of the occult revival and his analysis of the “occult explosion” phenomenon ignores the social implications of the time, I agree with his section implying a growing dissatisfaction with the Christian church's traditions could have contributed to the interest in alternative spirituality.²⁴ I believe this dissatisfaction was a continued extension of the feminist surrealists' fight against postwar conservatism.

23 Giovanna Costantini, “Le Jeu de Marseille: The Breton Tarot as Jeu de Hasard,” in *Esotericism, Art, and Imagination*, ed. Arthur Versluis et al. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008), 91–111. “Surrealists Andre Breton, Victor Brauner, Oscar Dominguez, Max Ernst, Jacques Herold, Wilfredo Lam, Jacqueline Lamba, and Andre Masson produced the Marseille set collaboratively, with lots drawn to decide who would design each card.” (Costantini, 91) This essay also includes an interesting note about the tarot becoming a tool to control fate, like psychoanalysis, in times of crisis. Unfortunately, the *Jeu de Marseille* was never finished.

24 Mircea Eliade, *Occultism, Witchcraft, and Cultural Fashions* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976). Eliade is in many ways a product of his time. He's what I would call a classic academic who focused his work on the history of religions. I think he could have benefited from some cross-discipline research, but he defends himself as “a historian of religions,” and states that he, “will not attempt to discuss their psychological, sociological, or even political contexts.” He does discuss the public's relationship to the Catholic church and the occult relationship to the bourgeois, which both feel politically motivated to me. He also ignores anything he doesn't care for by saying he won't talk about it. I must admit, it was infuriating to see an academic struggle with trying to find a reason for the “occult explosion” while actively ignoring any social context like second-wave feminism or anti-Vietnam War movements.

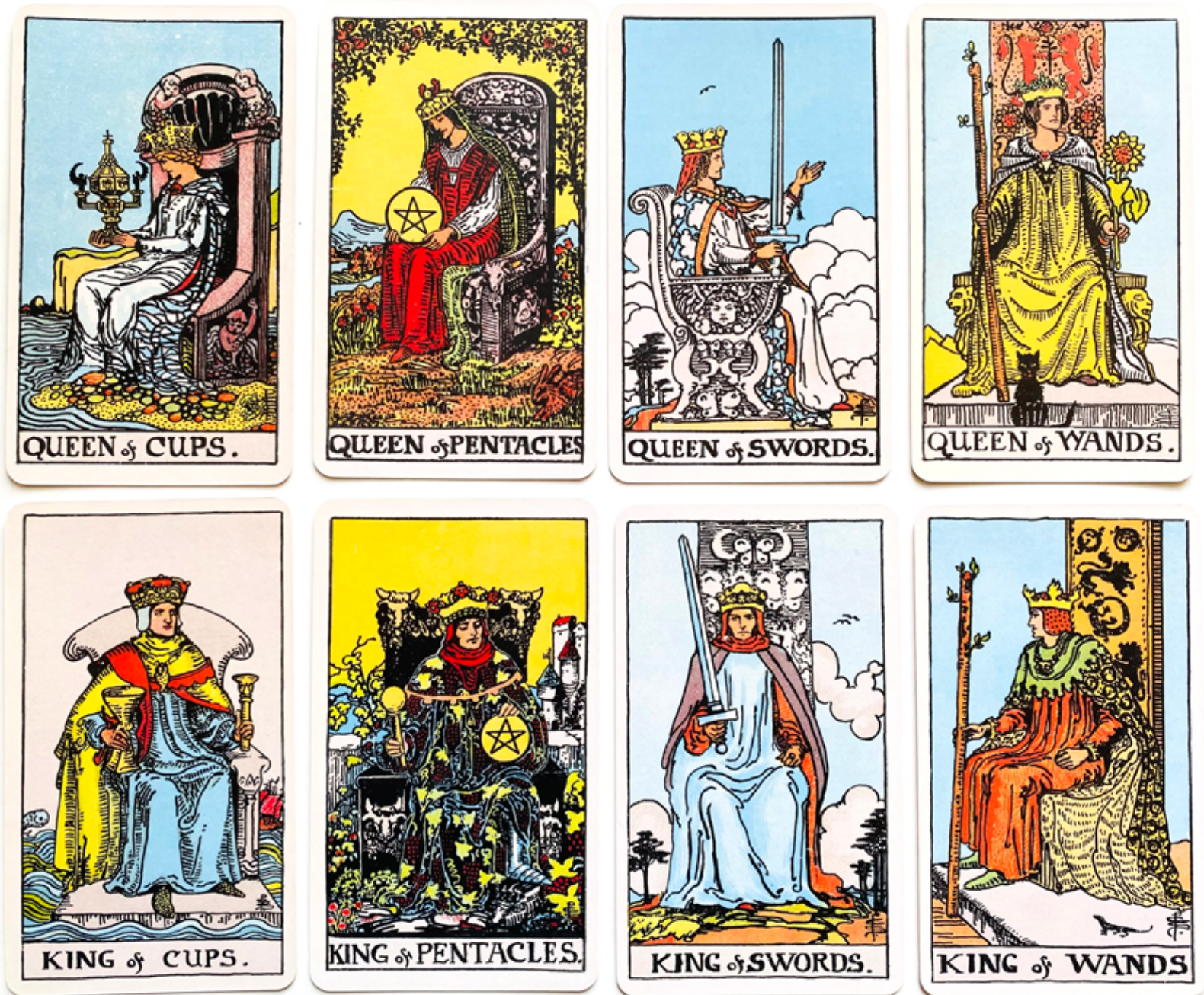
I would argue that *dissatisfaction* itself was a motivating force for a New Age spiritual revival. Throughout the 1960-70s a great upheaval was happening. In 1967 the Compton's Cafeteria Riot started the fight for queer rights that would eventually come to a boiling point in the 1969 Stonewall Riots. In 1970 the National Guard opened fire on anti-Vietnam War student protestors.²⁵ The Civil Rights Movement was happening during the 1960-1970s. By the 1970's second-wave feminism was in full swing.

Marginalized individuals and communities were looking for an alternative way of imagining existence because the social-political structures they lived in were failing them. The Christian religious foundations of America had left people feeling ostracized or dissatisfied and searching for new ways to imagine themselves and their world. This is one explanation for the rise in interest in the occult, and specifically in tarot itself.

25 These events are mirrored by contemporary happenings, continuing the cycle of returning to the occult in times of dissatisfaction. Transgender people continue the fight for queer rights in the face of anti-trans legislation. Student protestors fight for an end to the genocide in Palestine while academic institutions like Washington University in St. Louis send police officers to attack them. Feminism continues to battle for reproductive rights among a wave of anti-abortion laws. African Americans continue to fight against police brutality and legal bans on black history and equity practices.

Left:
Sylvia Rivera, a transgender activist, stands next to a banner at a 1970 protest for gay liberation.

Sylvia Rivera in 1970, image submitted by user Roseleeches, *Sylvia Rivera with STAR banner*, June 17, 2022, Wikimedia Commons. Accessed April 29, 2024.



Above:

There is a consistent gender ambiguity among the kings and queens of the four suits. The only indicator of their gender is their titles, and even then the abundance of historical records of people cross-dressing to perform cross-gender roles makes title an unreliable representation of gender. It should be noted that the kings are not considered the peak point of a linear progression in their suit. The structure of the Smith-Waite Tarot is nonhierarchical. The two of swords is just as significant as The King of Swords. The queens tend to stand for empathy, communal connection and wisdom and the kings tend to stand for leadership and service.

Pamela Colman Smith, Cards from the Waite Smith Tarot, 1909. 2.75 x 4.75 in, Photo of a facsimile of the original Waite Smith tarot deck from the author's private collection.



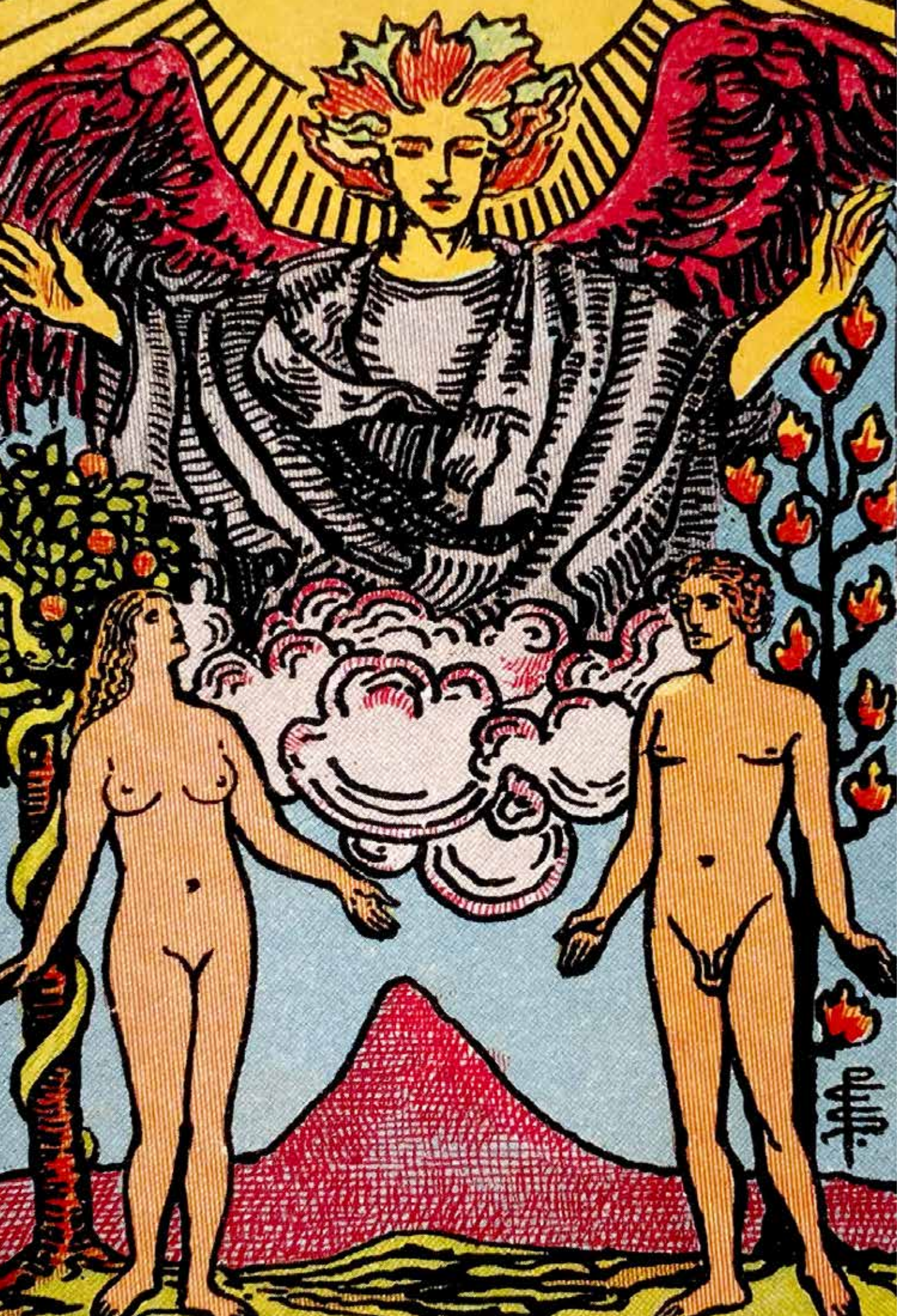
Above: Pamela Colman Smith, *The Chariot and The Devil* from the Smith-Waite Tarot, 1909, 2.75 x 4.75 in, Photo of a facsimile of the original Waite Smith tarot deck from the author's private collection.

Imagining the Transgender Soul

So, what does it look like to observe the trans spirit with this deck of cards?

As a refined meditative tool, the 78 cards of the Smith-Waite tarot are 78 mirrors meant to reflect the self to the viewer. This means that cards symbolizing an idealized masculinity, femininity, or the range of experiences in between are meant to be representative of one's internal experiences. What they call the "divine masculinity" of The Emperor card, a representation of masculine tropes that is the spiritual ideal, exists in every person regardless of gender. Because it's intended to be a personal mirror, the Smith-Waite tarot must be taken as a genderless object, despite its rather rigid binary representations of feminine and masculine bodies and roles.

One would think that Smith's illustrations of people acting out specific scenes would limit the imagination, instead, however, they ask to have context imagined onto them in a way that the graphic glyph of the "pip" featured on tarot cards preceding the Smith-Waite deck do not. The illustrations appeal to one's personal experiences and emotions, while the "pip" is a vessel for matter-of-fact communication. The ambiguous symbology of the cards leaves room to be interpreted as individualized, and arguably transgender, experiences. The illustrations from the deck carry an amalgam of appropriated symbols from different cultures



and religions that combine to become meaningless.²⁶ This meaninglessness, however, leaves room open for interpretations. The meaning of the illustrations is ultimately derived from whatever their viewer projects onto them.

There are obvious Christian influences on the cards, but I would argue the connotation of the church in the religious symbols is lost by creating an incoherent overflow of symbolic imagery. For example, The Devil is an obviously Christian-influenced card, yet exists in the same deck as The Chariot, which features illustrated blue cloth decorated in six-pointed stars usually associated with Judaism and features patterns that look very much like dreidels. When these symbols coexist, they leave space to be interpreted outside of the religions with which they are associated. Much akin to Barthes' thoughts on the Eiffel Tower, the illustrations are so oversaturated with meaning that they mean everything and nothing at once.²⁷

In his essay on queer typography, Paul Soulellis points out that queer language and communication often happen in obscured messages.²⁸ Oftentimes it is secret encoded language holding several meanings at once to queer folks but is invisible or illegible to oppressive outside viewers. The symbology in the Smith-Waite tarot creates a queer hidden visual language that can tell stories of one's masculinity, one's femininity, and one's rejection from gender norms.

In other words, Smith uses the visual language from dominant religious institutions and binary gender

norms but queers the symbolic content of those visuals. The queered symbolic language is the lens that allows for the interpretation of the transgender soul. Observing cards that contain gendered visuals allows the space to both challenge and affirm the imaginations of the trans self.

The Lovers card features two nude figures standing in nature. On the left side of the card is a feminine figure standing in front of an apple tree with a snake wrapped around its trunk, obviously eluding to the Garden of Eden. On the other side of the card is a masculine figure standing in front of a burning bush, which refers to one of God's appearances in the Bible. This scene is overshadowed by a third, giant angelic figure who has bright red wings, flowing robes, and a glowing radiant sun behind them. The figures appear to have sexed bodies and an immediate reaction would suggest that they are a man and woman, it would be reasonable to interpret The Lovers to be celebrating monogamous heteronormative romantic love. The one we categorize as feminine is much more interested in the Angel than the masculine figure who has his gaze affixed to her.

The Lovers card possesses significant transgender qualities. The bodies of the figures, outside of the sex we assign to their genitalia, are rather ambiguous. The appearance of the angel in the card implies that the relationship contains more than just the two featured figures. It's clear that this angelic being is part of the dynamic between these two other figures. The card doesn't even necessarily portray a monogamous relationship; it could just as easily be a polyamorous triad. It should also be noted that the two people are not romantically involved with one another. The two are simply standing at opposite ends of the image. The only aspect of the card implying a relationship is that their bodies are oriented toward one another. However, this could equally reflect a platonic or romantic relationship.

Maintaining that this card is a mirror for oneself, one can assume that an individual contains the capacities for all these characteristics and relationship dynamics. The Lovers card can be about self-love and the dangers of self-obsession as much as it can be about romantic relationships and the dangers of hyperfixation. If this card is to reflect an experience towards the viewer, then elements of love that one contains are as much about their masculinity as it is their femininity. The Lovers is as much about the social performance of love as it is about an internal emotional self that exists beyond the

26 The Smith-Waite deck is not without fault. It features only white bodies, blatantly appropriates and mystifies anything outside of Western Christian tradition and represents only one thin and abled body type. Pamela Colman Smith was far from a radically unbiased ideal compared to our contemporary thought and should be treated as such. Given the conservative nature of her time, however, she did queer and challenge the rigid boundaries of her time.

27 Roland Barthes, "The Eiffel Tower," in *Rethinking Architecture*, ed. Neil Leach, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), 164–72.

28 Paul Soulellis, "What Is Queer Typography?," May 6, 2021, <https://soulellis.com/writing/tdc2021/index.html>.

Left:

A close up of the details on The Lovers card.

Pamela Colman Smith, *The Lovers from the Smith-Waite Tarot*, 1909, 2.75 x 4.75 in, Photo of a facsimile of the original Waite Smith tarot deck from the author's private collection.



Above:

The Emperor is one of the more gendered cards. Most cards carry an ambiguity to their characters, it's rare to see one with defined sexual characteristics like facial hair. The card as a representation of one's self becomes about qualities rather than a strict category of gender. When I see this card I see a representation of order, strong will, and discipline, not Maleness.

Pamela Colman Smith, *The Emperor*, 1909, 2.75 x 4.75 in, Photo of a facsimile of the original Waite Smith tarot deck from the author's private collection.

body and oversees the experience. It's an internal spiritual truth reflected as an external display, not unlike the experience of being transgender.

Returning to Soulellis' thoughts on queer typography, he notes that language is not constrained to type and letterforms. He goes on to reference the "hanky code" that was used by queer men to signal their sexual preferences to other men without being noticed. Much like this, the symbology that Smith used in the tarot deck starts to form a secret language with the viewer. Because of the demand to have meaning projected onto the symbols of the cards, genderqueer folks have used the space to find and create a hidden language of trans identity in imagery.

Conclusion

It is difficult to find representations of transgendered people in all types of media. There are rarely trans characters in movies. It is uncommon to see trans characters in graphic novels. In the same way, it is hard to see, especially outside of contemporary times, trans bodies in the historical canon of illustration. The Smith-Waite deck demands to have meaning put onto it and has been used to imagine a reality that exists beyond the norms of the world. In the case of its creation, it pushed against the conservative limitations of the Christian Church and the conservative policy of the time. In the case of the "occult explosion" in the 60s and 70s, it pushed against a reality that exists beyond the patriarchy and heteronormativity. In the case of the present, it has become a language of defiance against the rigid norms of gender.

So much of the legal battle over transgender people revolves around their bodies and representations of their bodies. I want to make clear that the legal attacks attempt to eradicate trans identity by eliminating the visualization of it, but transness is something bigger than what can be seen. There is a need to develop ways to visualize and imagine transness without a focus on the body and how someone chooses to present themselves to the world.

Smith's illustrations for her tarot deck have always pushed against tradition, partly because of the queer way she made art and also because of the way that her illustrations demand meaning to be projected onto them. Part of transness is queering the form of the body, but another part of that, arguably the more significant part, is the spirit or the personal conceptualization of being trans. This part of the self cannot be eliminated or taken away. Trans people have always existed and trans people will always exist, even if they can't be seen.

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